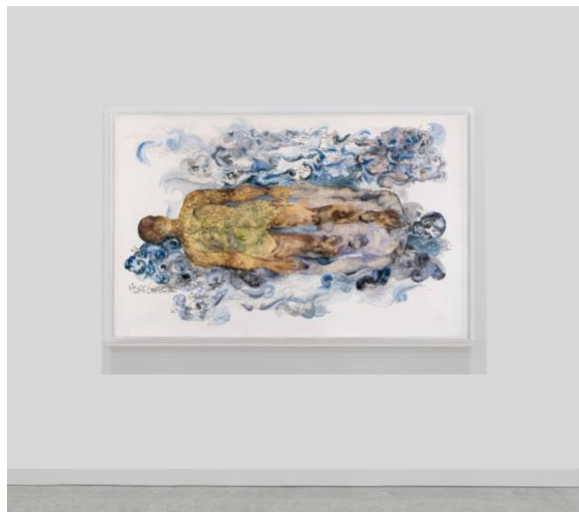


Kunitz, Daniel. "A Conversation with Shahzia Sikander." *Sculpture Magazine*. November 4, 2020.

sculpture

A Conversation with Shahzia Sikander



Kinship, 2019–20. Ink and gouache on paper, paper: 60 x 96 in. Photo: Adam Reich, © Shahzia Sikander, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, Shahzia Sikander trained first as a miniaturist at the National College of Arts in Lahore before moving to the United States in 1993 to pursue her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. She takes classical Indo-Persian miniature painting as her point of departure, challenging the strict formal tropes of the genre by experimenting with scale and various forms of new media. Recently, she completed her first sculpture, which will be on display in “Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues” at Sean Kelly Gallery (her first show in New York in over a decade), [on view](#) from November 5 through December 19.

***Sculpture* magazine: What led you to making sculpture now?**

Shahzia Sikander: The ideas encapsulated in this sculpture are part of the DNA of my work. I first sketched out the concept in 2000 [for a banner at MoMA](#), when I worked with the curator Fereshteh Daftari. At that time, it was not important for me to declare the content through a 3D form. I was culling art history’s classicism and ethnocentric reactions to Indian art as per Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s doctrine. I was also making a point by entangling Mannerism, the anti-classical impulse within the Western tradition, alongside Indian art, both as accomplice-witnesses of a one-sided history, and the drawing I had sketched with the two protagonists sufficed. In 2017 I had the

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opportunity to be part of the NYC Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, and during that process, hearing differing public opinion, studying public monuments—their complicated histories, historical reckoning, and tensions between communities regarding representation—I felt the urge to respond to the overt male representation of historical monuments through an anti-monument. I decided to cull out the protagonists in my paintings and re-engage them in a sculptural format. The female protagonists are proactive, confident, intelligent, and in their playful stance connected to the past in imaginative ways but without glorifying it.

Eurocentrism has been operable throughout art history and history. When we inherit one-sided or polarizing constructions of the past, we often unconsciously keep marching down the same paths. My intent through the work I create is to help pause and reflect and open up conversations around contested issues, aiding toward more nuanced ideas about the world. One such current heated conversation is around the removal of colonial and Confederate monuments. In this wrestle to decolonize public education and history, it is imperative also to inspect the geographies of inequality through the question of gender.



Promiscuous Intimacies, 2020. Patinated bronze, 42 x 24 x 18 in. Photo: Chris Roque of UAP, © Shahzia Sikander, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Sculpture: Can you describe *Promiscuous Intimacies*?

SS: The sculpture is in bronze with varied patina. With its sinuous entanglement of the Greco-Roman Venus and the Indian Devata, it explores the “promiscuous intimacies” of multiple times, spaces, art historical traditions, bodies, desires, and subjectivities. In their suggestive embrace, the intertwined female bodies bear the symbolic weight of communal identities from across multiple temporal and geographic terrains. They evoke non-hetero-normative desires that are often cast as foreign and inauthentic, challenging the viewer to imagine a different present and future. The sculpture is not glorifying the past; instead, its backward glance demands that we understand “tradition,” “culture,”

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and “identity” as impure, heterogenous, unstable, and always in process, disrupting taken-for-granted national, temporal, and art historical boundaries.

