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SHAHZIA SIKANDER: APPARATUS OF POWER

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# SHAHZIA SIKANDER APPARATUS OF POWER

# APPARATUS

# OF

# POWER

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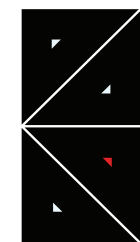
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## SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

## APPARATUS

## OF POWER

"Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same and of other without which nothing lives; undoing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another. . . .

A course that multiplies transformations by the thousands."

—Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, 1975

The exhibition *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power* at Asia Society Hong Kong Center takes as its subject the visual language of Shahzia Sikander's practice. Born in 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan, Sikander has developed an artistic style that is in dialogue with Indo-Persian miniature painting, from its sixteenth-century iterations during the Mughal Empire to its nineteenth- and twentieth-century permutations under British colonial rule. As the striking imagery found throughout this presentation attests, her art extends that medium and additionally culls from technical experimentation, historical sources, contemporary culture, personal experience, fantasy, mythology, and the popular imaginary. Furthermore, the evocative titles she assigns to her works hint at some of the operations underlying their narratives. The terse nature of many of these phrases, as well as her use of words and their forms, allude to revolutionary writings and political manifestos. In titling each of the chambers within Asia Society Hong Kong Center's Chantal Miller Gallery after a work it contains, the artist's own voice has been enlisted to draw out the thematic at stake within the exhibition.

The essays in this catalogue highlight several aspects of Sikander's work and the exhibition's conceptual grounding. Miniature painting scholar John Seyller explores the various iconographies in Sikander's practice. The playwright Ayad Akhtar explains the role of the *mi'raj* in Sikander's new work. Assistant curator Ashley Nga-sai Wu considers Sikander's practice and its installation at the Asia Society and Hong Kong Maritime Museum in the context of post-1997 Hong Kong. The historian Nick Robins reads Sikander's imagery through the lens of the British East India Company's global reach during its time. In her artist statement, Sikander reflects on her recent work and the sources that inform her practice. Finally, art critic Hans Ulrich Obrist engages Sikander in a captivating conversation that touches on several events and influences within the artist's career since the late 1980s.

In the following pages I introduce the "apparatus of power" of the exhibition's title and offer a reading of how

language and writing function in Sikander's practice.

This essay begins with a close analysis of *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* (1993, Fig. 1), which demonstrates the concept of the apparatus of power, an idea central to Sikander's work. Next I examine five aspects of the artist's practice that render her art a vehicle for visual storytelling: the relationship between Sikander's drawings and *écriture féminine*, or "white ink," a concept expounded by Hélène Cixous; the application of linguistic operations in writing to the artist's visual language; the ways in which Sikander's method addresses historical redaction; unexpected juxtapositions in the pictorial idioms of her work, such as that suggested by fiction writing and magical realism in particular; and the artist's engagement of poetic verse within the space of the wall. Finally, I consider how this presentation of Sikander's early work along with new drawings recalls Hong Kong's unique position in the history of the British East India Company and in the global maritime trade.

In *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, a flesh-colored figure floats atop a black background. The painting, which Sikander produced as an MFA student at the Rhode Island School of Design, was one of her early forays away from paper: it is gouache and gesso on board. Its pictorial language also marked a radical departure. The work's restricted palette and uniform iconography make it quite unlike her early miniature works such as *The Scroll* (1989–90, Plate 28) and *Mirrat I* and *Mirrat II* (both 1989–90, Plates 24 and 25), which include depictions of multiple human figures, Indo-Persian architecture, birds, and vegetation along with elaborate borders and intricate patterning. Conversely, *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* isolates a singular shape. Its carefully articulated legs end in whisk-like structures. These contours echo the series of curved lines that encircle the figure's heavy-bosomed torso. With a delicate V shape at the top of its contour, the female silhouette is headless.

