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lahore literary festival | Feb. 21-23, 2014



Shahzia Sikander *Artist and LLF Delegate*



I am proud and elated to be part of the Lahore Literary Festival this year. I was born and raised in Lahore and, as a Pakistani national, it has been my deep desire to exhibit my work in my country. Participation in the Lahore Literary Festival (LLF) provides me with an invaluable platform to engage with those who share my passion for art and culture, and it is the first formal invitation for me of this nature in Pakistan. I am deeply appreciative of and humbled by this opportunity to engage with so many individuals who are an integral part of my community. I am reminded of the time when, in 1987, I was looking outward to the world as a young person feeling very lucky to have ventured into the Arts. National College of Arts (NCA) was my beacon, nurturing curiosity and intellectual debate and a commitment to the creative process. It was a privilege for me to receive support from my mentors, peers, family, and friends who recognized my potential to make a contribution and encouraged me to take risks and develop a capacity for critical thinking and imagining the impossible. It was within this environment that I chose to engage with miniature painting during a time when there was little interest in pursuing it at NCA. What others saw as enslavement to craft and technique, I recognized as a path to expand the medium from within, embracing the complexities of craft and rigor in order to open up possibilities for dialogue. Miniature painting for me has always been heroic in scope and not limited by its scale – it is a space to unleash one’s imagination. In 1991, my thesis that I put forth regarding re-imagining miniature painting, was well received in the press and art circles of Pakistan and I received recognition for originality, vision and artistic excellence through the Shakir Ali and Haji Sharif awards. As Quddus

Mirza recognized more than a decade later in 2004 in *The News on Sunday* Sikander’s work “proved a breakthrough not only for the painter’s individual practice, but carved a new way for generations of miniature artists to experiment in multiple directions.” That moment in my life in 1991 was incredibly powerful as I was supported from communities within Pakistan, and this support validated and strengthened my identity as a young artist. I felt empowered and it was precisely that inspiration that I held onto and which allowed me to continue taking risks and transforming my work for more than two decades. Over the years, I have worked in a variety of mediums and formats, including small detailed paintings, murals, animation, installation, video and some collaboration with other artists. My process is driven by my interest in exploring and re-discovering cultural and political boundaries as a space for opening up new frameworks for dialogue and visual narrative. As a transnational artist, I continue to grow and engage with various communities around the world, participating and helping find meaning and drive cultural change. Pakistan is ripe with creative expression, and the festival celebrates this cultural capital. It brings increased visibility to art and culture in the South Asian context, serving as an important platform for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary exchange. By bringing together participants from all over the larger region, the LLF has served to dismantle many of the nationalistic divides that characterize the region and has created an inclusive space for dialogue and exchange. Developing new collaborative outlets within Pakistan that foster dialogue on important issues across generational divides is essential, as much as for young artists and intellectuals as for the older and more experienced members of our society. It is also necessary for us to continue to question and dismantle the economic stratification, both globally and locally. As the world we live in changes rapidly, it is even more urgent to think creatively and respond in a holistic manner to the complex realities of our times by integrating art and culture in our collective response. In order to do this, we must improve collaboration and support for the liberal arts and interdisciplinary learning and promote critical thinking and ethical values, which are essential to countering the lack of predictability of our times. Creativity is genius and the more we strengthen and build cohesion in the creative capital, drawn from the diverse communities of our great nation, the better we will be to address our current and future challenges.