

I don't believe in the model of pure
inspiration. All of my creative work stems
from a dialogue with others

– *Rachel Kushner*

Dialogue

Shahzia Sikander
& Sadia Abbas

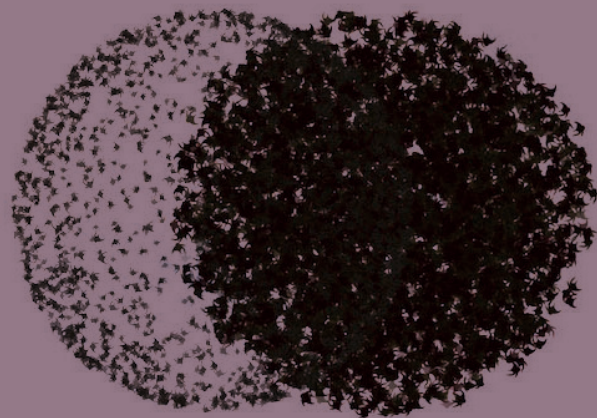


Photo: Mathias Ziegler

The Scroll and The Empty Room

I have had the immense pleasure of knowing the famed artist, Shahzia Sikander, for decades. I recall my mother, who was also an artist, once saying: “The miniature needs to be revitalised... How long will artists paint the same subjects, brought forth from centuries ago? Miniature painting needs to be used for contemporary themes.”

*In 1991, I went to the NCA thesis show and saw **The Scroll** by Shahzia. It was a long, meandering work, a kind of unfolding of the rooms of her parents’ house. A tesseract, not of a cube, but of a house, the walls falling in to expose a series of ethereal depictions of the artist in different areas and with different family members, some real, some imagined... a time-shifting Shahzia in the rooted geography of a symbolic space. It was beautiful, brilliant, mesmerising... a contemporary work that would pave the way for an immense shift in miniature painting. From this point onwards, Pakistani miniature painting would become a robust and experimental new form. I rang up my mother and told her about it. Later on, she would say how much she loved Shahzia’s work.*

*Our opinions about things—art, books, architecture, music—are sometimes pivotally shaped by people who have impacted our lives the most. Perhaps, I would not have immediately understood the ground-breaking concept of **The Scroll** had it not been for my mother, then. So naturally, when I set up **The Aleph Review**, I wanted an interview with this dynamic artist from day one. And she was also keen, but as we talked about this over many months, dare I say, years, getting the right person to interview her and at the same time examine the seminal importance of **The Scroll**, became a journey in itself.*

*Then one day she called up and asked me if a dialogue with a fellow creative would work. That creative was the writer Sadia Abbas, who had just published her novel **The Empty Room**, after the success of her academic book **At Freedom’s Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament**. Sadia Abbas is also the editor of a book on Shahzia Sikander’s work in conjunction with a survey exhibition being organized by the Rhode Island School of Design which will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and the Morgan Library in New York in 2020-2021.*

*It seemed that the two had already found parallels between **The Scroll** and **The Empty Room**. A dialogue, then, seemed logical. The following is their exchange. Please note that since this dialogue was commissioned for **The Aleph Review**, Shahzia has bagged another accolade, being appointed amongst the six new members of the Board of Trustees of The Rhode Island School of Design. Sadia’s novel, meanwhile, has been short-listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.*

Mehvash Amin

Shahzia Sikander working at the Franz Mayer Studio in Munich.



The Scroll by **Shahzia Sikander**, 1989-1990

Transparent and opaque colour, dry pigment, watercolour and tea on wasli paper

34.3 x 162.2 cm (13½ x 63½ in)



Ecstasy as Sublime, Heart as Vector

by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2016

Glass, stone and marble mosaic, 20.1 m (66 ft) tall

Permanent site-specific commission

Economics Building, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

Sadia Abbas: You have talked recently about the affinity between *The Scroll* and *The Empty Room*. I am humbled and honoured. I wrote about a painter, so for a painter like you to respond that way to my book, means the world to me. It was important to me that painters be drawn to what I've written and, of course, I'm so often transfixed by your work, but what exactly do you mean?