Powerful and haunting as a stand-alone work, *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* functions as an isolated study within

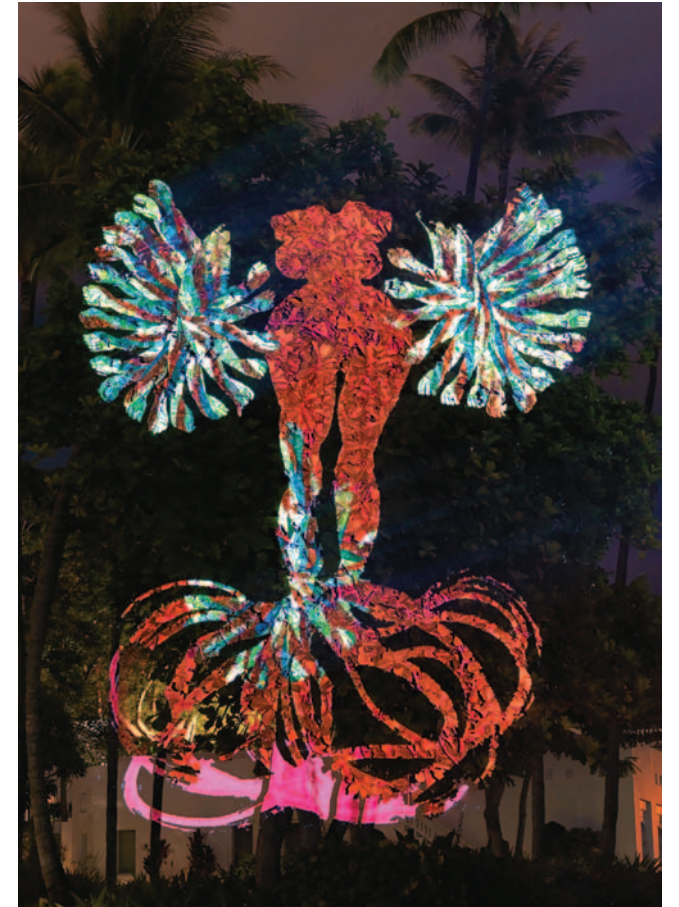


**Fig. 1** Shahzia Sikander, *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, 1993. Gouache and gesso on board, 78.7 x 48.3 cm. Courtesy the artist. All works by Shahzia Sikander unless otherwise indicated.

Sikander's signature vocabulary of images. *Eye-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings* (1989–97, Plate 3), *Perilous Order* (1997, Plate 7), and *Elusive Realities* (2000, Plate 4) are just a few of her works that contain variants of this iconic headless form. As Sikander's practice expanded to encompass other media—including drawings on walls, tissue paper, and windows as well as works in the digital realm—this figure grew in size along with it, making its way onto the wall in 1997 at the Drawing Center in New York. In that exhibition—Sikander's first New York show of mural paintings after a series of wall installations made during her residency at the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, between 1995 and 1997—the figure was repeated several times in different variations, sometimes oriented horizontally or flanked on both sides by multiple arms clutching knife-like weapons. This armed version appeared in Sikander's first animation, *Intimacy*, made in 2001. That same year, the figure was included in the top register of the print *Heist* from the series *No Parking Anytime* (Plate 23). In 2011 the figure morphed into a new version that, like the 1993 study, glows against a dark background. Realized as part of Sikander's digitized projection *Unseen* (2012, Fig. 2) at Doris Duke's Shangri La in Honolulu, this iteration was flanked by numerous spiraling arms. Photographic documentation of this nocturnal exhibition shows the projected drawing peppering its red, blue, and green colors against lush Hawaiian foliage, its brightness amplified by the lack of ambient light in the surrounding seascape.

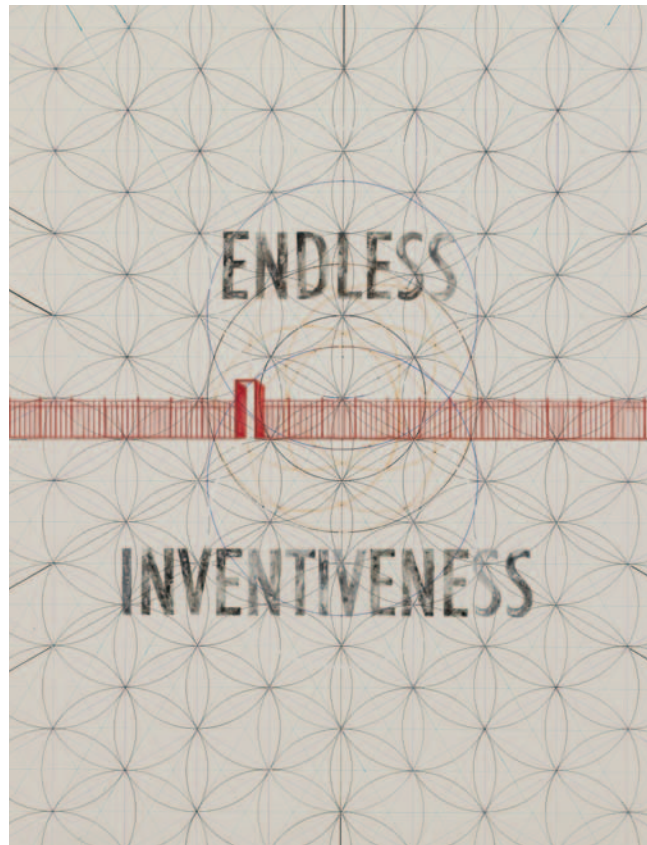
The ways the figure in *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* has taken on new meanings in works spanning multiple media, geographic contexts, and visual variations since its making in 1993 demonstrate what Sikander has called an "apparatus of power." This visual device refers to the potential of a given image to communicate differently depending on its context and format. Featuring a singular form and accompanied by a title including the word "dislocation," the 1993 work refers to the artist's own status as an outsider (Sikander was living abroad at the time). In *Unseen*, however, this form alludes to the ghost of Doris

