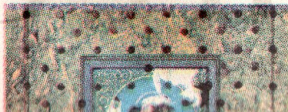


'Miniature fascinates me on a conceptual level'



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Shazia
Sikander's
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Here, she
explains how
she made a
name for
herself in
the art world

By Quddus Mirza

interview

In less than a decade, Shazia Sikander has become one of the major artists. Her solo exhibitions have held at Whitney Museum New York, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C. and The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Kansas City. She has exhibited in various important group shows, including the forthcoming 'Contemporary Drawing Show' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In

addition, her work is part of major collections around

the globe.

No Pakistani artist (or South Asian) has risen as high as Shazia Sikander. The immense scale of her success also brings forth many issues relating to ethnicity, identity and mutli-cultural preferences in the current art world. During her recent visit to Lahore, the artist talked about her art at the National College of Arts, which was not only an inspiring experience for the students at her alma mater but also initiated a debate on the role and responsibility of artists living abroad and how they encounter, bear and over-

come the responses of others.

The News on Sunday: What do you think of the present day Pakistani art?

Shazia Sikander: It appears that Pakistani art is no more on the periphery. The best thing is that the young artists are not concerned about shows abroad. In fact, now the outsiders are interested in what is happening here.

But at the same time Pakistani art is not duly represented. If it is written about, it either carries the ghetto mentality or is described by the 'outsiders' in a superficial fashion — as in the case of Marcella Nesom. I feel it is an unfortunate situation because the original dialogue gets lost by bad representation, and even if it reemerges — let's say after five years - it won't make any impact.

TNS: Don't you think the 'outsiders' are searching for ethnic and exotic art here?

SS: The audience abroad does not care any more about the labels such as exotic, ethnicity and regionalism. They are aware of the decline of post-modernism. They are prepared to understand art of other places along with history and narrative from the land of origin. However, this change has taken some time and a lot of effort.

People kept writing about my work with fixed ideas when I was doing miniature. They used to see and describe what they wanted in the work of an artist from this region. But later that tone altered because of multiple reasons.

TNS: What brought about this change in the reading and describing of your work?

SS: The habit of putting artists in a separate slot is changing because a large number of creative personalities, active in today's art, are from different origins. Same is with several critics and curators connected to important international venues and publications — for example, Shamim Momin, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

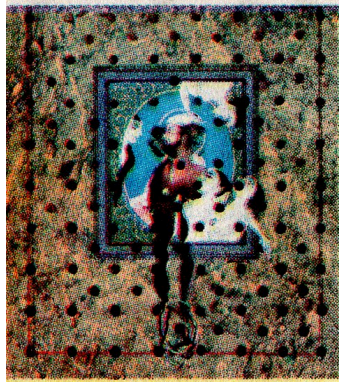
TNS: How did you manage to earn a big name in the American art circles?

SS: It all began with the show at the Whitney Museum in 1997. I got a positive review. In fact it appeared in the same issue of a magazine which had another review on my solo exhibition held at Drawing Center. That was a good introduction. The shows at Whitney are normally trashed by critics, but they said that it was exciting to see something new — in the form of my work.

That was success. I moved to New York where I interacted with other artists. In December 1997, I had a show in New York which also generated good reviews.

After that everybody waited to see what Shazia Sikander did next. I did not sign up with Mary Boone or Gagosian Gallery because I was aware of the art market phenomenon: of how they make and unmake you, and being an outsider they can dump you any moment. I was unhappy about it so I moved to Texas. I did not show for two years. My gallery was after me, but I felt that if I were not fully sure about it, I would not do it. What I exhibited in the three years after that was what I produced during my studies at RISD.

It took me five years to recover from that state. There was a constant pressure from my gallery, demanding my work for the line of buyers. On the contrary, I worked in large scale in the non-commercial spaces. The result of which is that the relationship with the gallery deteriorated but links with critics improved. So when I showed after a gap of five years I got good feedback. The reason for positive response is to do with my persistence as well as public's exposure to the Indian and Pakistani art, which helped



From the collection of (above) Whitney Museum and (top) National Gallery of Canada.

viewers to relate to my work that is based on miniature paintings, though the medium varied from paintings to digital works and installations.

TNS: How did the training in miniature painting help you?

SS: When I was doing miniatures at NCA, I realised I was in a school to explore creativity and to learn the skill of a tradi-

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tional art form. I studied the techniques but I was more drawn to Zahoor's work which played an essential role in my development as an artist.

I make two types of works: paintings and large installations. Both are inter-connected in terms of their imagery and structure. The large works fall on the other — democratic — side of miniatures. These installations are constructed with

many layers of transparent papers akin to the traditional method of building a tone or colour by applying various layers of brush marks in miniature painting. I don't want to synthesise the two — and I am happy with this dichotomy. The more the gallery presses for paintings the more I intend to do these huge non-saleable works.

TNS: How do you feel about the present resurgence of miniature painting in this region?

SS: There is growing interest in this genre. Over here various approaches can be found in adapting miniature. Having multiple — and sometimes contradictory — points of views about its validity, course and strategy is essential for its development. Even the exotic interest in it contributes in some form.

At present, miniature painting has influenced several contemporary artists, for instance Hockney, Clemente and many

others. A few people believe that these individuals from the West are exploiting the vernacular, but miniature in its essence was a hybrid art form, open to a variety of experiments and influences, especially from Akbar's period. But when we think about it we often overlook the diversity in this genre, made possible by influences from various regions and cultures.

Looking at miniatures displayed at many venues around the world, one does not feel like reproducing miniatures but to make art which is hybrid — in a subversive way. Miniature fascinates me on a conceptual level.

TNS: But how about its identity as a unique method of executing a work?

SS: It has been associated with a specific technique but overt importance has been given to this aspect because every kind of art has its own technique and one has to excel in it. For me, seeing the miniatures in museums was an overwhelming experience. When you find the level of skill in those works, you are humbled by it and you appreciate it, you don't try to copy it.

TNS: How do you associate yourself with miniature and its current practice?

SS: To me, miniature has a special significance. I observe its formal devices in the context of history. The works from past are like windows for that age — in their way of painting and in their manner of composition — which bears an abstract sensibility. But because of its nomenclature we tend to restrict ourselves to the conventional miniatures.

Personally, I was more concerned about it being called 'miniature' and the whole baggage of classification. In fact, how objects/art forms are labeled is very important. The way we have started defining things (for example drawing room) is a colonial residue. In a similar manner we perceive miniature paintings as the British saw these and restrict it to small-scale works on paper. On the other hand, the word miniature originates from 'minatour' that means refinement. And the refinement can be in any form of art, may it be a painting, installation or computer generated work.