Shahzia Sikander: Well, I read your book again recently and it is remarkable how many parallels there are. You know I painted *The Scroll* when I was only 19, so to be transported back in time was deeply meaningful. Not in any nostalgic way. *The Scroll* came about by reflecting on the interiority of space, internal and physical, and how to depict it in the miniature language. How to condense space and capture detail but not be defined by limitations of time. One of the visual references that I studied deeply was the Safavid painting's use of storytelling by activating the boundaries of the house. Interestingly, as soon as I started reading your book, Safavid painting's enduring relevance came to my mind.

SA: That's so interesting. I'm also intrigued in the similarities in our work—partly, in the process of creation, but also about the relationship that women have with space that, in some sense, is what the novel is about, which is why what you were saying about rooms is so important.



Quintuplet-Effect

by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2016

Glass painting, 6.4 x 4 m (21 x 13 ft)

Permanent site-specific commission

Economics Building, Princeton

University, Princeton, NJ

I wanted to write a novel that never left the house, and in the end, I kind of joke saying I copped out, because it does actually leave the house, but to me that was the formal issue, how do you keep it mostly in the house?

SS: *The Scroll* captures the psychological dimensions of a house via its residents and their various functions within the house's physical nature, as well as the role of domestic labour, including different class structures. I first started



Artwork: © Shahzia Sikander

Unseen Series 3 by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2011-12

HD digital projection, dimensions variable
 Installation view, Shangri La Museum of
 Islamic Art, Culture & Design, Honolulu, HI

imaging the domestic space through a series of drawings and large-scale collage paintings in 1988. The fact that I chose to focus on a house was also because that era was defined by the looming Hudood ordinances and as a young, single woman, one could not freely roam around the city. It made sense to me to locate the work in the house where I was bound to be spending the majority of my time. *The Scroll*, interestingly, is also about creating kinship with an inspiring mentor, the architect Nayyar Ali Dada. The house, the muse in *The Scroll*, was built by him. I observe the spaces of the house but alter them in ways reminiscent of Safavid painting. I was trying to paint space that could be simultaneously flat and voluminous. The house is the armature for the protagonist. But the protagonist in the painting is struggling in the space. It is painted transparent often, as if it's moving through space, always restless, diaphanous, passing through time and not being rooted in the moment that the other characters exist in.

SA: You mean the figure of the woman that occurs throughout painting?

SS: Yes. The figure is of a young girl who is in transition, in the process of determining who she is. She is everywhere in *The Scroll* as the observer, but her face is never visible. Of course, while reading your book, the main character, Tahira, becomes familiar to me, caught in similarly conflicting ways within the confines of her home, but in her case it's her in-laws' house. While painting *The Scroll*, it was not important whose house it was. What I wanted to depict was the transitory nature of life, where the house is just one abode—a very spiritual notion borrowed from the historical Safavid painting. But what reminded me of Safavid painting while reading your book was the richness of detail in which you elaborate light and inanimate surfaces, apart from the discussion around livings forms.

The Scroll deconstructs space by activating all space, whether it's the surface of the walls, windows, doors or surfaces of objects in the house, people's clothes,



Artwork: © Shahzia Sikander, Photo: Umar Riaz

Disruption as Rapture

by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2016

Music: Du Yun
 featuring Ali Sethi
 Animation: Patrick O'Rourke
 Duration: 10:07 min.
 Lahore Biennale
 2018, Lahore,
 Pakistan