Duke, the tobacco heiress who modeled Shangri La in Honolulu after architecture she saw while traveling in Morocco and the Levant in the 1930s. In following the life of this image, we see that the apparatus of power is sensitive and responsive to time.



**Fig. 2** *Unseen*, 2012. Photographic documentation of nocturnal projection at Doris Duke's Shangri La, Honolulu, Hawaii.

## VISUAL STORYTELLING: ILLUSTRATING A VOCABULARY OF FORMS



**Fig. 3** *Empire Follows Art: Endless Inventiveness*, 2009. Gouache, ink, and colored pencil on paper, 96.5 x 78.7 cm. Courtesy the artist.

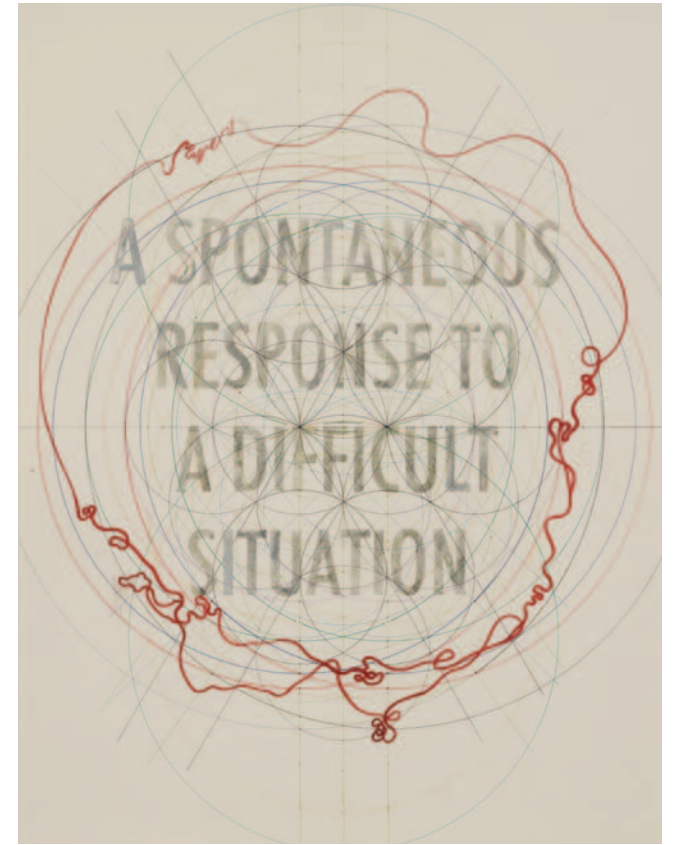
Drawn to the endless inventiveness of pictorial symbols, Sikander works with an accumulative and unrestricted iconographic language that remains open-ended over long periods of time. Her images are far from literal appropriations from their various sources. Instead, they take on a life of their own among multiple objects within her oeuvre. For example, the shape of the red fence is a trope found in Safavid painting (1501–1722), and Sikander employs the red fence to suggest alternative meanings. In *The Scroll*, the red fence serves as a far-off border surrounding the artist's childhood home. Twenty years later, the form becomes part of the subject of *Empire Follows Art* (2009, *Plates 71–74*), a series of four large drawings made with gouache, ink, and colored pencil on paper. The capitalized block lettering and terse phrases of these drawings recall political manifestos, and the red fence plays a key role in their composition. Specifically, in *Endless Inventiveness* (2009, *Fig. 3*), the fence bisects the horizontal page and introduces the color red into the drawing's monotone palette. Furthermore, the fence in this drawing has a door, "an opening," that, as the artist has observed, "suggests there are multiple ways to connect to the past."<sup>iii</sup> *A Spontaneous Response to a Difficult Situation* (2009, *Fig. 4*) includes a wandering, loosely circular line that encompasses the page and intrudes upon the carefully printed lettering, suggesting the spontaneity of the drawing's title. Of this use of the red line in the *Empire Follows Art* series, Sikander has said, "I see the red fence having multiple purposes, one of which is its function as an editing tool, the red line as a correcting pen of sorts that has the capacity to highlight and cross out elements. The emergence of the red line within the large drawings is also a way of linking the large drawings to the notebook page."<sup>iiii</sup> *Empire Follows Art* thus illustrates the multiple iterations of the red fence as architectural feature, boundary line, and writing implement.

