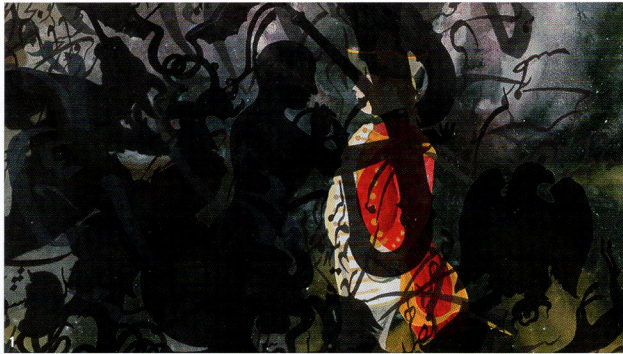


Shahzia Sikander

The Exploding Company Man and Other Abstractions

BAKALAR & PAINE GALLERIES MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN



1 THE LAST POST

HD video animation, 10:00, 2010

The Last Post is inspired by Sikander's ongoing interest in the colonial history of the sub-continent and the British opium trade with China. The protagonist is an East India Company man—the “exploding” man of the show's title—who appears in various guises throughout the work. In one instance, he is a metaphor for the collapse of the Anglo-Saxon hegemony over China. In another, he appears as a lurking threat in the imperial rooms of the Mughal Empire, which once ruled much of South Asia. In the animation, Sikander also uses subtle references to the Company School, a style of painting whose visual language developed in eighteenth-century India as Europeans sought documentation of the country's exotic plants, animals, and architecture.

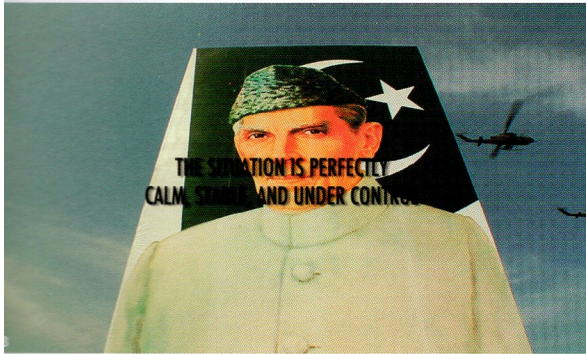
2 GOSSAMER

HD video, 11:21, 2010

The Last Post premiered in 2010 at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai.¹ For that exhibition, Sikander collaborated with musician Du Yun on a performance featuring the composer's piece *Gossamer*, conceived as a dramatic soundscape for Sikander's animation.

The video *Gossamer* stars Du Yun, a New York-based musician of Shanghai origin. Created as a collaboration between Sikander and Du Yun, *Gossamer* presents a dialogue between the two artists. In the video, Du Yun represents dual roles, the contemporary and historical, traveling between cities (New York and Shanghai) and continents (the U.S. and China), while reflecting on the underpinning of *The Last Post*.

¹ *by day by night or some (special) things a museum can do*
Curated by Hou Hanru, October 2010–January 2011.



3 BENDING THE BARRELS

HD video, 20:00, 2009

Bending the Barrels is a reflection on the paradox of authority, exploring military pageantry staged against military rhetoric. The rituals of military marching bands in Pakistan are rooted in tradition and courtly spectacle, a topic also found in Indo-Persian miniature painting. Examining the marching band as a political device, the video superimposes text derived from authoritative military pronouncements over scenes of soldiers playing music. Calling attention to itself through formal disruptions, the text poses a series of questions concerning its intent, authorship, and meaning, especially in the context of Pakistan's long struggle against military dictatorships, Islamic fundamentalism, and failed democratic attempts. The music performed by the soldiers strives to provide emotional and creative space while occupying a precarious and awkward relationship to its own history.

