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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Landscapes of Swirls Fuse Past and Present

By Benjamin Genocchio

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DEXTEROUS and clever, Shahzia Sikander continues to surprise with an exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. In addition to a suite of 51 drawings, a wall painting and a dazzling digital animation, there is video documentation of a collaborative performance with the Indian dancer Sharmila Desai. How does she find the time to do all this?

Perhaps it's because she's young. Ms. Sikander, 35, was born in Pakistan and trained as a miniaturist at the National College of Arts, Lahore. In 1993, she moved to the United States, where the intimate scale and jewel-like quality of her miniature-inspired paintings dazzled audiences.

Miniature painting originated in Iran as a tradition for illustrating royal books. In the 12th century Islamic conquerors introduced it to India and Pakistan, where it took root and, later, blossomed during the Mughal Empire (1526-1857). In this period, Muslim rulers reigned over much of what today is India and eastern Pakistan.

By the end of the 20th century, miniature painting in the subcontinent had become a popular tourist souvenir. It was exotic kitsch. Seeing a potential for subversion, Ms. Sikander appropriated the art form and infused it with contemporary subject matter. This fusion of old and new, past and present was universally bewitching.

Dominating the Aldrich's exhibition is a suite of Ms. Sikander's latest miniature-like drawings. She had intended to exhibit older works, but they were requested at the last minute for an important show in Spain. So she let them go, and made new ones for the Aldrich.

The suite of drawings on display, "51 Ways of Looking," are more minimal than her paintings. Fragmented, mostly monochrome line drawings, they depict subjects from a multi-armed deity, which looks like Shiva but is holding soccer balls, to a portrait of her sister to Arabic calligraphy and abstract compositions. Gone are her painterly imitations of traditional miniatures.

What are we to make of this? Many of the individual drawings look like preparatory sketches for miniature paintings. Was this intentional, or because the artist ran out of time to finish them? I don't know.

But viewed as one work, these drawings seem to have an entirely different goal than her previous paintings. Rather than trying to dazzle with beauty, they focus attention on the multiple formal aspects of miniature painting. Showing us initial sketches, sections of figurative imagery or, in the case of the abstract designs, the sacred geometry used by Indian painters to plan paintings, they help us see the complexity of the finished compositions.

These drawings also hint at a new direction for the artist. I'm glad, for her miniatures were a little too sentimental for me. And the formula was so successful that Ms. Sikander spawned many imitators. An abrupt about-face may throw them off.

Ms. Sikander is also making a lateral move into digital animation. "Pursuit Curve" (2004), her third animated video, riffs on ideas of landscape in miniature painting; in the piece, pastel shapes meld and dissolve into patterns and landscape motifs. Although perplexing, there is enough poetry, mystery and complexity here to keep you absorbed. A meditative soundtrack wafts through it all.

Perceptive viewers may notice overlaps between the video and drawings. For instance, a cluster of swirling turbans at the beginning of the video is echoed in one or two of the drawings (as well in the wall painting at the museum entrance). The same goes for some long-haired wigs that float about the landscape at one point in the video like giant black birds. It's all very strange.

A similar working process characterizes both the drawings and video. Ms. Sikander starts on a drawing, finds something in it that will stimulate the next one, and so on. The video animation is produced much the same way; the artist allows spontaneous reaction to determine its shape and direction. In this way she retains the formal elements of miniature painting without the historical baggage.

If Ms. Sikander were still cranking out her glitzy miniature paintings, you could probably dismiss her as a victim of the art market merry-go-round. But she is not, and that takes a certain amount of courage.

This show suggests that she is a far more sophisticated and ambitious artist than her previous fare has led some to believe.

"Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis" is at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through Jan. 5. Information: (203)438-4519.