

PARALLAX

Shahzia Sikander

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Tufts

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Times Square Midnight Moment, New York, New York October 1–31, 2015
6th Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia September 16–October 4, 2015
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Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain July 16–November 22, 2015
SPACE Gallery, Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio, Texas October 8, 2014–March 7, 2015
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Cover:

The Cypress despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden, 2012–13

Endpapers:

Video still from *Parallax*, 2013, , three-channel, single-image HD video animation with 5.1 surround sound, 15:26 minutes. Music by Du Yun

Frontispiece:

Installation view, MAXXI | Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome, Italy, 2016–17

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UNBOUNDED VISION

Ayesha Jalal

Sahzia Sikander is a self-described “idea-driven artist” who strives to break out of molds to encourage alternative ways of seeing. She has been pushing the frontiers of visual perception since the resounding success of her thesis show *The Scroll* at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, Pakistan, where she earned an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts in 1991. In addition to learning the techniques of miniature painting, during that time she engaged in a close study of Mughal and Safavid traditions. *The Scroll*, a turning point in contemporary miniature painting, was an open-ended personal narrative that unfurled into a *mélange* of reality and imagination against the backdrop of Sikander’s hometown of Lahore, the city of Mughal gardens. While deploying



techniques of Persian and Mughal miniature painting, Sikander boldly flouted conventions of form and scale, producing not the typical 11-by-15-inch—notebook-size—single-page miniature but a 5-foot-long painting that merged multiple narratives into a single frame.

Parallax resonates with the same artistic sensibility, but it departs in form and scale from Sikander’s early work, engaging with space and time through collaborative, interdisciplinary, and performative approaches. This audiovisual reverie on the Strait of Hormuz—its age-old migratory flows of labor and confluence of diverse cultures and its more recent history of Western colonialism—is a mesmerizing and immersive experience.

Parallax marks a high point for Sikander. After her formative years as a student of miniature painting in Lahore, she struggled to adjust to the master’s program in fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design, where it was not fashionable to make “beautiful pictures,” let alone miniatures. What exhilaration to have her work exhibited years later simultaneously at Tufts University and in New York as part of the Midnight Moment program in Times Square, where her short animation *Gopi-Contagion* flashed on giant digital billboards each night throughout October 2015.

Miniature art was not appreciated in the United States when Sikander first exhibited her work there in 1992–93. Instead of shifting her aesthetic to conform to prevailing tastes in the art market, she embraced the miniature more firmly, but in a radically different way. By the early 1990s, she was deconstructing the

medium, a process that was foundational for her subsequent work. Visual deconstruction is a volatile experience: the “shattering of one screen to show the narrative behind, that is the idea of the mirage. A deconstruction is a mirage. . . . Deconstruction is literally like cleaning your glasses—it is the parallax.”¹

Sikander responded to Yuko Hasegawa’s invitation to participate in the 2013 Sharjah



Left and opposite:
Gopi-Contagion, 2015
HD video animation on digital LED billboards
Installed in Times Square, New York, as part of
Midnight Moment: Times Square Arts

Biennial by envisaging a work that would weave together facets of different communities she knew and identified with. Sharjah was close to Karachi, and the biennial represented Sikander's best hope of displaying her work to a Pakistani audience. If they could relate to it, the experience would be like a homecoming. The stakes were high: *Parallax* emerged from a space that was "more difficult, more painful, more unpredictable" than what Sikander had known. Having visited Dubai since the 1970s, she had to shed layers of her own preconceptions about the current Arab Emirates (UAE) to find a new way of viewing the physical and cultural geography of the Gulf. This required a recalibration that was personally challenging but artistically inspiring. Her "ultimate *jid-o-jihd* [struggle]" was to destabilize her assumptions and create a work that would speak to others. She spent a year working on the project, traveling to the Emirates several times to visit the Sharjah Art Foundation, museums, libraries, and other key institutions in search of books, maps, and photographs.

Sikander's exploration of the cultural ambience of Sharjah and its environs was mediated by Pakistani workers with whom she could communicate in Punjabi. Part of *Parallax* concerns the story of an anonymous Punjabi laborer-turned-caretaker, living in an abandoned old cinema in Khor Fakkan on the east coast of the UAE. Hailing from Kasur, in Punjab, he had arrived as a construction worker to build the cinema, which had been appropriated by the sheikhdom under royal prerogative. Sikander shared cups of tea with him and his Arab friends and associates and heard his story of thwarted hopes.