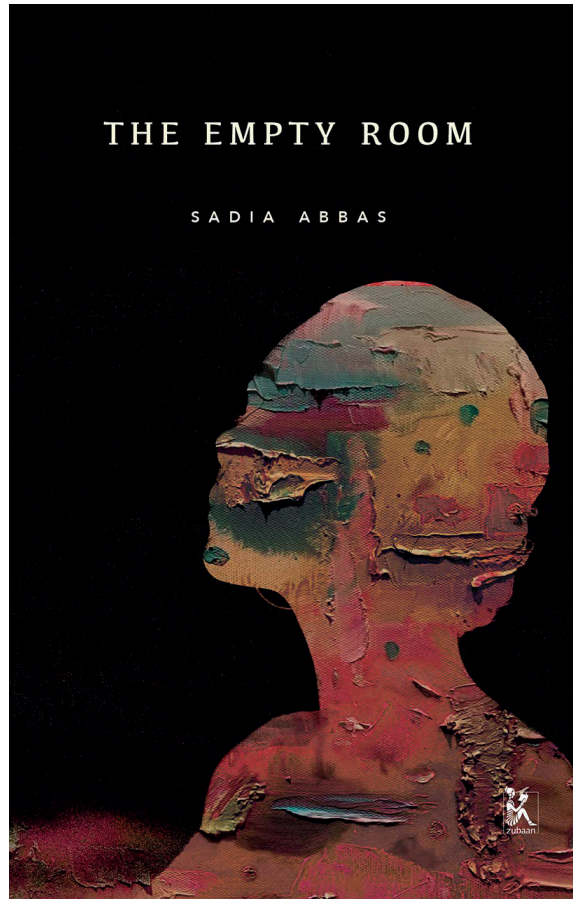
or the surfaces of their skin—every tiny area is covered in individually designed pattern. This play with treating the animate and inanimate in similar strengths allows a breakdown of assigning importance in any hierarchical manner.

SA: I'm embarrassed to say, that *The Scroll* was not my favourite work by you. I love, for instance, some of the more anarchic ones, like *Pleasure Pillars*, or *Red Rider's Hood*, is that what it's called?

SS: *Hood's Red Rider* and *Red Riding Hood*: they are part of a series around the monstrous, associated with the female.

SA: I love all of these, which are different: intensely coloured, beautiful, gorgeous, full of a sort of anarchic plenitude; but once I finished my novel, I suddenly kind of understood *The Scroll* so much better. And I got more and more intrigued and in love with *The Scroll*. For instance, where the young woman is stepping over the threshold: to me, it's almost like Tahira stepping into her new life. What's the threshold that's been crossed here?

SS: It is about departure. I was marking a new direction in the miniature painting tradition through *The Scroll* and the opening section, where the young woman steps over a threshold, symbolized as a frame, is exactly about that, about taking herself and others (the viewer) along into a new territory, a new beginning. *The Scroll* did launch the neo-miniature movement, after all. When you think about it, it was intuitive at that time to tap into the Safavid period in such deep ways.



¹*Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, 1656, Museo del Prado, Madrid. The painting's complex composition raises questions about reality and illusion, and creates an uncertain relationship between the viewer and the figures depicted.

SA: There's also that image at the other end of the scroll, where she's painting a self-portrait, and there's this triangular relationship with herself. I think of it as a sort of *Las Meninas*¹ moment. In *The Empty Room*, Tahira is looking at Zubeida Agha's self-portrait. And it doesn't say initially in the book whose self-portrait she's looking at. It just says self-portrait, and so this play of what a woman's self is, given that sort of spatial constraint. And, of course, there's this spectral figure throughout your scroll. Which is, of course, brilliant precisely because it's both playing with the inaccessibility of the interior space of the miniature, right, and deconstructing the boundary. Is that fair?

SS: Yes, so the woman painting the self-portrait in *The Scroll* where neither she nor the viewer can see her face or the self-portrait being painted is very much

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I feel that one of the points of affinity in our work is that we're both really interested in exploring form, or forms. I wanted to play with the domestic novel and go against the marriage plot, which ends with romantic resolution. So, it begins the day after the wedding and becomes about the existential navigation of an enclosed space

Sadia Abbas



Artwork: © Shahzia Sikander; Photo: Luis Do Rosario; Courtesy: Fondazione MAXXI

Parallax by *Shahzia Sikander*, 2013

Music: *Du Yun*

Duration: 15:26 min.

Installation view, MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo, Rome, Italy

June 22, 2016-January 15, 2017

about depicting past, present, future all in one space. I think the women in our work are struggling to create a rupture from the present towards the future, moving away from the prevalent layers of patriarchy. I'm painting this work in 1987, '88, '89...

SA: Right, it's at the apogee of the Zia years, and we were both formed in that moment.

SS: Right.

SA: And, of course, I chose not to write about it. I chose to end the novel at the cusp of that period, because I also wanted to study how some of those tendencies were always there. Tahira is not forced to be in the house. She's married off and, of course, that becomes her realm and she's constrained in it because of her class. She technically has the option, but not within the psychic constraints imposed by her marriage.

