

Visual Arts

Shahzia Sikander at the Morgan — vast worlds in pocket-sized pictures

The Pakistani-American artist's cross-cultural narratives shine in a New York exhibition



'Pleasure Pillars' (2001) by Shahzia Sikander © Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly, New York and Pilar Corrias, London

Ariella Budick YESTERDAY

Shahzia Sikander opens tiny windows on to colossal vistas. Her manuscript-like paintings on paper only look modest from a distance. Up close, they unveil themselves at leisure, divulging layers of meticulously rendered hyperreality. In “Venus’s Wonderland” (1995) a veiled woman emerges from the waters, an alligator has usurped her clamshell, and a monkey hanging from the Tree of Knowledge by its tail pelts her with apples. The scene, an intricate mash-up of mythological motifs, bursts past the frame, as if all that detail, energy and imagination can’t be contained by artifice. Sikander allows her mind to roam even as she freezes allegory into image, movement into line. Her gorgeous exhibition at New York’s Morgan Library and Museum offers keyhole glimpses into a vast, fantastical world that bears an uncomfortable resemblance to our own.

Extraordinary Realities covers the first 15 years of the 51-year-old artist’s career, from her formal training in Pakistan to the beginnings of her life in New York, where she still lives. When Sikander entered the National College of Arts in Lahore in 1987, Western modes dominated the academy. She opted for an alternative path, studying with Bashir Ahmad, a master of Indo-Persian miniature painting. This demanding discipline, with its gods and kings and laborious techniques, had fallen deeply out of fashion. Though her hip peers saw only kitschy anachronism, Sikander felt she could fuse ancient conventions with contemporary ends.

“I chose the medium when it was widely considered craft, with no room allowed for creative expression, because I perceived a frontier,” she says. To her, the principles of beauty and exactitude in manuscript illustration also contained subversive potential. She saw herself as an explorer discovering new worlds in pocket-sized places.