Sikander conceived the idea of making a work on the cinematic scale of *Parallax* while projecting her drawings in the cinema, the caretaker forming the entire audience. Threatened with deportation, he appears in *Parallax* as a reclining figure merged at the legs with a second, skull-headed figure; they languidly pull apart as if drifting into the annals of time. In conceiving the image, Sikander was thinking of dead bodies at the bottom of the ocean as well as the infamous British colonial name for the area, the "Pirate Coast," whose allegation is contested in local histories written by members of the royal family.²

In the work, the travails of migrant labor in the UAE and the related histories of the Indian Ocean are interwoven seamlessly





into the Gulf's tortuous experience under Western colonial rule. Sikander's meeting with nine young men from Peshawar, Pakistan, who eke out a living driving taxis was another meaningful encounter. "This place eats our blood," they told her, "but where do we go?" Visualizing someone rapaciously sucking blood, Sikander imagined labor in exchange for bodily fluids. Her experience with Pakistani workers encouraged her to make a piece that is critical without being overtly political or highly contrived. In *Parallax*, forearms with open palms and clenched fists descend from the skies, signifying exchange and resistance; chained Christmas trees represent the mirage of migrant labor seeking better livelihoods in unwelcoming lands.

To connect with the local community, Sikander made long car trips in intense desert heat. Absorbing the passing landscape, Sikander also experienced a mirage, an event that helped her forge a strong emotional and visual dialogue with sand and water. Along the coast, she was awed by the immensity of the sea—the weight and mystery of its waters—while the desert sand reminded her of an hourglass marking the time of history. Shifting sand dunes made her think of this kind of time as the nemesis of authority. She was drawn to the idea of sand as a model of self-organized criticality, a compelling, if controversial, theory that sees natural processes as self-correcting when they reach a critical point. Sikander immediately related to the notion, understanding it as a perfect way to approach the multilayered history of the Strait of Hormuz.

Power of Silence, from the series *End of Something*, 2009
Graphite and ink on paper
17 x 14 inches (43.2 x 35.6 centimeters)
Private collection

Translating time into drawing and locating ideas in space proved to be a challenge. Rejecting gimmicky animation, Sikander made her first drawings in Sharjah while immediately experiencing the elements of sand and heat. She thinks in the language of color, and envisioned the blue, brown, and cadmium red of water, land, and sunset in the desert. Varying the pressure with which she applied her brush to transparent paper, she captured the modulated aspects of the landscape. The small coastal towns dotting the rim of the Indian Ocean gave her a sense of the rhythms and textures of local culture, very different from her earlier, mainly Dubai-centered, impressions. A road sign indicating the direction toward an eight-hour ferry ride to Iran suggested to her that her work had to reflect the intertwined historical imaginaries of this geographical space straddling the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, which has belonged to the networks of Indian Ocean trade, commerce, and migratory flows for millennia.

As a soundtrack Sikander chose poetry recited in Arabic, a language she doesn't speak, for both intuitive and intentional reasons. For one thing, she associates Arabic with the melodious sounds of Quranic recitation. In earlier works, she had visualized the lyrical experience of hearing text without understanding its meaning.³ At the Maritime Museum in Sharjah, she was captivated by *nahamat*, the soulful music of local fishermen. The content of the poetry she chose, which evokes the geographical and



The Last Post, from the series *End of Something*, 2009
 Graphite and ink on paper
 17 x 14 inches (43.2 x 35.6 centimeters)
 Private collection



emotional cartographies of conflict over land ownership, is less important, ultimately, than its sonorous quality. The sound enhances the open-endedness of the visual abstractions—a rich and colorful matrix of hundreds of small and large drawings, scanned at the highest resolution, with details invisible to the naked eye enlarged to generate perceptual distortions.

The intoned Arabic poetry meshes with the animated drawings to create a range of meanings open to the viewer's imagination. There is no metanarrative. Some of the visual vocabulary comes from Sikander's established repertoire of motifs, notably the *gopi* ("cow-herding girl") hair, which she used in earlier animations to destabilize solid images and unveil other forms embedded in their structures. The method is a visual incantation of the Islamic principle of *tawhid* (the unity of existence), conveyed by the expression "one in many," which invokes the transcendence of God, and "many in one," implying God's oneness with the plurality of creation.⁴ Able to assume solid and liquid form, the *gopi*'s hair

Above and opposite: *The Cypress despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden*, 2012–13

embodies the tension underlying the idea of the one in many and the many in one, which Sikander uses to produce new forms—solids taking liquid form—and create circular dance movements that swarm as well as sing.

