

A vibrant, stylized illustration of a man in a turban and patterned robes, surrounded by floral and geometric motifs. The man is the central figure, wearing a white turban with purple stripes and a red and white patterned tunic. He is seated on a white throne with a yellow and black patterned backrest. The background is a complex composition of colors and patterns, including a pink and white diamond grid, blue and purple floral motifs, and red and white geometric patterns. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Indian miniature painting with a modern, abstract twist.

# art matters

Summer 07/08



# Shahzia Sikander



In conversation:  
Rachel Kent speaks with Shahzia Sikander

**Rachel Kent:** Shahzia, you started to examine the miniaturist painting tradition in the late 1980s while living in Lahore, Pakistan. Could you describe what ignited your interest in this particular art form?

**Shahzia Sikander:** In 1987, when I started exploring directions for my work, I gravitated towards deconstructing miniature painting, theoretically and formally. I was looking for a format and context that had all the inherent complexities of 'high' and 'low' art, acceptance and lack of acceptance – for miniature painting had shifted from a historically elevated art form to one of souvenir kitsch – and reproduction versus innovation. There was not a lot of interest in miniature painting practice at this time, and this made it a fair game. I was challenged by the inherent potential of transformation through recasting the genre.

**RK:** In 1993 you left Lahore and moved to the USA, where you remain today. What first drew you to America and how has your work been received there?

**SS:** I first came to Washington DC to do an exhibition of my paintings at the Pakistani Consulate in 1992. That opportunity allowed me to establish communication with art universities in the United States and I later decided to do my Masters in Fine Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, where there was a keen interest in my work. The work is an outcome of growth developed via observations of my immediate environment and community.

I travelled a lot within the US during 1995–2000 and was able to evolve considerable relevance for my practice, while I questioned notions of authenticity, cultural or political identity, and related aspects of translatability and contradiction. There seemed always to be an audience and I was eager to gauge a response. Recently receiving the MacArthur Award for my art in the US was both rewarding and humbling.

**RK:** You incorporate a range of historical and contemporary motifs in your work. Can you speak a little about the sourcing of visual references in your work, and how they relate to one another?

**SS:** These elements, whether representational or stylised, are often sketched first to develop an independent interchangeable archive of visual material for me to use in my work. I take photographs every day of all sorts of situations: from media clippings to street culture, with people on the streets, architecture, commercial objects, patterns, graffiti etc to controlled portraits and landscapes. I also observe historical paintings from different periods to locate aspects of interest (for example, 'light' and 'darkness' as subject matter).

Above: Shahzia Sikander *The Illustrated Page* (edition #1) 2005–07 One of three unique works on paper (gouache and hand painting, gold leaf, silk-screened segment) Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Produced in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop Museum Image courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York © the artist





I seek elements that have the potential to conjure up multiple associations: for example hairdos that could suggest bats, birds, or crows. Or a digitally manipulated floral pattern that could equally be associated with aesthetically appealing bomb bursts. This process of developing forms is unending. The search is always to develop a form, motif, or element that might spark a moment of interest in the viewer.

**RK:** You work across a range of media including ink, gouache and graphite on paper. Most recently you have also created screen-based works, using hand-drawn and digital animation techniques. Can you speak a little about your animated works? What are some of the differing challenges these mediums offer you as an artist?

**SS:** The challenges are pretty much the same. How does one make a work compelling enough to raise the viewer's interest and expectation while not necessarily providing an illustration? The idea is always more important than the medium or format. The different techniques are just part of the process of construction.

**RK:** You have created a new on-site wall painting as part of your MCA exhibition. Can you speak about this aspect of your practice, and the issue of scale?

**SS:** I started painting directly onto the wall as a means to explore ideas about ephemerality and to question notions of labour; despite their time-consuming creation, these works would always be painted over. Scale was also an important aspect entangled within the practice of creating paintings and drawings which, though tiny in scale, were heroic in detail. As I established this aspect of my work, I started to shift the scale from 15 feet to 70 feet. I also started to incorporate drawings on suspended, transparent sheets of paper along with the wall paintings, to further elaborate space as part of the experience.

**Shahzia Sikander**

27 November 2007 until 17 February 2008



Previous Page: Shahzia Sikander *To Rule Again* from the series *Flip-Flop* (detail) 2004 ink and gouache on prepared paper San Diego Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Asian Arts Council Image courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York © the artist Facing Page: Shahzia Sikander *The Scroll* (detail) 1991-92 vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolour and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper Collection of the artist Image courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York © the artist

