

# Art History 101

*It is possible that the intrigue around artist Shahzia Sikander will finally be extinguished with her arrival at next year's Lahore Literary Festival. But the enigma of her enormous success - a MacArthur "genius" grant, a prestigious medal from the US government, and a permanent place in Western Art History - will likely linger, in Pakistan at least, for generations to come. By Salman Toor*

It was 10 years ago that I first came upon a mention of Shahzia Sikander's work in Helen Gardner's widely prescribed textbook 'Art Through The Ages'. I was an undergraduate at a Midwestern college in the US. Needless to say, I wasn't expecting to find a Pakistani artist - and a young one at that - in my class on art history. But there she was: Shahzia Sikander, born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1969.

I managed to get an internship as her studio assistant that summer. Her studio was in Dumbo (Down Under The Manhattan Bridge Overpass). She was calm and cool when I was late on my first day. (I was new in New York and got lost in Brooklyn.) She picked me up from the

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train station. She had freckles and fine features that suggested a Central Asian ancestry. In her gait I recognized the attractively carefree attitude of a student from the National College of Arts in Lahore. (That is where she studied miniature painting before enrolling at the Rhode Island School of Design.)

The building was a beehive of artists' studios. It was the kind of place where many names rang a bell. It was part of a constellation of places and people to which I was oblivious at the time. My own undergraduate head was full of the Western Classical tradition. All I wanted was to go to the Spanish room of the European painting section of the Metropolitan Museum and be allowed to die there.

Shahzia's studio was small and chaotic. An open wooden chest which looked like it had just arrived by courier was piled with tumbling columns of magazines, brochures and monographs. There were tea-colored papers strewn about the grey wooden floor; an assistant, a white American girl, was hunched over a particularly large one. She was drawing a complex floral border from various prototype printed sources with a sharpened pencil. Lighting the scene were cold overhead energy savers common in such studio spaces. My



job was to make an informal, handwritten bibliography of all the press coverage of Shahzia's work.

But before I left her studio that day I saw some exquisite things. Among the tracing papers on the floor and tables were delicate, precious drawings like rare unfinished illuminations by many a nameless court painter in India before the supremacy of the British was made plain. There were half finished paintings containing severed elements from the familiar lexicon of miniature painting.

### **When I returned to my dorm in the autumn and told my peers who I had interned with, they refused to believe me**

Airborne, unclassifiable monsters of Indo-Persian extraction were gliding and overlapping, their transparent forms entangled in a swarm of linear markings. There were creatures that resembled apes, griffins, chimeras, interwoven with writhing, tubular forms, meandering here, intertwining there, like the stingers of a jellyfish. The wet sienna and olive green pigments bled charmingly into the opaque white ones that crossed their paths. There was the larger painting (the one the assistant was working on) of what seemed to be an aerial view in miniature of a traditional Punjab Hill, but seen as on a psychedelic trip: the ground color a pale, acrid Van Gough green with maroon outlines for the stylized forms typically used in illumination paintings to signify shrubbery and rock formations. Among these rustled pairs of Persianate angels' wings connected to robed bodies with missing limbs. The altered scale and color made the picture spectacularly strange, pulled free of its original con-

text, posing a challenge to definition.

This was work in progress for what would become her show later that year at the Sikkema and Jenkins Gallery in New York.

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In a typical excerpt from press releases about her work there are the following phrases: 'Interested in the distance between the original and the copy... transformation as narrative... hybrid imagery that blurs polarities...'

To a person who is neither an artist nor familiar with clever little museum soundbites, this may sound like academic abstraction. But if it does it is only because this is an instant of thinking big, massively, ambitiously huge. This idea of making art about the idea of the distance between an original and its copy can encapsulate (among other global ideas that bring to mind the writing of Amitav Ghosh and V.S. Naipaul and Pankaj Mishra) questions and assumptions about regional, national and religious identity, especially for people like us. Think about a religious fanatic's desire to be an exact copy of the imagined original template of the life of a Shariah-abiding Arab Muslim in the seventh century. Apply this idea to the sensory distance between the original text of the Quran in classical Arabic and its translation in Urdu or English, let alone the imaginary phantasmagoric translation experienced by millions of

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non-Arabs based on the sound of its recitation and the familiar sight of its calligraphic script. Ask yourself about the similarity and difference between the majestic figure of the East India Company officer (as seen in Shahzia's famous *The Last Post* animation) and the present ruling classes of South Asia. Can we express the transformation of identity that occurs in the uprooted immigrant experience (as seen in her wandering *Tree Root Leg* female figure) to create an all-purpose hybrid that is equipped to deal with displacement and can make any place its home? In a nutshell, this means: can we have multiple perspectives and multiple, shifting identi-

## **With bloodless calm - Sikander unmoors traditional forms**

ties instead of a monolithic one? Shahzia's single minded drive and her ubiquitous presence maneuvered in a world rife with borders proves that we can.

Shahzia does not chase these mammoth ideas with the regular destructive rebellion with which Western artists often attack and mine their artistic heritage in the hope of stumbling on a grungy new form. With patience and care – at times even with bloodless calm – Sikander unmoors traditional forms and uses them like seeds for hybrid forms, ones that can encompass “global” ideas and experiences as well as “Eastern”, “provincial” or “marginal” ones. Western art famously appropriated foreign ideas (look at the relation between Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* to the influx at that time of African tribal masks in French museums) to reinvent itself in sync with its shifting perception of the world and its own progress.

The American art scene is the arena in which she initially made a name for herself. Here, the reigning trends (among better ones) have to do with cynicism, sarcasm, decay, and the constant anticipation of the death of art (that's what happens when you have comfortable nations with museums that curate the treasures of history in a linear fashion; their young artist-citizens develop problems that could leave us befuddled). Within this peculiarly American conversation about whether something is art or not, a conversation governed by the ambition to demolish boundaries between art and everything else, Shahzia Sikander's is a towering achievement, one marked by her personal intelligence and poise.

So if the rumor is true and she's finally returning to her hometown next year, please give her a hearty ovation. And listen. And try to understand. ■