But I'm sure my sense of space is entirely shaped by the '80s too. I remember my aunts talking about taking the bus to go to university. But for a middle class family in the late '80s, that was not permitted for girls.

SS: As a female, how one experienced space—it was all about restriction.

SA: That's right. Also, in my case it had as much to do with my mother and father, that they just couldn't handle an adolescent girl. Neither can society. A girl that hits puberty has to be taught to move differently and that's very confusing because we're given relative freedom as children to run around and then there's this complete 180 degree turn. So, part of the bodily constraints Tahira feels comes from my interest in that disciplining of the body.

SS: *The Scroll* depicts various stages of youth, there are children relatively free, playing around and the young adult female defies bodily restrictions by becoming an elastic, transparent, moving, morphing form, almost like a ghost. This claiming of the freedom of the body is the defining emotion in the work.

There is another movement in time in the work. In drawing a bridge to the historical miniature, like the Safavid tradition, I was examining the stake in miniature painting, as an outsider to the prevalent western canon of painting in the present-day construction of art history. Going beyond miniature painting's fraught Euro-centric discourse, often presented as a derivative art form, and thus I explored Indian, Persian, Turkish, Chinese painting traditions to counter the emphasis on Renaissance art.

The process to learn such expansive history was slow. This slowing down of pace to acquire knowledge was equally important in developing depth, by tapping into the interiority of the miniature language, a wondrous and imaginative zone. This going around the colonial space was like going further backward...

SA: ...in time...

SS: In historical time. I was not interested in shortcuts of contemporizing the



Monsters Within

by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2000-2001

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolour
and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper
37.8 cm x 28.9 cm (14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in)

miniature by inserting photographic perspective or photographic references, but in expanding the link with the historical, prior to the modern and the colonial period's deliberation on the genre. The multiplicity of the language—its form, its syncretic nature, its socio-political formations—are myriad; there is no one way to define it. In that respect, the term 'miniature painting' itself is limiting.

SA: So, I want to ask you more about *The Scroll*. I'm intrigued by it, I love the way it kind of almost unfolds domestic life and it makes it available in a way that is fundamentally linked to its scale. There's another image that's always struck me: of you suddenly deciding against the grain of that

²Bashir Ahmed (b. 1953), Pakistan's master miniature painter, taught miniature painting at the National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, from 1982 to 2014.

historical artistic moment, that you wanted to learn from Bashir Ahmed² this incredibly laborious and rigorous art and then just hunching over it and doing it for hours. You wanted to work or push yourself and then you were going to do it right. So, talk to me about the question of the miniature and scale, and the domestic in *The Scroll*. Why take the miniature and turn it into a scroll?

³Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999) was a pioneering Pakistani artist, known for his experimental approach to painting, sculpture, design and architecture. He taught at the NCA, Lahore.

SS: I was burdened in an inspiring way to create something fresh, something that neither Bashir Ahmed nor Zahoor ul Akhlaq³ had done with their experiments with miniature painting. The desire to depart into a new territory while keeping the conversation with the historical tradition alive was a fully immersive, fantastical reality. I was living, breathing, digesting and regurgitating my obsession with Safavid painting to find a moment of epiphany. I had so many ideas, but not enough time to make hundreds of paintings, so I thought why not create one epic painting as my epic poem. There was also a certain playfulness in choosing the format of a scroll, as it naturally lends itself to depicting a narrative about time, an unfolding of an event, a story, a day, a lifetime, from left to right or right to left, depending on however the viewer wants to enter the space.

The fact that no one had yet created a large-scale miniature painting in the department was also exciting, as the long horizontal format also challenged

the tired existing thesis template of theme-based and notebook-sized 'series' of miniatures. I am proud that *The Scroll* also launched a movement of 'large-scaled' thesis paintings in the miniature painting department at the National College of Arts in 1991.

SA: You know, it's really interesting to me, because I feel that one of the points of affinity in our work is that we're both really interested in exploring form, or forms. I wanted to play with the domestic novel and go against the marriage plot, which ends with romantic resolution. So, it begins the day after the wedding and becomes about the existential navigation of an enclosed space. But I was also thinking about things like Urdu poetry, fiction, and conduct books like *Bahishti Zevar*.⁴ I was trying to imagine a consciousness that is shaped by all of this while writing a novel that is fully English but is trying to get the cadences of a very particular Muslim Ashraf sensibility from North India: utterly polite, very formal, profoundly social yet utterly repressed in the social sphere. I wanted to write about somebody who actually believes in that propriety—whatever it is for a 21-year-old or a 23-year-old to believe in the strictures in which she's been brought up. I was brought up to be someone like that, yet my own tendencies are ironic and anarchic, but that anarchic sensibility is not the one that governs the book, doesn't shape its voice.