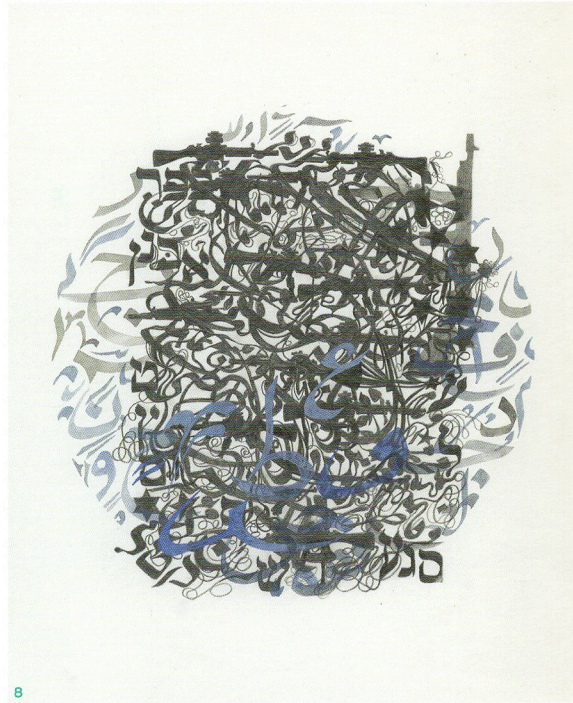
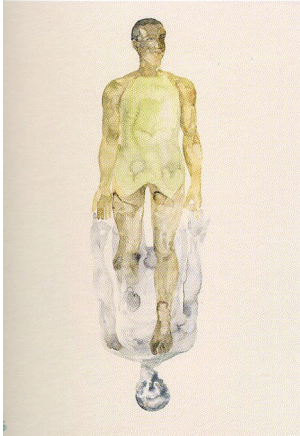
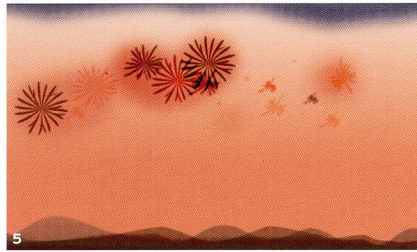


4 SpiNN

Digital animation, 6:38, 2003

The motif of the vortex is set into physical motion in Sikander's animated film *SpiNN*. A pun on the news media channel CNN, *SpiNN* depicts a dense mass of abstracted imagery spiraling inwards, hovering like a swarm of angry black crows or bats. It eventually settles into the image of a traditional Mughal durbar hall incongruously populated by gopi women (devotees of the Hindu god Krishna), whose abstracted black hairdos comprise the central imagery of the work. Feminist agency finds symbolic representation in this "hair bird," providing an aesthetic and affective vocabulary of renewal and pleasure, rather than a more direct message of political resistance.

The accompanying music created for *SpiNN* by David Abir is a fusion of compositions by Stravinsky and Mahler that have been reworked and played on Iranian instruments. Sikander's digital process is yet another way to explore formal and subjective issues within the tight parameters of miniatures. Combining a non-traditional medium with a traditional genre builds relationships among present and past, space and dimension, issues of narrative and time, and the notion of translation.



5 PURSUIT CURVE

Digital animation, 7:12, 2004

The animation begins with a spherical shape that seems strangely flower-like—a digital dahlia, or an origami ornament—and then decomposes into elements that fly off like insects or butterflies, yet are in fact turbans. Similarly mutable are the images of starbursts on the horizon, which might equally refer to fireworks or the bomb blasts of missiles reaching their intended targets. Sikander reinforces this allusion by sampling the sounds of exploding bombs in the accompanying soundtrack (composed by David Abir) creating a palpable tension between beauty and horror.

Pursuit Curve's title comes from mathematical and military terminology. The video is best understood as an act of digitally manipulating a line into various shapes and shadows, generating power through transpositions and permutations. Though the video lacks a formal narrative, its progression follows the logic of layering.

6 PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO AGITATION

Ink and gouache on prepared paper, 2009

In this series of works Sikander explores the juxtaposition of the Hindu and Muslim iconographies as a parallel to the historical relationship between India and Pakistan. In this way the histories interweave, creating an engaging union of colors and ideas where boundaries disappear and differences are enriching.

7 CONFRONTATION

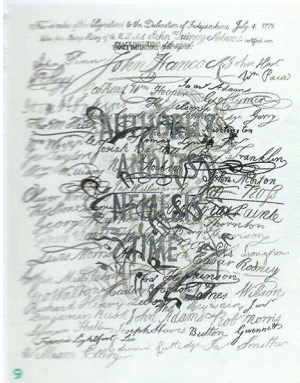
Ink and gouache on paper, 2011

In Sikander's latest drawing, she continues her investigations into the company man, the main character of *The Last Post*. This work records and reflects on Sikander's complex process of researching and making animations.

