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art

New York based artist Shahzia Sikander talks about her first entirely digital piece of art, which has won high critical acclaim



Shahzia Sikander

SpINN

I started exploring Miniature Painting in 1987. During the late 80's when I enrolled at the National College of Arts, there was no great interest on a grass roots level for resurgence in miniature painting. For me it was about wanting to understand an art form with a present that was based on the past. I wanted

to question its relevance and critically understand its cultural and historical dimensions. My initial feeling towards the aesthetic was that of kitsch but I saw the potential of subversion, not just in context and form but also in technique. Prior to that, miniature painting wasn't seen as a very active way of developing self-expression so one naturally wasn't inclined to go in that direction. It wasn't till I did my thesis work that a major resurgence got

started. The "scroll", my thesis painting, which was the first ever to bring personal expression to a thematic structure, triggered a wave of doing "large scale" miniatures and building up on lived experience. Today it's wonderful for me to see that so many new artists have embraced miniature painting in Pakistan. It is a decade later and my exploration of pursuing the boundaries of miniature tradition continues, this time with a departure in the direction of animation.

The title of my current work is SpiNN, which is a pun on CNN, the media giant. It is a short digital movie that deals with issues concerning the realities of perception. Perception in how it is shaped, altered, manufactured and presented on a daily basis.

How information is spun to show us what we want. This work is a commen-

"The Pakistani-born pasticheur of Indo-Persian miniature paintings kicks up, in digital animations on two monitors, her meticulous phantasmagorias of mingled Hindu, Muslim and Christian motifs. The results are enchanting and spooky, as when black hairdos of gopis (the lovers of Krishna) detach and swarm like bats. Sikander proves that miniatures are a live tradition, subject to cogent innovations." *New Yorker, January 27, 2003*

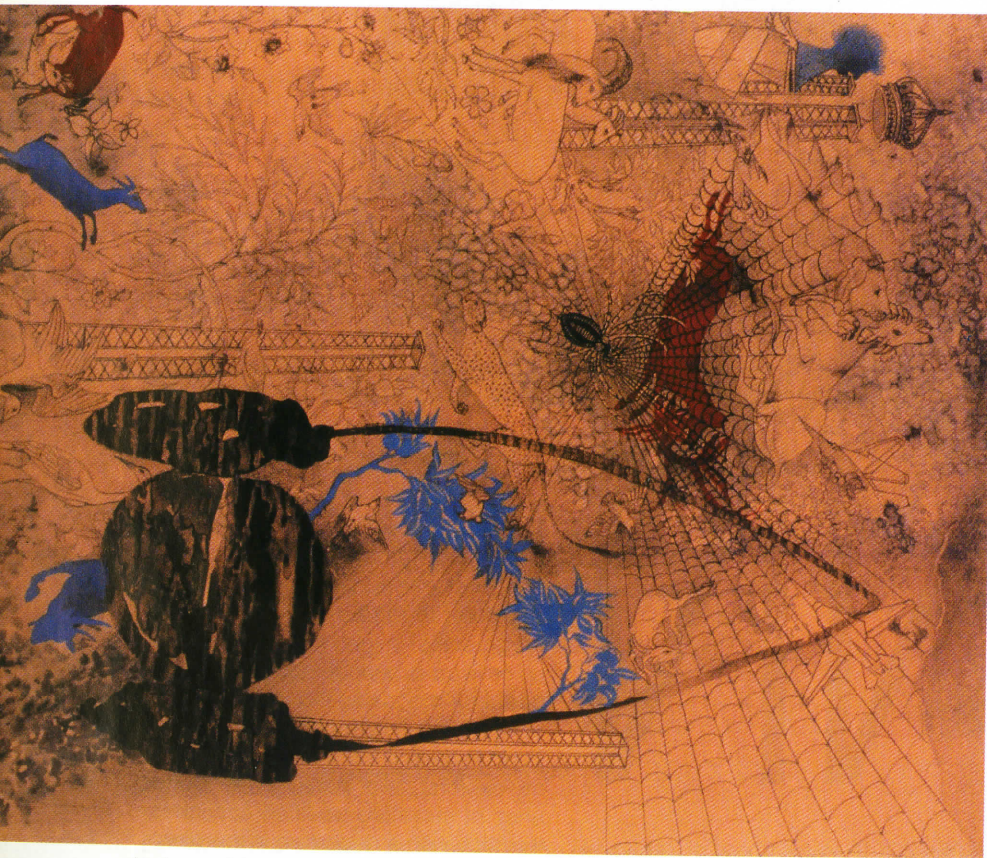
tary on lived experiences, art history, pop culture and the role of media. My inspiration has been derived from day to day mundane and ordinary things like news on TV or some text in the newspaper. I have then taken this information and underlined it with a degree of humor. Presented as an open-ended narrative, the DVD unravels its

The installation not only creates a relationship between two very different mediums (painting and digital technology) but exaggerates the parallels between both. Combining a non-traditional medium with a traditional genre allows building a relationship between present and past, space and dimension, issues of narrative and time. The purpose

interpret it and understand it through a web of transparencies, layers, and agendas.

Miniature Painting also comes with a set of rules. The conceptual transforms itself into the act. It's the materiality, the seductiveness of the surface, the investment of labour, the submission, the hours that are put into creating translucency that become significant players. In the end they are almost meditative and meaningful gestures, like ritual.

The concept of stages and ones perception of them brings into question the criteria for evaluating a 'finished' miniature - a criteria almost of evaluating 'beauty', and in this case specifically the execution of it. Introducing a non-painting process into the equation allows for the extension of a dialogue that pushes the experience of viewing into one of understanding, tracking, questioning, and investigating. It allows an observer to have a window into the artist's mind and simultaneously allows the artist to play with the observer's sense of



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content over a period of 6 minutes in an endless loop. I am less interested in illustration - I find open-ended narratives more compelling especially since the medium at hand is so precise and detail oriented. The video is hung opposite its counterpoint, a fixed narrative presented as a painting. Both are presented in a narrow passageway that can be entered from both sides.

being to destabilize.

The animation is an entirely ephemeral experience and its small scale invites the viewers to become intimate with its content. The space, the images and their meaning is altered slowly as one views it - the process is similar to communication - the information is there in the core, but it's up to us to



Installation View - SpiNN 2003



Utopia - SpiNN 2003

"Most of the exhibition is dedicated to the artist's more familiar method of mingling traditional media with contemporary subjects...this mixture of East and West resonates with Sikander's experience as a Pakistani woman living in Brooklyn, and with life in our heterogenous postcolonial world." *Time Out, January 23-30 2003*

closure. 'Beauty' in this context transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries, projecting a deeper understanding to the viewer, one that is independent of contextual restraints. It drags antithetical modes of expression out of their confines and into a shared existence. The shift is purposefully subtle, not challenging or confrontational and the technology is not instant, it is controlled.

The continuities within my work remain primarily formal. I have always found Miniature Painting a very conceptual activity. My interest still remains to create a dialogue with a traditional form. How to use tradition while engaging in a transformative task. Interested in the play, the flirtation with tradition, my interest in this genre remains primarily conceptual, focusing on issues between scale and labor, precision and gesture, norm and its transgression. ●



SpiNN