This multivalence is at the heart of *The Life of Forms in Art*, first published in Paris in 1934 by the French historian and philosopher Henri Focillon (1881–1943). Focillon argues that forms generate different meanings according to their environments and surrounding social structures, thereby creating "psychological landscapes."<sup>iv</sup> Consequently, forms resonate with different viewers according to the historical vantage point from which they are seen. He writes:

A work of art is situated in space. But it will not do to say it simply exists in space: a work of art treats space according to its own needs, defines space and even creates such space as may be necessary to it. . . Form is not indiscriminately architecture, sculpture, or painting. Whatever exchanges may be made between techniques—however decisive the authority of one over the others—form is qualified above all else by the specific realms in which it develops.<sup>v</sup>

Focillon was writing about elements of Gothic sculpture, antique bas-reliefs, and other premodern objects, but his observations have contemporary relevance, and his comparison of forms to language is useful when considering Sikander's work. According to Focillon, forms have linguistic potential. "For in the life of the mind," he writes, "there is a region in which forms that are defined with the utmost exactitude nevertheless speak to us in very different languages."<sup>vi</sup> Sikander's visual vocabulary similarly operates as a distinct language whose significance and resonance continually shifts and evolves.

Equipped with this versatile formal language, Sikander frequently employs the miniature as a vehicle for telling stories.<sup>vii</sup> Nonnarrative and abstract, these tales are at once universal and specific. Her signature forms are a means of creating stories while playing with, questioning, and deconstructing the pictorial idioms she has developed. This



**Fig. 4** *Empire Follows Art: A Spontaneous Response to a Difficult Situation*, 2009. Gouache, ink, and colored pencil on paper, 96.5 x 78.7 cm. Collection of the artist.

auto-critique is constantly folded back onto itself through a series of inner references. Sikander's engagement with language extends from the micro ways by which visual phrases are formed to the macro level of writing such as poetry, fiction, and historical texts.

## ÉCRITURE FÉMININE AND PAINTING WITH WHITE INK



**Fig. 5** *Who's Veiled Anyway?*, 1997. Transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, graphite pencil, and charcoal on board. 28.7 x 20.6 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 97.83.1. ©Shahzia Sikander.

Sikander's practice challenges the medium-based restrictions of miniature painting, in which she was trained at the National College of Arts in Lahore in the late 1980s. In those years, miniature painting was largely unknown to the global contemporary art world; the Euro-American canon occupied the field of painting. Pakistan was then under Muhammad Zia ul-Haq's oppressive military regime, and miniatures were unpopular with that generation's youth. Notably, after she completed her education in the craft-based practice, Sikander was the first woman to begin teaching within the male-dominated field of miniature painting.

As a student, Sikander undertook a rigorous miniature painting apprenticeship with the master painter Bashir Ahmad (b. 1954). The usual course of study entails a grueling daily schedule of rote learning and copying. Sikander's ability to deconstruct the miniature is rooted in this training and her expertise in the technical and formal intricacies of its making. She has repeatedly disrupted this carefully articulated process of miniature painting by drawing on the imaginative possibilities she elicits from the medium.

The writings of Hélène Cixous offer a useful framework in which to consider Sikander's manipulation of established forms and pictorial conventions. In her writings of the early 1970s Cixous introduced the idea of *écriture féminine*. This feminine writing, or "white ink," as it is called in English, serves as a means of introducing new narratives and perspectives into the male-dominated field of history.<sup>viii</sup> In *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), Cixous writes that the result of such an approach would be that "all the history, all the stories would be there to retell differently; the future would be incalculable; the historic forces would and will change hands and change body—another thought which is yet unthinkable—will transform the functioning

of all society."<sup>ix</sup> By calling on women to write and thereby add their voices to the historical canon, Cixous insists that women have the power to disrupt trenchant historical narratives.