8 SERIES OF TRANSFORMATIONS

Ink and graphite on paper, 2009

Series of Transformations is a study about altering a form while tracing its path from its origin to its detour. The motifs rely on the power of transformation, a trope that has preoccupied artists and writers since classical times. Metamorphosis occurs on both literal and metaphorical planes, forming the genesis of both myth and religion. Transformation and flux are central concerns for Sikander, embodied visually through the play between representational, abstract, and textual forms.



9

9 EXACT IMITATION OF THE ORIGINAL

Ink and graphite on paper, 2009

In this piece Sikander plays on the idea of replication and authenticity. The signatures from the U.S. Declaration of Independence in the work refer to a jacquard woven version of the original document, and Sikander's further replication of this facsimile explores its contamination. Nothing is eternal, ideas change and alter over time. Time thus emerges as the nemesis to authority.



10

10 THE END OF SOMETHING

Graphite, ink, and gouache on paper, 2009

In this series of detailed drawings, the human and the mechanical, the grotesque and the absurd, the violent and the comical all come together. The oft-appearing overweight man and his transforming image is a stand-in for power relations and hierarchies. Informed by Americana in the Cooper-Hewitt collection, from which Sikander curated an exhibition in 2009, the series also has overlapping themes of beauty and violence.

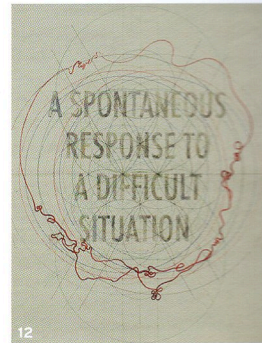


11

11 THE LANGLEY SERIES

Ink and graphite on paper, 2009

Playing on the word "Langley," Sikander pulls apart English landscape artist Batty Langley's *New Principles of Gardening: Or, The Laying out and Planting Parterres, Groves, Wildernesses, Labyrinths, Avenues, Parks, &c.* (1728), pairing it with real and imagined gardens as well as referring to labyrinthine institutions such as the CIA, based in Langley, Virginia.



12

12 EMPIRE FOLLOWS ART

Ink, gouache, and graphite on paper, 2008-2009

In *Empire Follows Art* the classical hexagonal grids of Islamic art and architecture and complex geometric indices generate hidden patterns, revealing a highlighted pentagon. The resulting stalemate is echoed in all four works in this poster-scale series. Inscriptions in English text also permeate the image, resembling the textual quotations in the video *Bending the Barrels*.

COVER: Still from *The Last Post*, 2010. HD video animation.

INSIDE LEFT: *Stalemate*, from the *Empire Follows Art* series, 2008-2009. Ink, gouache, and graphite on paper.

INSIDE RIGHT: Still from *The Last Post*, 2010. HD video animation.

Shahzia Sikander works in a time of great geopolitical change. Recent events in the Middle East, for example, have helped to break down clichéd cultural and political boundaries and open up new frameworks for contemporary visual art. Working in painting, drawing, animation, installation, video, and film, and employing ideas that are often subversive and polemical in nature, Sikander creates artworks that are physical manifestations of the momentum of our globalized world.

Born in Pakistan and now based in New York, Sikander studied miniature painting in the late 1980s at the National College of Art in Lahore, Pakistan. Since then, she has developed an original artistic practice that creates a new dialogue with this historical painting style. Inspired by Indo-Persian schools of miniature painting, Sikander incorporates aesthetic debates of popular iconography and contemporary cultural theory into her work. By referring to the traditional forms of miniatures, she conjures associations with imperialism, as well as storytelling and popular mythology. Yet by unraveling the conventions of miniaturist paintings, she also deconstructs the post-colonial legacy of the Pakistan region. Her work confronts and interrogates the perceptual distances between the cultures designated as “East” and “West,” an area of poignancy and difficulty in the current political climate.

Throughout her practice, Sikander interweaves references to the past with reflections on everyday life and its forms, and these visual motifs, drawn from a rich mental archive of imagery, repeat and reinvent themselves across various media. Sikander’s primary materials include graphite, ink, and gouache on paper, and in 2001 she began working in digital animation, setting her miniatures into motion. This use of animation, as well as her layered images and the play between representational and abstract forms, destabilizes Sikander’s representations and visually embodies her central concerns of transformation, societies in flux, and disruption as a means to cultivate new associations.

Shahzia Sikander: The Exploding Company Man and Other Abstractions was curated by Hou Hanru for the Walter and McBean Galleries at the San Francisco Art Institute.