

# ARTFORUM

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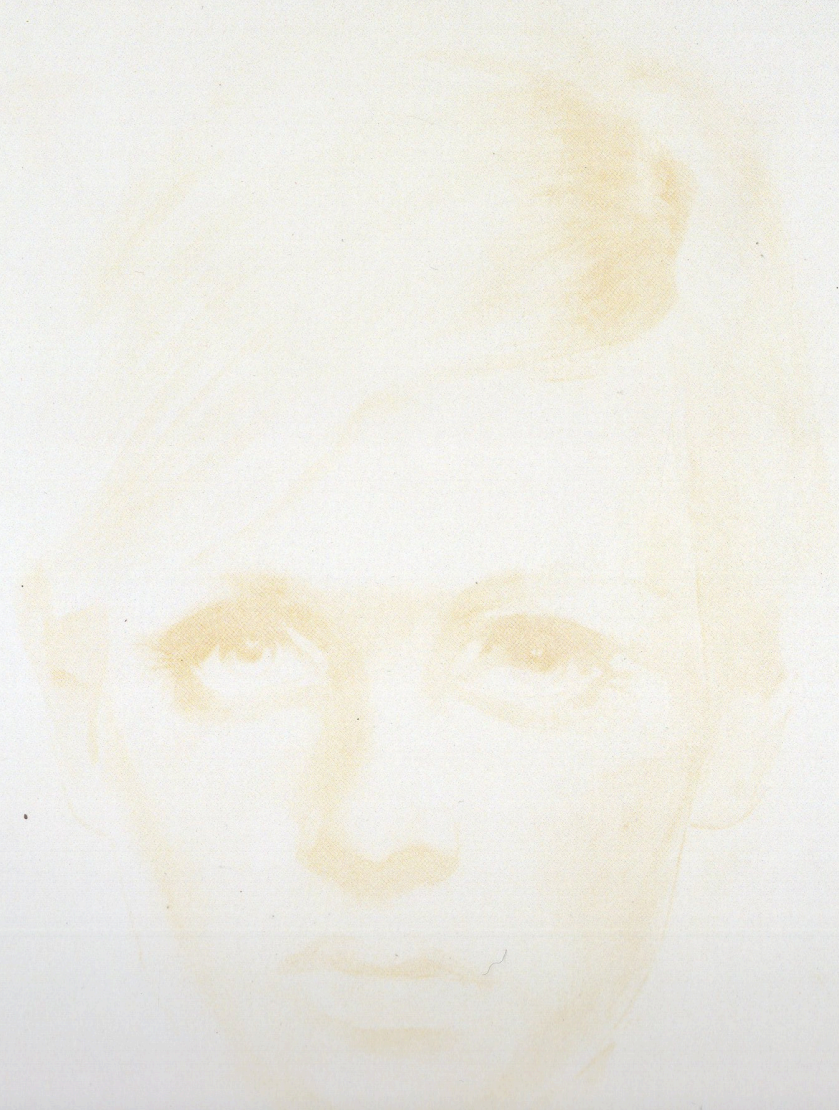
I N T E R N A T I O N A L



**FIRST TAKE**  
10 NEW ARTISTS

**WINTER PREVIEW**  
50 SHOWS WORLDWIDE

Carol Bove



## SHAHZIA SIKANDER

ALDRICH CONTEMPORARY  
ART MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, *Pursuit Curve*, 2004, still from a digital animation, approx. 7 minutes.

Installed at the Bohlen Foundation, Davis's photographs form an exhibition-cum-diary, with images accompanied by fragments of text reproduced in a "newspaper" about the show. Rather than explain the images, Davis offered imagistic, psychological background material. The photograph *Grandmother's Buttons*, 2002, for example, triggers a memory of his lefty activist grandma: "When I was twelve, we chained ourselves to part of Cape Canaveral. She told me she felt guilty that she'd never been arrested, but proud she'd marched on Washington. . . . This is pale nostalgia. Can the photograph cure it?" An oil stain (a perfect signifier for contemporary geopolitics) is identified merely as *Nixon Monument, Nixon Birthplace*, 2002, but explained thus: "After driving all the way to San Clemente and being told politely—as only old Republican ladies can be polite—that no tripods were allowed in the library, this stain was my only recourse."

Modeled after Walker Evans's Depression-era *American Photographs* (1938) (which also influenced Frank's *The Americans* [1958]), Davis's images provide a shorthand for both the political moment and a study of the potentially engagé artist in a confused and confusing era. Where much recent work (from Olav Westphalen to Daniel Joseph Martinez) has focused on fringe elements like the Unabomber, Davis's "politics" are mundane to the point of absurdity: A taco stand is painted with text declaring ONE PEOPLE, ONE NATION, ONE TACO, ONE DESTINY.

