

Embodying the essence of art

THE attendees of artist Shazia Sikander's session, 'The World in Miniature,' at the LLF experienced a powerful glimpse of the dissonances and disruptions which have presided over the history of this area through 'Parallax,' a piece of installation art by Sikander. A series of digitally animated drawings, 'Parallax' begins with a field of static which erupts into birds flying away into a vast sky, followed by a succession of abstract and representational forms in vivid colours and textures giving way to each other.

One of the most evocative images is that of the 'Christmas tree well,' a multi-valve oil well named so because it resembles a crude Christmas tree. Sikander has translated the image into a garlanded monstrosity taking over the screen and multiplying manifold. Scored with a haunting soundtrack composed by the Chinese composer Du Yun which includes the recitation of poetry by the local poets of Sharjah, 'Parallax' talks about the fervour of activity the discovery of oil brought to the Strait of Hormuz, the tensions of imperial control over the area and the suffocation and silences created by it. In the course of several minutes, the visual and auditory vocabulary of this piece of art grants the audience a far deeper, more human, more encompassing and more elevated understanding of this slice of reality and the writing, rewriting and omissions of its history, than can be available through any other medium.

Art, for Sikander, is an instinct with which to imagine the future and re-examine the past. Of special interest to her is the dialogue art makes possible across political and cultural boundaries, of the subtle challenges it can present to ideas of fixity, separation and representation. Trained as a miniature artist, Sikander said that she works to "expand the medium from within," by keeping intact the traditional set of rules and attention to detail governing miniature painting while

experimenting radically with scale and form. This rearticulation of miniature painting represents a space of infinite possibilities for Sikander and fulfills her intent to challenge and break through the status quo. As an artist, she believes that she sees "the worlds within the world" and remains unrestrained by traditional notions of space, thereby giving birth to "new ways of being." And indeed the glimpse the audience got of her work displays Sikander's unique insight and manifest

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accomplishment as an artist, particularly of her ability to reimagine space. One of her projects refurbishes the space of a dilapidated cinema she came across at Khor Fakkan, near Sharjah, from the point of view of a Pakistani caretaker who lived in the cinema for 36 years and still saw the space as alive and functional despite the decrepitude and disrepair about him. Sikander saw the vitality of the world within that world and brought it to us as a profound moment of illumination.

Sikander's work reaffirms the notion that

artists plumb deeply into that which we all collectively feel and sense at some level and give it a material form. Art throughout the centuries thus encapsulates the raptures and discontents of civilisations, and it is in this vein that art historian Naman Ahuja, in the session titled 'The Body in South Asian Art,' explored the representations of the body in South Asian art. He looks at the body not only as a subject of art but also as the embodiment of the values, preoccupations and as-

tation of the body beyond the limits of the form. By exploring artworks which touch upon ideas such as the paradox of the body being considered an impermanent vessel and yet being venerated (such as in Buddhist stupas) and the depiction of the body in negative space or as anthropomorphic symbols in cultures which resist the literal representation of the body, Ahuja explicated upon the body as the locus of identity, power and experimentation with representation alongside raising basic questions about the agency of the body.

At one point during the session, Ahuja stressed greatly on the importance of considering the artist as an imaginative and creative agent and not just a mindless replicator, which brings us to such questions as how art comes to be. How do artists navigate through the journey which culminates in their art?

The session 'Dissonance and Detour' set out to explore this with John Zarobell in conversation with artist Shazia Sikander, novelist Kamila Shamsie and curator Diana Campbell. All three panelists were concurrent with the idea that detour has defined their work. Shamsie told us that her method of writing embodies detour for she never has a defined game-plan for her novels and often her writing takes her to completely unexpected places while Sikander said that detour is in fact her journey, she comes upon many of the subjects of her work while driving around in a car. Campbell described how her sudden whimsical move to Hyderabad from New York and then on to Mumbai has indelibly stamped her work. Dissonance for Sikander is what opens up the realm of possibility while for Shamsie it brings about avenues of discomfort which are necessary for artistic production. The session gave valuable insight into the nature of the connection between the artist and her work. ■

— ZARA KHADEEJA MOJAKA