From the Indus Valley excavations to the Chola bronzes, bronze and metal casting has had a long history in South Asia, where often the sacred and tangible objects interacted in essential and functional ways with human activities and socioeconomic practices. The various patinas highlight the fact that classical painted statuary was polychromatic and not necessarily “lily white” as constructed over time in the popular imagination. The historian Sarah Bond points this out as “color prejudice”: “How we color or fail to color classical antiquity is often a result of our own cultural values.” For me, connecting the patina to these larger discussions on color in classical sculpture also links the issue of classicism with American monuments and memorials, which are often revered as symbols of patriotism. When asking what stories and whose perspectives get commemorated in public spaces, BIPOC and especially women of color are the least represented. *Promiscuous Intimacies* engages these urgent, multiple cross currents of re-examining colonial and imperial stories of race and representation.

***Sculpture:* Can you say a little about the significance of hybridity in the work as well as how it evokes non-hetero-normative desires?**

SS: The work is not about hybridity. It is not fusing cultures or aesthetics. The work is very much about alternative cartographies, the deliberate juxtaposition of seemingly oppositional formations to disrupt dominant ways of both seeing and knowing. The sculpture is the antithesis of the fictions of purity and authentic national culture.

The title of the work, *Promiscuous Intimacies*, is taken from an upcoming essay on my work by Gayatri Gopinath, the scholar, professor, and director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University. (Shahzia Sikander, [Extraordinary Realities](#), Hirmer Publishers, 2020). In engaging with Gayatri Gopinath, I found her definition and elaboration of “the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora” pertinent to my work in how it “deviates from straight lines of hetero- and homo-normative scripts, patrilineal underpinnings of conventional articulations of diaspora and nation.” The notions of “home” and authentic state are embedded within my practice but not in any definitive ideology, nationalism, or geography. The multiple juxtapositions, unexpected detours, dissonance, jostling, and shifting hierarchies are strategies I have employed in my work since the mid-’90s to destabilize and explode binary thinking in all its forms. The non-binary gender identity is layered in my work, and it is particularly heightened in this sculpture.

Much of my work’s engagement with tradition and representation deals with both non-normative gender embodiments and sexual desires. Such alternate way of seeing, as precisely articulated by Gopinath, “a queer optic,” is about the desire to juxtapose and bring to the fore the “promiscuous intimacies of multiple times, spaces, art historical traditions, bodies, desires, and subjectivities; it allows us to glimpse other worlds not tethered to the here and now of gender and sexual normativity.”

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According to Gopinath, “Sikander’s work evokes the distinctions between self/other, inside/outside, foreign/native, masculine/feminine, human/nonhuman, only to render these distinctions porous and unstable. Sikander’s work traffics in promiscuous intimacies: the word ‘promiscuous’ is derived from the Latin *miscere*, meaning ‘to mix,’ and we can understand Sikander’s work as promiscuous in the sense that it lays bare the intimacies, the deeply imbricated nature, of apparently discrete aesthetic and cultural traditions, histories, and geographies.”



The Perennial Gaze, 2018. Glass mosaic mounted on plywood in brass frame, 70.25 x 43.25 in. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York, © Shahzia Sikander, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Sculpture: How did you go about making it? Did you draw it first? Did you make models?

SS: The ideas were drawn out first. To validate the two intertwined bodies and the incredible elasticity of their combined state, I worked with two female models and directed them. I had to confirm if the body of one female could mount on the shoulder of another while being held in the other’s hand. The balancing act with the live models was informative. It allowed me to work out the essential details of form, the movement in space, the gestures, the nuances of the tilt of their heads, the gaze, the cupping of the hand, the tug at the necklace, the several opposing forms and their legibility. The models were photographed, and the drawings and photographs functioned as models for my sculpture, which was made in clay to scale.

Sculpture: Were there particular inspirations for the work?