"My Life in Politics" is both an oblique self-portrait and a portrait of the United States. But can the two be separated? As Arthur Danto recently stated in these pages, one can renounce citizenship but not being

an American. Nevertheless, we are far from the days of Gilbert Stuart, a tattered copy of whose iconic presidential portrait figures in Davis's *Thrift Shop Washington*, 2004, which greeted visitors at the exhibition's entrance. Rather than offer a utopian fix, Davis instead throws his signs and signifiers into the air. Politics, particularly in the face of defeat, is about gestures: the filibuster, the oil stain, the photo of a Rush Limbaugh book display that garners Davis's tersest comment, "Enough said."

Davis documents the way contemporary politics works on a velvet-rope model, emphasizing the divide between insider and outsider. Photographs such as his *Closed Circuit*, 2003, which depicts a television in the office of a Massachusetts state legislator tuned to a closed-circuit broadcast of the senate floor, illustrate the way in which the political scene is now twice removed by technology. We can see further than ever into the halls of power, while still being kept at a safe distance from them.

But there are always images, which commemorate or memorialize the effort at effective dissent. At a moment when it might be more dangerous to do something—as the case of Steven Kurtz suggests—Davis's images are relatively safe, documenting the battle rather than fighting on its front lines. However, at the very end of the exhibition's "newspaper," in reference to his photograph *Election Map*, 2004, even Davis seems to give up hope. "I propose secession," he says. "Honestly, even one big union won't help us now. . . . This country is a tragedy, literally. Fatal flaw and all." One only hopes his words, like his images, are documentary but not prophetic.

—Martha Schwendener

Shahzia Sikander, born in Pakistan but currently living and working in the United States, deconstructs an Indo-Persian tradition to which she remains attached. Sikander is fascinated by Mughal miniatures, paintings that use intense, fully saturated pigments, and is particularly fascinated by their underdrawing. Does she believe that their essence lies beneath the surface? Perhaps, but her art doesn't attempt to answer that question. Sinopia, the drawing that underlies European frescoes, does reveal structural information, but the relation of Sikander's drawings to Mughal art is more complex. Not interested in merely making literal reproductions, she employs faint colors and lines in geometric patterns along with fragments of figurative images.

"Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis," at the Aldrich, had four parts. Near the entrance of the museum was *Duality* (all works 2004), a large wall painting in which the heads of five turbaned men touch at the center of a pinwheel pattern. Upstairs was *Collaboration*, a thirteen-minute video of a performance staged at the opening of the exhibition showing the dancer Sharmila Desai, long dark hair flowing, performing on a floor mat painted by Sikander. In the next gallery was *51 Ways of Looking*, a suite of small drawings made with graphite, ink, and paint on paper. And in the last room was *Pursuit Curve*, a seven-minute digital animation.

In *51 Ways of Looking*, one seemingly unfinished portrait is accompanied by two pictures drawn in pencil, one soft, the other with hard lines. A second sketch from the suite, also apparently incomplete, is in the style of Ingres, as he might have worked had he lived in India. Still other drawings show Escher-like dissolves, organic imagery coming into being, and fields of animal forms. But Sikander also draws circles set on a black background or off-center in a field of colored straight lines and curves. She has a fondness for patterns, solid grids, and more lightly sketched ones with superimposed curvilinear forms.

Perhaps the most revealing work on display was *Pursuit Curve*. An arching horizon is covered with trees, and soon the interior of the earth below is filled in. That picture in turn dissolves, replaced by a field of Indian heads before a background of changing colors. Finally the

whole scene is covered with forms in furious motion, and there are explosions and fireworks above a field of waves.

Initially this enchanting exhibition seemed slightly baffling: I didn't see what unified its four parts. But on further reflection, I realized that this confusion was central to Sikander's project. The world coming into view, as if we were just coming to consciousness, is her essential concern. Reading *51 Ways of Looking* as the sketch for *Pursuit Curve*, I began to see how she thinks. The content and geometry of her work may come from Mughal art, but her way of seeing is all her own. Some artists merely offer exotic subject matter: Sikander's more elusive achievement is to make persistent gentleness a convincing and consistent strength.

—David Carrier

#### PHILADELPHIA

### PEPÓN OSORIO

INSTITUTE OF  
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After completing a three-year volunteer residency at Philadelphia's Department of Human Services, Pepón Osorio elaborately reconstructed its offices in the galleries of the ICA. *Face to Face* (all works 2004), one of three installations shown here, was assembled from re-created materials from the DHS—desks full of case histories, computer terminals, and sundry office supplies. Claustrophobic and windowless, it made one feel as though lost inside a real government bureaucracy, which metes out death by drab repetition and administrative protocol. Signs of the struggle with dehumanization were everywhere: Caged in a large steel-wire bin piled up with the possessions of a client family, a video narrated the mother's harrowing story of her suicidal son, juxtaposed with footage of him as a once-happy toddler. Reproduced family photos and inspirational posters taped to the walls above desks personalized otherwise oppressively generic cubicles.

In the next gallery, *Trials and Turbulence* simulated a family courtroom, complete with a judge's bench, audience chairs, and an institutional-gray carpet. In the center, an ornate wood-and-glass vitrine borrowed from a forgotten department store held a meticulous diorama of a messy tenement bathroom. On the shower curtain was projected a video of a young woman named Adrienne who volunteered an intimate account of her ordeals growing up