Parallax opens with a static screen. An elongated horizontal field formed by the *gopi*'s hair begins to gyrate as the horizon slides down: Sikander describes wanting to make the ocean pulsate. The image also looks like a dense field of gushing oil wells. An aerial view of the Strait of Hormuz then shows an interplay of land masses and spiraling oceans. Zoomed details of digitized images reveal the contours of the land. By destabilizing the physical landscape and magnifying the crevices through which alternative ways of seeing emerge, Sikander constructs a melancholic reflection on the lost and contested histories of the Gulf region.



Colored aquatint showing Ras al-Kaimah under attack by the British on November 13, 1809. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

Sikander’s first large drawings for *Parallax* were of the sixteenth-century Dhayah Fort in Ras al-Khaimah, formerly Julfar, which in the early nineteenth century served as the point of entry for the English East India Company. The scanned and enlarged versions of the paintings reminded the artist of a map of the United States, whose inclusion in *Parallax*, far from being incongruous, locates the Strait of Hormuz in a more expansive history of waterways. Julfar was a seafaring and pearling center of historic significance in the Indian Ocean maritime trade. Large wooden dhows laden with goods were used for trade with East Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and China. Now called Ras al-Khaimah—one of the seven emirates constituting the UAE—the port no longer supports the seafarers or pearl divers who took to other employment after the discovery of oil and the Japanese invention of the cultured pearl. The twin curses of black gold and British colonialism obscured the longer history of the Gulf region. A hub of commercial trade and profit for the British, Sharjah during the 1930s was the only stopover for the aircraft of Imperial Airways, later British Airways, en route to India, China, and Australia.⁵ Sharjah’s relationship with Imperial Airlines is reflected in *Parallax* in the forearms dropping from the skies.

One of the poems recited by the male voice is about Julfar. The poet imagines himself as the great-great-grandson of the fifteenth-century Omani cartographer and navigator Ahmad ibn Majid, the “lion of the sea.” Born in Julfar, ibn Majid is known in the West as Vasco de Gama’s supposed guide from Africa to India. The poem urges ibn Majid to return and witness the condition of his hometown, once the pride of Arab seafaring and now a forgotten city. Would the city’s fortune change if its illustrious son were to return with his wisdom and inquisitiveness? What if its history had been different—if the Arabs had made better vessels than the British and had controlled their waterways differently? At this point, a “giant laboring figure with a bent back” appears on the screen, seemingly spouting oil (actually a digitally enlarged blob of ink).⁶ The gushing oil wells are in fact the sweat from bodily labor.

A dance of the imagination without prescribed steps, *Parallax* enralls by opening, not limiting, the possibility of seeing differently. Boundaries are in constant flux, a condition intrinsic to the materials with which Sikander draws: ink or gouache applied to paper is unstable and lacks sharp edges. The artist plays with the idea of movement in an imaginative and breathtaking evocation of the flux and reflux of the maritime history of Indian Ocean trade. *Parallax* poignantly ends with an empty canvas—a metaphor of its multiple potential meanings and an overture to the viewer to return to see this mirage from yet another perspective.



Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 11, 2013

Ayesha Jalal is the Mary Richardson Professor of History at Tufts University, with a speciality in South Asia and the Muslim World. She is also Director of the Center for South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies at Tufts.

1. All quotations are from Shahzia Sikander, conversations with the author, September 18 and October 16, 2015.
2. Sultan bin Muhammad al-Qasimi, *Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 1988).
3. *Riding the Written and Writing the Ridden*, 1992–93, Bradford City Museum, Bradford, U.K.
4. The idea is best elaborated in the thinking of the Andalusian theologian Muhiyuddin ibn Arabi (1165–1240). See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
5. Nicholas Stanley-Price, *Imperial Outpost in the Gulf* (Philadelphia: Trans-Atlantic Publications, 2012).
6. Sebastian Smee, "Sikander's animated art evokes worlds of uncertainty," *Boston Globe*, October 1, 2015.