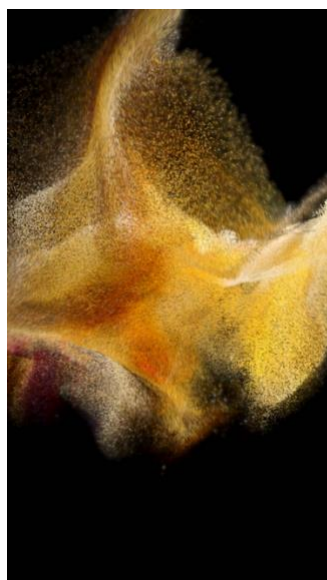
SS: Syncretic sculptural traditions of the subcontinent. [Bronze Nataraja](#) from 10th-century Chola, the Harappa Dancing Girl from the Indus Valley, Gandharan Bodhisattva. The 1993 [“Gods, Guardians, and Lovers: Temple Sculptures from North India A.D. 700-1200”](#) show at Asia Society. Also, Thutmose’s bust of Nefertiti, [Goddess Uma](#) from the Champa kingdom of Vietnam, the [bronze statuette of Aphrodite](#)

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[Anadyomene of Baalbek](#), Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, Pontormo's *Visitation*, El Greco's *Laocöon*, Gayatri Gopinath's book [Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora](#), "[Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought](#)" by Durba Mitra, and Sarah Bond's article "[Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color.](#)"

Sculpture: Sculptors who continue to inspire you or whom you continue to look at?

SS: I have an eclectic interest. Here are a few sculptors whose work I admire: Eva Hesse, Michelangelo, [Ruth Asawa](#), James Turrell, Cildo Mereiles, [Nicole Eisenman](#), [Huma Bhabha](#), Davi Hammons, Doris Salcedo, Cornelia Parker, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Damian Ortega.



Reckoning, 2020. HD video animation with sound, 4:16 min. Music by Du Yun and animation by Patrick O'Rourke. Photo: © Shahzia Sikander, Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

Sculpture: How do you see sculpture relating to the rest of your practice?

SS: I work in a variety of mediums and scales to address the multivalence of ideas. Every artwork I create I conceive of as a poem: individually crafted, exploring tensions between material and meaning, people and society, power and powerlessness, to engage with the intrinsically beautiful and poignant into culturally relevant and transformative. Reinterpreting the past to engage with contemporary social and political issues has been the touchstone of my engagement with art. My work disrupts traditional categories and forms, whether classical, feminist, or South Asian, in layered and nuanced ways that reflect our current conditions, especially in the U.S.

Throughout my practice I have aimed at creating work with unpredictable diversity in pursuit of a multifaceted imagination, open to influences and experiences. My artistic process starts with research, which also includes engagement with community and

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Careful listening. I see myself as a thinker, and drawing is my thinking hat. It is a notational tool, a fundamental language that allows me to collaborate with other languages. Space, velocity, magnitude, direction, narrative—all essential elements inherent in the process of drawing—become more active through movement, form, sound, and sculpture.

The multiple, abundant, and syncretic sculptural traditions of the subcontinent have played an integral part in the evolution of iconographies present in my work to date. I have studied South Asian sculptural objects—their physical forms, contexts, truncated histories, and reception in Western art history—to create artworks such as the *Midgets to Monsters* (1995–99), *Fleshy Weapons* (1997), *A kind of Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* (1993–96), *Pleasure Pillars* (2001), *Empire follows Art* (2009), *Parallax* (2013) and *Ecstasy as Sublime Heart as Vector* (2016).

My work tells stories while investigating interdisciplinary languages of form, migration patterns, cultural quarantine, and the flux of human identity. Historically, the movement of objects (and bodies) in trade, slavery, migration, colonial occupation, and urban patterns of human costs of displacement and pollution, has forced meaning to shift and oscillate with every generation.

When one thinks in terms of narratives, and how history is determined, how real is that account? All histories are about redactions, where often the highest bidder gets to tell the story. When I create artwork, regardless of which medium, I research visual forms that challenge fixed narratives in order to reorganize histories and geographies of inequality—and in drawing unexpected connections and juxtapositions, I can move stories and people forward.