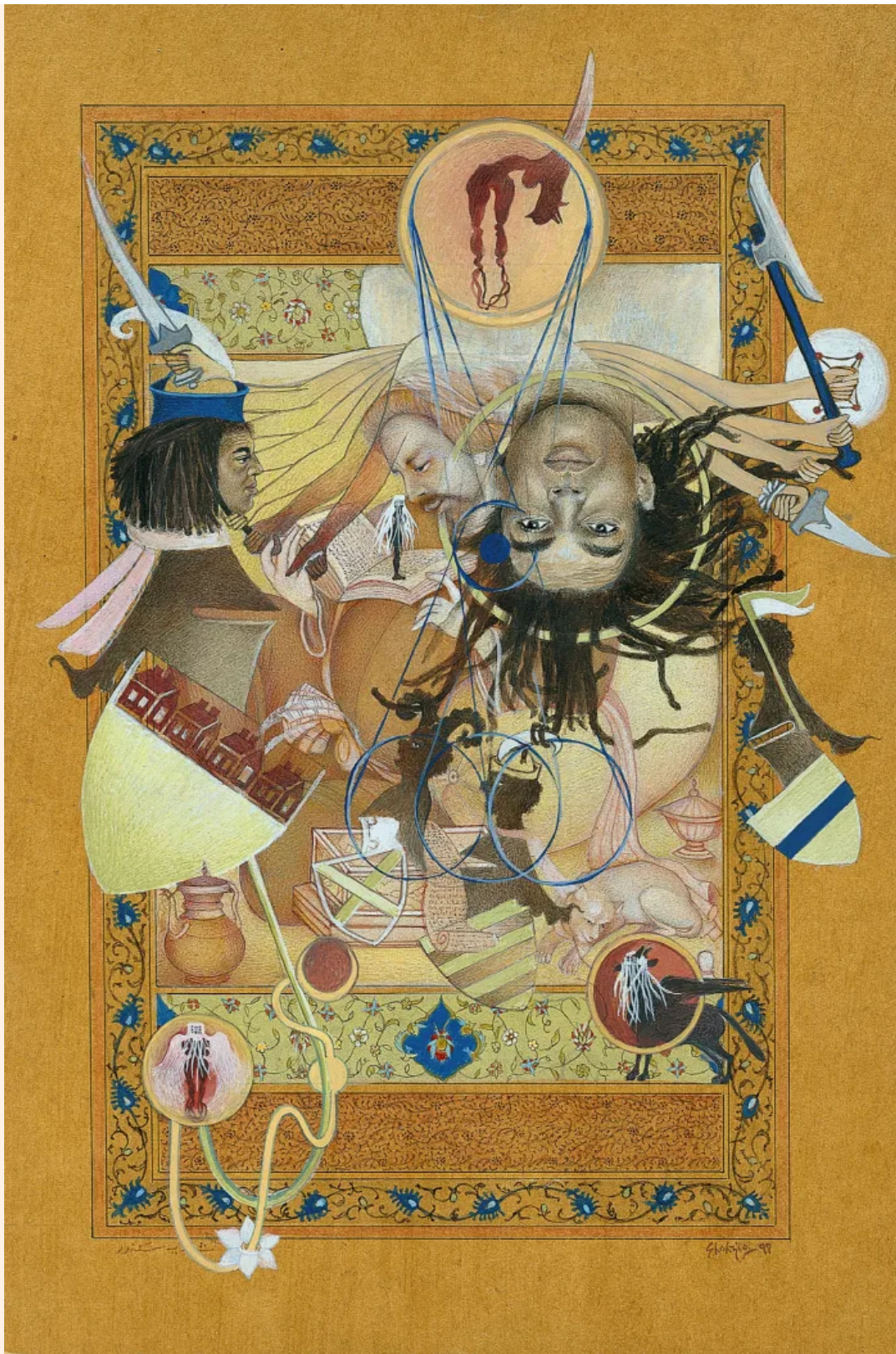


Detail from "The Scroll" (1989-90) © Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly, New York and Pilar Corrias, London

Her senior thesis, "The Scroll" (1989-90), was produced over two years and still holds its own on a wall of the Morgan. She prepared the layered *wasli* paper by hand, burnished each sheet with seashells, and stained them with tea to make them glow. She mixed her own colours, too, blending pigment and ink into pine-tree green, mountain blue, and sienna red. Only then was she ready to paint.

Sikander's enchanted scroll escorts the viewer through her girlhood home, where we see the artist as a teenager, haunting corridors and corners. Family members chat, eat or celebrate, as if unaware of her presence. Squatting servants wash clothes in a tub, sweep up dust, roll up rugs, and perform an array of other household chores. The girl is practically spectral, a faceless, gauzy figure rendered in white gouache, drifting among the many rooms. She claims the domestic sphere as the arena of women's freedom, large enough for her to stretch, enfolding enough to offer solace. The architecture that unfurls from page to page is an extended metaphor for Sikander's maturing self.

Ironically, the local success of this ode to family life propelled her far from home. In 1993, she enrolled in the Rhode Island School of Design's MFA programme, where she encountered a new set of pressures and creative constraints. In response to racial stereotypes and polarising dichotomies (east/west, Islamic/Judeo-Christian) she invented an avatar, a floating headless female figure whose arms and feet metamorphose into looping, trailing ribbons. These tendril-like limbs are "self-rooted," in Sikander's phrase, able to attach and nurture themselves anywhere. Equal parts plant, human and animal, "they refuse to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, to be stereotyped."



'Eye-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings' (1989-97) © Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly, New York and Pilar Corrias, London

In the US, Sikander slipped away from the tight precision of her Pakistani work, adopting a loose calligraphic gouache. She used that technique for “Housed” (1995), which takes on the fraught topic of the veil. A bendy grid of broad, fuzzy strokes resolves into a domed birdcage, with a lantern at the top and an opening at the base. The enclosure also resembles a shuttlecock burka, the Islamic world’s most concealing garment, which covers a woman from head to toe and masks her eyes with a mesh. Westerners often recoil at the outfit, regarding it as a prison. Sikander acknowledges the sinister associations, but the open portal suggests that the form inside — a bright bird? a beating heart? — could escape but chooses to remain. The structure is not a cell but a shelter, a comforting retreat from public scrutiny.

The avatar and the veil reappear regularly throughout Sikander’s work, elements in her elaborate symbolic language. The artist and the show focus attention on that idiosyncratic, cross-cultural repertoire of stories. Yet the scenes also suggest a more layered and open-ended set of narratives, and it’s that interplay of specificity and allusiveness that makes these paintings so exquisite. In “Hoods Red Rider II” from 1997, Sikander conflates Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella into a fierce and vengeful figure like the Hindu goddess Durga. The recurring silhouette is crimson now, her feet a web of shreds or contrails. A white veil shrouds her face, billowing like a superhero’s cape or an angel’s wings, and a dozen or more arms brandish swords, axes and daggers. At her feet, a scowling prince, rather pathetic in his pride, clutches, not a delicate slipper but a woman’s clunky sandal.



'Hoods Red Rider II' (1997) © Courtesy: the artist, Sean Kelly, New York and Pilar Corrias, London

Over time, Sikander became increasingly confident in her refusal to be boxed in by binary clichés or to respect the lines dividing styles, genders, religions and hemispheres. The bodies in her iconography become more androgynous. Humans and animals merge. Recurring avatars now sport equine heads or claw-like feet. Jaguars and bears interact with more tenderness than mothers and children. Machine guns melt into one another. Sikander is at her most powerful when she's exploring these hybrids and contradictions. Her visions can be at once delicate and harsh, beautiful and violent, nuanced and passionate.

After a decade or two of searching, many artists settle into the rhythms of making what they know will work; she packs her small frames so full that each square inch intimates another bewitching path.

To September 26; themorgan.org

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