

# SHAHZIA SIKANDER

Artist Statement, Lahore Literary Festival 2014



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. The Lahore Literary Festival's (LLF) invitation, which provides me with an invaluable platform to engage with those who share my passion for art and culture, is the first formal invitation I have received of this nature in Pakistan. I am deeply appreciative of and humbled by this opportunity to engage with so many individuals I consider to be an integral part of my personal 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 was my beacon, nurturing curiosity and intellectual debate and a commitment to the creative process. I was lucky to receive nurturing and support from teachers, family, and friends, who recognized my potential to make a contribution and encouraged me to take risks and develop a capacity to critically think and imagine the impossible. It was within this environment that I chose to engage with miniature painting during a time when it was not popular. What others saw as enslavement to craft and technique, I saw as a path to opening possibilities for dialogue.

In 1991, my thesis focusing on experimentation in miniature painting, was very well received in the press and art circles of Pakistan and for which I received the Shakir Ali and Haji Sharif awards. As Quddus Mirza wrote in 2004 in Pakistan's *Encore: 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 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 at all stages of my involvement. I am also proud to say that, as an 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 production, 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. 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 more rapidly, it is even more urgent to think outside of the box and respond holistically to the complex realities of our times by recognizing the role of arts and culture and investing in it as a part of our collective response. This can be done by improving collaboration and support for the liberal arts and interdisciplinary learning as well as nurturing critical thinking and ethical values, which are an essential aspect of countering the unpredictabilities of the world. Creativity is genius and the more we support the great creative capital of our great nation the better we will be to participate and address the challenges of the future.

