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Arts of Asia

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Ancient and Modern Asian Art



Connecting Past and Present

Qing Dynasty Imperial Ceramics Art of the Islamic Worlds Decorative Arts
Indonesian Gold Japanese Photography Asian Modern and Contemporary Art

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 Zhan Wang,
Artificial Rock #83, 2006,
 stainless steel and
 mahogany, edition 3/4,
 95.3 x 63.5 x 27.9 cm.
 Cai Guo-Qiang, *Odyssey*,
 2010, gunpowder and
 pigment on paper,
 304.8 x 4937.8 cm.
 Photograph © The
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 Arts, Houston

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ASIA THROUGH CONTEMPORARY EYES

Highlights from the Collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

ALISON DE LIMA GREENE

Photographs © The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Thomas R. DuBrock, photographer unless stated otherwise

THE MUSEUM of Fine Arts, Houston opened its first permanent building in 1924, the year that the institution made its first acquisition of non-Western art. Over the decades that followed, the museum matched its city's ambition with rapid growth, adding expansive new galleries to its original structure, including two major additions, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, that opened in 1958 and 1974 respectively. At the same time, the museum's exhibition programme became increasingly global in scope, and both historic and modern collections were built through the remarkable generosity of successive generations of collectors and patrons. However, while notable acquisitions of historical works from across Asia reflected the museum's commitment to world cultures, Asian contemporary art only began to have a significant presence during William C. Agee's tenure as director from 1974 to 1982. With the visionary support of Alice Pratt Brown and the Cullen family, Agee commissioned the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi to create the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, a project that gave the heart of the museum's campus a newly international outlook (1).¹

Noguchi submitted his first proposal for the Cullen Sculpture Garden in 1979. Over the next five years, he refined the plans in order to create a "sculpture for sculpture", where concrete walls, granite pavers, open areas of grass and native trees offered an intimate setting for works from the museum's collection. Synthesising modern aesthetics with historical sources, Noguchi freely drew inspiration from the great Jantar Mantar Observatories in Delhi and Jaipur, as well as from the dry landscape (*kare-sansui*) at Ryōan-ji and the stroll garden (*kaiyū-shiki-teien*) at Katsura in Kyoto. Noguchi's use of these sources was not merely formal; he was also keenly aware of how Zen principles of contemplation and passage could shape the visitor's experience: "I find the changing relationships of the spaces exactly as I hoped", he commented. "Walking through the garden I think there is a kind of conversation going on, a very quiet conversation between walls and spaces, people and sculptures. The walls are sculptures as far as I am concerned. They form a geometry of playfulness."²



1 Isamu Noguchi, *Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden*, 1986. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum commission funded by The Cullen Foundation, The Brown Foundation, Inc., Antonette and Isaac Arnold, Jr., Mr and Mrs Theodore N. Law, Mr and Mrs Meredith J. Long, Mr Douglas B. Marshall, Jr., and Mr William James Hill; trees and plantings generously sponsored by River Oaks Garden Club, Mr and Mrs M.S. Stude, and The Garden Club of Houston. Image courtesy the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives

Peter C. Marzio, the museum's director from 1982 to 2010, oversaw the construction of the Cullen Sculpture Garden, which opened to the public in 1986. In the decades that followed, the museum's campus continued to grow apace. In 2000, the Audrey Jones Beck Building opened, offering a permanent home to the European and

¹The Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden was created to link the museum's main gallery building with the newly opened Alfred C. Glassell, Jr. School of Art, see Alison de Lima Greene, Valerie J. Fletcher and Marc Treib, *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculpture for Sculpture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

²Celeste Marie Adams, "The Sculpture Garden: A Conversation with Isamu Noguchi", *MEAH Bulletin* 9, no. 3, Summer 1986, p. 20.



10 Shahzia Sikander, *Uprooted Order Series 3, No. 1*, 1995, vegetable colour, watercolour, dried pigment and tea water on wasli handmade paper, 16.8 x 9.2 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Joseph Havel and Lisa Ludwig, 2003.728. © Shahzia Sikander. Photograph © The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Pakistan

After completing her studies at the National College of Art in Lahore, Shahzia Sikander launched her career in the United States in the mid-1990s with her *Uprooted Order Series*, works which radically reconfigured the conventions of Hindu and Mughal painting. Unlike many artists of her generation who appropriated historical sources in order to express distance in space or time, Sikander instills her work with a fresh immediacy that is at once improvisatory and highly disciplined. Sikander has declared:

Imagination and intuition inform my process. Art, at times a solitary practice, is sustained by the desire to connect and communicate—the pendulum between conformity and freedom, craft and culture, fragility of

emotion and tenacity of control... Within the work of art, the elasticity of the form is its ability to remain relevant over its various iterations within geographical, historical, sociopolitical, cultural, gendered and psychological transformations.²⁴

Uprooted Order Series 3, No. 1, 1995, was painted during Sikander's two-year tenure in this museum's Core Residency Program, and it exemplifies the nuanced referential strategies she established during this breakout period in her career (10). Committed to being a female and feminist voice, she has explained: "Early on in my practice I began developing a personal vocabulary, an alphabet of sorts, in which forms could serve as stock figures and no longer had to hold onto their original meaning."²⁵ Here, three *gopis* (devotees of Krishna) dominate the composition. Two are depicted in a pearly white grisaille without attire or adornment, while the central *gopi* is richly clad and more naturalistically rendered. Hovering over this figure is a veiled, possibly winged silhouette, whose legs taper into roots, as if pulled from the ground, an emblem that first appeared in Sikander's work in 1993 and which has become one of the artist's most enduring signifiers. Echoes of this figure recur on a smaller scale as well, one breaking from her roots to dance exuberantly, complicating received ideas about the meaning of the veil and women's autonomy.

At the same time, Sikander exercises a strong formal control, with the central axis of the composition defined by four stacked circles, while other circles establish a horizontal intersection. Sikander has identified these as *chakra*, while acknowledging that they also can be understood as Modernist tropes.²⁶ Similarly, the two *gopis*, who frame the page function much as the traditional ornamental borders of miniature painting; they focus the viewer's gaze and push from the margins to the centre.

Huma Bhabha builds her sculptures and works on paper through assemblage, collage and photomontage, compositional strategies that she employs with the freedom of a scavenger and the rigour of an architect. *Untitled*, 2014, is one of a series of monumental drawings featured in *All the World's Futures*, Okwui Enwezor's global survey for the 2015 Venice Biennale (11). Commenting on this series, Bhabha noted "The drawings... have a kind of cinematic feel to me: the underlying photo is usually a place where I've spent time (Berlin, Karachi, Poughkeepsie) and functions like an establishment shot. But the actual mark making is the action."²⁷

Untitled demonstrates Bhabha's use of the photographic ground as a scaffold for action. Working over a base-layer of photomontage, Bhabha transforms the fragmented landscape into a colossal, totemic head. A cargo-cult idol for the internet era, Bhabha's haunting apparition is fashioned from web-based image banks—film stills, news media, advertising—the electronic detritus of our times, shaped and animated by the artist's hand. One mask-like eye is punctured by a collaged image of a marijuana bud, suggesting psychotropic introspection as well as the toxic realities of the global trade in narcotics. "There is never a particular narrative; that is something you have to make up for yourself", Bhabha has observed. "I give you clues, but my own interests stay in the background. What I love about the photographs is that they provide so much information, and my role is simply to add more."²⁸