SS: I really enjoy how you play with form in your practice as an author and a critic. The novel itself is a slowly revealing study of the tensions we have as creative people, as women who create art. It was so much fun to read how you depict a painter of a certain time period in Pakistani culture. The woman in *The Scroll* is trapped in all her internal conflicts too, yet remains an active agency, not the woman often depicted in historical Indian paintings, like those of the Kangra school, as a helpless figure at the mercy of an event yet to occur.

Gender aside, *The Scroll* broadens the topic of how the personal can be depicted in the socio-political by inserting the tension of the ambiguity of the youth, the search for identity. The tension of what I was experiencing, what my generation was experiencing in the turmoil of Zia's military rule. I was, at that particular socio-political moment, not interested in depicting benign scenes of a wedding, or romanticizing traditional festivals such as *basant*, nor of friends hanging out at a mehndi, you know I wasn't interested in those thematic...

⁴Bahishti Zewar ('Heavenly Ornaments') is an eight-volume treatise on Islamic beliefs and practices written by Mawlānā Ashraf Ali Thanvi and first published in 1981.

Study for The Scroll by Shahzia Sikander, 1988

Collage on board
2.4 x 1.5 m (8 x 5 ft)





Artwork © Shahzia Sikander

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Shahzia Sikander

SA: ...set pieces.

SS: Set pieces, right, because then if I painted such illustrative sets, where exactly would they lead to? I wanted to paint the youth's emotional and conscious restlessness that I was going through personally.

SA: Something sparked when you were talking about the waiting woman and you wanted to do something bigger. It seems that the rescaling with *The Scroll*: in a way it's about the systemic, the structure of social organization of which the house is the fundamental unit for women, and that's there in your work. You're reimagining that space and opening it up. You're deconstructing the miniature and inserting the domestic in an unapologetic way and completely redoing the gendered space of the miniature. You are also pushing against the highly gendered way in which a waiting woman is presented, which is, of course, in the miniature as symbolic of a kind of wistfulness and inevitable loss.

If you remember, part of what *The Empty Room* is critiquing is that fetishization of loss, and there's a waiting woman at the end in the final painting Tahira paints. She is slightly off-centre. But the whole point of the novel is, in some sense, that that figure is absolutely central to our social formations. The woman could only be desired or can only wait to have her desire fulfilled. So, the waiting woman is an expression of what society desires for women. The poetic obsession with loss and the figure of the waiting woman in traditional miniature laments the loss but also re-inscribes and fetishizes it further. The

Gopi-Contagion

by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2015
Times Square, New York, as part of
Midnight Moment:
Times Square Arts



© Shahzia Sikander; Photo: Ka-Man Tse; Courtesy: Times Square Arts

woman who waits endlessly is virtuous, because she's willing not to live her life in any other way and that yearning in perpetuity is meant to be beautiful. So what do you do? You bring along *The Scroll*, and you reimagine the space completely. So, the personal there becomes an effect of social structures, which in *The Scroll* represents itself as a real formal reimagining of the miniature.

SS: The female in *The Scroll* is omnipresent.

SA: Is this an ironic play with what is represented and what isn't?

SS: Absolutely! I think that is what draws me to the mystical nature of Tabriz and Safavid schools of painting. There are so many compositional and painterly clues and codes to unlock. I feel like a detective whenever I get to explore these periods of paintings. The formal language of paint, how transparency is offset by opacity, how peeling back the various layers of colour, form and symbolism allows knowledge to come alive. It's similar to reading Ibn Arabi.⁵

He talks about the metaphysical aspects of the human body. Its engagement with nature and time. These concepts are present in experiencing the historical miniature, in taking freedom to unlearn and learn, to challenge the reductive and narrow art historical measurement of the miniature and to take more of an ownership of the non-western canon, to locate oneself within its continuation in time.