Rather than advocating for a revisionist approach, Cixous uses neologisms as a means of staking her claim in writing—as is evident in the term *écriture féminine* itself. Sikander in turn investigates the imaginative possibilities of the image by considering it as something that is alive and breathing, durational, and possessed of spatial and temporal components. Her new and constantly renewing forms, such as the headless figure in *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* and *Unseen* as well as the red fence in *The Scroll* and the *Empire Follows Art* series, reflect this interest in cultivating new forms of expression. By inventing a new visual vocabulary within the framework of a centuries-old visual approach to storytelling, the artist has inserted a new language as a painter of histories.

Sikander began reading Cixous in the mid-1990s and was drawn to the concept of white ink as a visual metaphor. "I was obsessed with white gouache," she has said, "as a means of inserting a white line atop a male figure, proposing the androgynous as the self."<sup>x</sup> For example, *Who's Veiled Anyway?* (1989–97, Fig. 5) was made by altering one of Sikander's early miniatures of a male polo player riding a horse (Fig. 6). To the horseback rider in this painting she added a chalky white veil and streaming white lines, not in order to depict a woman, but as a means of confusing the rider's gender. Emerging from the horse's rear is the headless female form as a phallus, which here functions as a confusion of genitalia when read alongside the inverted double-headed nude female body atop the horse's rear and the outline of a nude male in the painting's margin. The figure with the phallus has arms that recall the figure of the headless female figure. The veiled



**Fig. 6** Initial layer of *Who's Veiled Anyway?*, 1989. Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper.

polo player meets the gaze of the red-outlined mustached man, whose own lower half is left unfinished, offering a mysterious reading of his own castrated body. With such desexualized figures, this painting makes androgyny its subject. In addition to its use in final layers, white ink is also a foundational element in Sikander's practice as the basic pigment used when mixing all additional colors in *gad rang*, a technique intended to elicit opaque color.<sup>xi</sup> The use of white in the compositional structure of the ink thereby symbolizes opacity and transparency, a yet-to-be-determined space in Sikander's work that is made visible with white ink.

