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PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN

FROM PAKISTAN TO PROVIDENCE, SHAHZIA SIKANDER LEARNED HOW

FIRST YOU SEE THE WOMEN. THEY LEAP, they float; they beckon; they smile, ever so slightly, through a veil. They go about their business. And somehow these luminous figures of 32-year-old artist Shahzia Sikander's invention work their way under your skin and into a place near your solar plexus, where

feelings you cannot quite name reside. It's not until a moment later that you register the intricate designs of which these women are a part. Your eyes take in the menfolk, the animals, the symbols, the thousand little grace notes. Sikander's paintings wow the art world—her work has been exhibited at New York's Whitney Museum, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and the Smithsonian Institution—but her appeal extends beyond the critical realm. She both embraces and subverts the centuries-old Eastern art of miniature painting, saturating her canvases not only with color but with mischief. Traditionally, miniatures depict religious subjects and rituals such as weddings. But Sikander's paintings portray everyday experiences and evoke the inner

life. Her women slip out of the requisite borders, their bodies become weightless, uncontainable. Sikander herself refuses to be claimed, be it by the Manhattan gallery crowd who would crown her its exotic priestess or by the traditionalists of her homeland.

"Art, for me, has always been a ticket for experience," Sikander says, recounting her journey here. Her English is inflected and rapid-fire, her physicality small and intense. Her studio, a loft in a downtown Manhattan industrial building, is tidy and spare, though not unwelcoming. She perches on a chair, leaning forward. "I grew up in a convent in Pakistan," she says. Although Muslim, Sikander, like her mother, received a missionary education. "Till high school, I was studying food and nutrition, home >

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA PAUL



Shahzia Sikander
in her Manhattan
studio, spring 2001

TO PAINT HER WAY OUT OF TRADITIONAL THINKING.
DAWN RAFFEL QUESTIONS A RISING STAR WHO QUESTIONS EVERYTHING.

STYLIST: KATHY PEARSON/DAVE AND PATRICK; MICHELLE REED FOR MAREK EDWARDS, INC.



Riding the Written is tiny—5¼ by 8 inches—but packs a visual wallop. On the border, letters morph into horses.

submission; the student serves a sort of apprenticeship with her teacher and spends most of her

time copying. It wasn't long, though, before Sikander began interjecting her own wit and intelligence into an ornate framework. She spent nearly a year of 12-hour days creating a huge, meticulous scroll showing all the interiors of a Pakistani household, the women present everywhere. "The scroll was a breakthrough because the personal had never really been in miniature painting," she says.

Sikander's star rose in Pakistan, but she yearned for more artistic freedom. "For a year I pursued the Pakistani ambassador to the United States to do a show of young artists," she says. Finally she was awarded a one-day show in Washington, D.C.; she arrived on a standby ticket. Enamored with the liberties America offered, and with the emotional support of her family, in 1993 she cobbled together enough scholarship money and odd jobs to attend graduate school at Rhode Island School of Design in Providence.

Sikander feels the sheer act of having to pay her own way, file for immigration, and find a place to live affected her painting as much as her new surroundings. "I was forced to be resourceful, and maturity comes with that," she says. "I don't feel you need to go through a major life crisis to be an artist. There's an integrity that comes with just being creative." But life in Rhode Island had its frustrations. "People would be interested in my work but not aware of the meaning, the history,

"THE CHALLENGE IS TO CONTINUE TO REINVENT YOURSELF," SIKANDER SAYS. "I DON'T MIND

economics. I learned how to make bread-and-butter pudding—everything that is British, that would never be part of the diet one has in Pakistan," she says. "Our papers went back to England to be graded. It was the remnants of colonialism, and we never questioned it." This would be perhaps the last thing she didn't question.

At the National College of Arts in Lahore, Sikander chose to study miniature painting, a form that had fallen out of fashion and that she'd despised as a child. "I had this hateful relationship with

it because it was such a tourist-kitsch art form. And yet I couldn't get it out of my system," she says. "When I was growing up, you either rejected it because it was very traditional, or you claimed and proclaimed it as 'This is our heritage.' I found both very extreme. I was not interested in some nationalistic endeavor. I got interested because I thought, It's so easy to reject something. It's so easy for us to be critical. It takes more of an effort to open up to something."

To master the art of miniatures requires

the underlying humor and mythology—so there was a loss," she says.

"Just because one was from Pakistan, everybody questioned you about being a Muslim and being a woman. I was supported by my parents to come here, and all the women in my family are very active," Sikander says. "A lot of women I met here were so dependent on being in a relationship. Their identity was all about who they were dating. Where I grew up, dating wasn't allowed—but maybe you can't say that was oppressive."

FOR A FEW YEARS IN THE mid-nineties, Sikander did a lot of paintings with “floating costume-looking veils.” Although some people felt she trivialized the politically charged issue of Muslim women covering their faces, she explains, “My intention was never to make a political statement. It was really about how provocative and loaded and, at times, stereotyped that image is. I did some ‘performances’ where I wore the veil to odd places, like bars and grocery stores, to see how people would react. People would not talk to me on the street. At the grocery store, they would give me room to go ahead in line. For me there was complete anonymity—no one could see my expression—and yet, at the same time, I was the only odd one out in Providence.” Unknown yet instantly recognizable: “I like that kind of contradiction,” she says.

Over the past five years, Sikander has lost the veils but not the contradictions, exploring not only Muslim but Hindu mythology, occasionally painting huge canvases “to break out of the preciousness of miniatures,” and creating impermanent—and mutable—exhibitions in public spaces. This fall Sikander’s work will be displayed at the Asia Society in New York as part of a series called *Conversations With Traditions*.

That she has almost single-handedly sparked a resurgence in miniature painting, both in the United States and Pakistan, where her reputation has grown, is a point of pride. “There are 20 other artists doing miniature painting just in New York,” she says, and 30 students graduating from the once sleepy Lahore

refuses to be at the mercy of the marketplace and won’t paint with the aim of selling. “The art world can be fickle,” she says. “I haven’t done commercial shows. I’m more interested in working with nonprofits, where they give you an artist’s fee or a place to live so you can do experimental work.” A recent fellowship took her to Houston, where she contributed to a project in a low-income African-American neighborhood. “You get a house for six months and total freedom to do whatever you want,” she says. Sikander painted on the walls and floor in an Indian tradition. “I was able to get a lot of people from South Asian communities to visit a neighborhood they had never even driven into,” she says. “They were hesitant, yet we created a lot of relationships, friendships with people from different cultures.”

Energized by dialogues of all kinds, Sikander has nevertheless paid a price for freedom. Her life has been one of transience—traveling throughout the country wherever grants take her, working where she can find a space—and with no guarantee that her latest artistic leaps will be met with approval.

“The challenge is always to continue to reinvent yourself,” she says. “I don’t mind experimenting in public. You can’t control everything. People can love your work or hate your work. It doesn’t matter.” What’s important is to pull the carpet from under all of our feet, but gently. “I’m interested in raising questions and opening up healthy conversations—not necessarily saying, ‘Oh, these are the answers,’” she says. “The answers will always be various and different.” ●

EXPERIMENTING IN PUBLIC.”

program every other year. Yet Sikander doesn’t want to be labeled a miniaturist or, for that matter, a Pakistani immigrant, and she has, at best, an ambivalent relationship to the limelight: “The fact that you, and not the work, become a spectacle is the most detrimental thing for an artist.”

Although Sikander is represented by a well-known gallery, she

Separate Working Things, like all of Sikander’s art, is richly hued. She uses vegetable colors, dry pigments, watercolors, and tea on hand-prepared paper.