SA: I think *The Scroll* inaugurates a consistent strand in your work about wanting to understand and then find a visual idiom to represent systems in general, to imagine how the world is organized. All your paintings of these women with multiple beings, self-portraits with rams' heads, women with their feet tied, headless women—they all have that impulse. And they become profound mediations on history, on representation, which, of course, artists take part in. In your animations, for instance, *The Last Post* is on the entire history of colonialism, *Parallax* on capitalism, it seems. It's almost like you're telling the history of colonial modernity in your later work in an

Aretha Franklin

by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2018

Ink and gouache on paper

40.6 x 29.2 cm (16 x 11.5 in)

Created for New York Magazine

Collection of the Artist



Artwork: © Shahzia Sikander

⁵ Ibn Arabi (1116-1240) was an Arab Andalusian Muslim scholar, mystic, poet and philosopher, whose works have become influential beyond the Muslim world.

idiom wrenched out of the miniature. And it's already there in *The Scroll*, this wanting to change the scale so that the structures that underpin the world as we know it are understandable, and in this case, of course, the domestic is a version of the world.

SS: In 2000, I started developing a video-based animation idiom that brought to life this particular notion of compressed space and reality within the miniature painting genre that you are talking about. Even then, almost a decade after I had painted *The Scroll*, I revisited the Safavid school of painting to find inspiration for animation. The tension is so thick in the perfectly painted

Safavid paintings that I started to imagine that if I pulled one element out of place, the entire painting would spiral into chaos, breaking all borders that it interfaced with.

SA: Well, it's interesting that you say that, because for me it's all about tension too, tension at the level of the sentence and in the form and in the interactions. There's a point where there are dragons on Shehzad's shirt, and I write that they are anthropomorphic with menace, because every detail in Tahira's world is beautiful, but it's intense and ready to bite; as if the world is seething with beauty and menace all at once.

SS: Right, there's this conflict, the tension we both engage with in depicting beauty. For me, beauty remains subversive and thus essential. You can get involved in the seductive nature of paint to be confronted with the troubling

patriarchy and gendered spaces that I often depict in my work to question patriarchy's persistence across cultures. This use of opposites, in a way, is present in many aspects of your novel, even when Shahzad, the controlling husband of Tahira, does something redeeming.

SA: He's not a monster.

SS: You expect him to be but then the perspective broadens. Andaleep too, her death is so unexpected. She hovers around injecting life and then one is left hanging when she is gone.

SA: What you're also doing that's so interesting is that, on the one hand, there's



Artwork: © Shahzia Sikander

Pleasure Pillars
by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2000-01
Vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolor and tea on hand-prepared wasli paper
30.5 x 25.4 cm
(12 x 10 in)
Collection of Amita and Purnendu Chatterjee, New York



© Shahzia Sikander; Photo: Christopher Katsarov

a lot of detail but there's no clutter, there are open spaces too, but all these exquisite details as well. The young man looks relaxed in a way that the women never do, he's got a certain privilege in his relaxation. The servants in the first bit are squatting, and you can just see the kind of effort of the legwork in their bodies. And then the idea that the parents are overseeing the construction of the self-portrait, so the question is are they seeing it or presiding, in some constricting way, over its creation.

SS: Interesting. The dynamic of the human form and its interface with societal norms fascinates me. I have, at various points, explored the historical works by either stripping off all the figurative forms to see if the psychological dimensions of space are dependent on the figurative narrative, or not, and how much of the structural elements would be left if they held equal intrigue and power. Such ways of looking at the historical allowed me to distil a language of space that is almost uncanny in *The Scroll*. It sings. It's alive. All the various patterns for both the animate and the inanimate in *The Scroll* are created from observation, and then stylised. They are not lifted from old miniatures. They are culled from the process of learning the historical language itself.

SA: It's quite a statement. So much attention to the domestic sphere, to that which is not considered worthy of being public. *The Scroll* in its scope and scale and exquisite labour is saying: this time, this domestic time-space is worthy of such attention.

Disruption as Rapture
by **Shahzia Sikander**, 2017
Film created from drawings, shown on LED panels installed outdoors at the Aga Khan Museum for the Nuit Blanche Festival, 2017, Toronto