



Shahzia Sikander (extreme left) at the Sharjah Biennial

# ODE TO SHARJAH

MUHAMMAD YUSUF WRITES ABOUT AN ARTIST WHOSE WORKS ARE FULL OF IMPRESSIONS OF THE EMIRATE

One of the celebrities who attended Sharjah Biennial 11 (SB, Mar. 13 – May 13) was American-based artist Shahzia Sikander. Widely — and deservedly — regarded as the person who breathed new life into the miniature, she is a one-woman powerhouse, whose scintillating talent links a variety of disciplines, making up a unique vision. For SB, she utilised drawing, animation, photography, poetry, collaboration

and performance to create a space that is experiential, imaginative and poetic.

Her offering falls into two parts: Part 1 titled *Parallax*, which is a 3 channel HD animation and a little over 15 minutes that focuses on Sharjah's unique location at the Strait of Hormuz and the area's historic power tensions. It is inspired by the idea of conflict and control where drawn elements come together to create dissonance and disruption.

In there, abstract, representational and textual forms coex-

ist and jostle for domination.

Spheres made of hair spin and sing, Christmas trees made of valves and spools spout, while undulating colour fields create pitch and fervour and large swaths of static noise erupt into flocks. Human voices recite and narrate, creating tension and rhythm while oscillating between audible texts and environmental sounds.

"The research visits to Sharjah led to all the drawings for this work," Sikander said. "It is an animation made out of hundreds

of drawings... The music was also created partly in Sharjah, in collaboration with three local poets (which came about after a meeting at the poetry house in Sharjah).

"I invited Chinese-American composer Du Yun to work on the music with the poets. Their interaction led to my decision on putting up a performance of their collaboration. The entire video animation is a symphonic visual poem (that is how I see it).

"My interest in poetry of course underpins all the work

I put up in Sharjah. I have always been interested in the political and the poetic. The work in Khor Fakkan (Part 2) also uses poetry and drawings which were projected in the abandoned cinema to transform it."

Part 2 consists of HD-Digital Projections at Khor Fakkan Cinema, Sharjah, of C-Prints in a series of 15 images. Sikander titles it *The cypress, despite its freedom, remains captive to the garden*.

"While visiting Sharjah in August 2012 as part of the process

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of developing ideas for the Biennial," she said, "I toured the dilapidated cinema in Khor Fakkan. The building, full of character, was in a state of decay, dying a slow death.

"Amidst the fast UAE building culture, the stagnating space felt like an anomaly to me. On arrival at the site to project and film in December 2012, I came across the sole guard, who happened to be from Pakistan and who had come to Sharjah as a labourer to help build the cinema.

"His story, though completely unexpected, ended up being woven into the work, less as an illustration and more as a random moment of illumination. Drawn images were also projected inside the cinema in various locations. At times, the projections symbolically brought back the cinema to life for the caretaker.

"The final photographs capture the projected information as it transforms the existing space. After interacting and working in the space for a few days, I found out that the cinema was originally designed by architects and engineers from Karachi, fashioned after some of the cinema architecture of the 60s and 70s in Pakistan.

"The caretaker, having risen the ranks as a manager of the space, had literally lived in the cinema for 36 years. This was his life, his love: since his existence was so intricately intertwined with the space, the imminent death of the cinema in my eyes became a metaphor for his life's labour.

"He, on the other hand, spoke of the space as if it was still alive and functional, unable to see the layers of dust and decay around him, a sole survivor held captive to a dream. The phrase 'The cypress, despite its freedom,

## SMILING FOR SHARJAH

ARTIST SHAHZIA SIKANDER EXPLAINS HOW THE EMIRATE OF SHARJAH HAS INFLUENCED HER WORK

**M**y sister lives in Abu Dhabi and now that Sharjah has allowed a real opportunity for me to engage, I feel I have a better understanding of the area in general.

I visited Sharjah several times in 2012 to develop ideas and do research and did one of the projects in Khor Fakkan. In that visit, I rented a car and drove across east and west coasts, which was also important in understanding the topography and the shift in the vernacular.

There is much more to understand. And I have kept the door open to do more work there if the opportunity comes. The other wonderful thing that has come about from the work I put up at the Sharjah Biennial is the invitation to develop a work for the 13th Istanbul Biennial (Sept. 14 – Nov. 10, curator Fulya Erdemci). The title of the biennial "Mom, am I barbarian?" is a quote from the Turkish poet Lale Muldur's book of the same title.

Biennials are significant in bringing attention to art works and artists as well as opening new opportunities for discussion. In my own particular situation, I introduced Art21 (<http://www.art21.org/artists>) to the Sharjah Foundation, who very generously invited them to come and visit the biennial.

Art21, in turn, invited me to conduct interviews with artists participating in the Sharjah Biennial. It was very educational for me to learn more about various projects and the artists' thinking process behind their works.



remains captive to the garden' is from the ghazal of the poet Ghalib. In the spirit of his poetry which is multidimensional and full of multiple mean-

ings, the use of the phrase is also meant to elicit multiple reads."

Sikander was born in 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan. Educated as an undergraduate at the

National College of Arts in Lahore, she received her MFA in 1995 from the Rhode Island School of Design. She specialises in Indian and Persian miniature painting, a traditional style that is both highly stylised and disciplined.

While becoming an expert in this technique-driven, often impersonal art form, she imbued it with a personal context and history, blending an Eastern focus on precision and methodology, with a Western emphasis on creative, subjective expression.

In doing so, she transported miniature painting into the realm of contemporary art. Raised as a Muslim, she is also interested in exploring both sides of the Hindu and Muslim "border," often combining imagery from both — such as the Muslim veil and the Hindu multi-armed goddess — in a single painting.

She has written: "Such juxtaposing and mixing of Hindu and Muslim iconography is a parallel to the entanglement of histories of India and Pakistan." Expanding the miniature painting to the wall, she also creates murals and installations, using tissue-paper-like materials that allow for a more free-flowing style.

In what she labels performances, she has experimented with wearing a veil in public, something she never did before moving to the United States. Utilising performance and various media and formats to explore issues of border crossing, she seeks to subvert stereotypes of the East and, in particular, the Eastern Pakistani woman.

She has received many awards and honours for her work, including the honorary artist award from the Pakistan Ministry of Culture and National Council of the Arts. She resides in New York and Texas.