## THE MECHANICS OF DRAWING AS WRITING

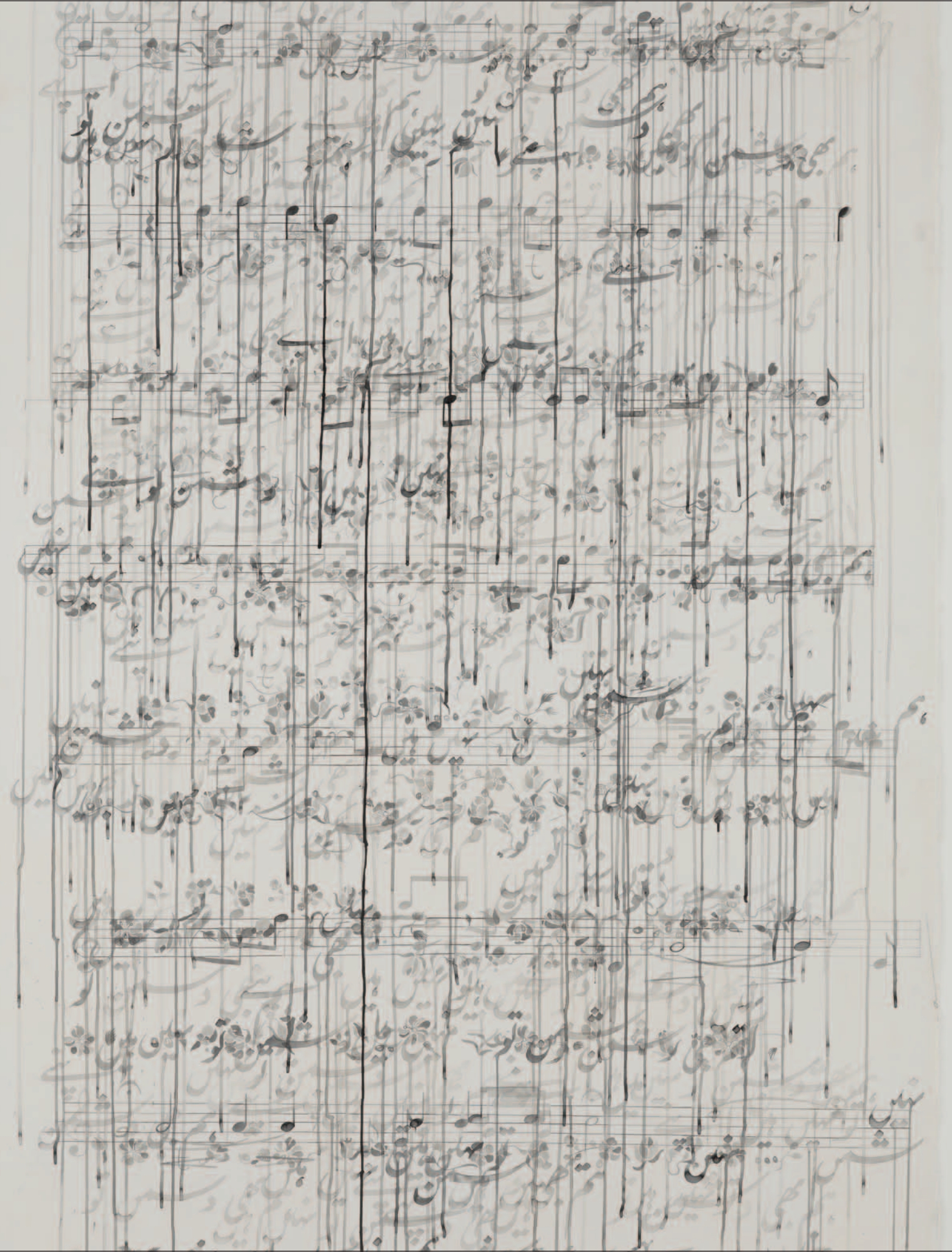
“Epistrophe” is the repetition of a word or expression at the end of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses. Sikander’s triptych of the same name utilizes this rhetorical device by playing with what it means to visualize such an operation. Each of the three panels in *Epistrophe* (2013–15, [Plate 66](#)) contains similar visual phrases pulled from the artist’s signature vocabulary of images. Just as individual words brought together form a phrase, clause, sentence, or verse, so too do the forms in Sikander’s visual alphabet. Spheres in various colors and sizes include larger circles of black *gopi* shapes and smaller red spheres. Likewise, drips of falling paint, Urdu script, and musical notes appear across the page, suggesting multiple approaches to writing. *Practice Makes Perfect* (2011, [Fig. 7](#)) also recalls the process and mechanics of writing in its semblance to a musical score. Here, Urdu script, vegetal scrolls, the musical score for the bugle call “The Last Post,” and ink drips are layered on top of one another. The work’s monochrome palette suggests the black-and-white text in printed books and music sheets. Furthermore, the ink and the paper used to make this work highlight how the language of music is a drawing at the same time that it is a written and sonic language. Notably, both *Epistrophe* and *Practice Makes Perfect* are monumental in scale: such large-format drawings celebrate the immersive space of the miniature as well as its capacity for monumental storytelling.

Sikander also subverts the literal scale of the miniature through seriality. Beginning in the 1990s she experimented with the visual effects of multiplying her signature forms by printing with copper plates, silkscreens, and cutouts. She has collaborated with major US printing houses, including Hare+Hound Press in San Antonio and Crown Point Press in San Francisco, to produce *Monsters to Midgets* (2001, [Plates 9–14](#)) and *No Parking Anytime* (2001, [Plates 15–23](#)). Several of the titles of the works in *No Parking Anytime* refer to interrupted movement, such as *Bound*, *Traffic Jam*, *Reflect*, *Heist*, and *Entangled*.

These color photogravures with spit bite aquatint and soft ground etching are printed on gampi paper with chine-collé. As a result of these materials, the prints play with the legibility of the imagery by depicting various levels of ink saturation and simultaneous approaches to image formation. For example, in *Entangled* ([Plate 19](#)) the imprints of two abstracted bodies are overlaid with depictions of two monochrome figures whose snakelike bodies ensnare one another. On top of these bodies are two bright blue Kalashnikovs pointing in opposite directions. The barrels of these guns are knotted and thereby rendered dysfunctional in a gesture of nonviolence. The serial repetition of such imagery serves to disrupt the preciousness of the miniature medium by inundating the viewer with the same form while playing with the opacity of the printed image.

While investigating print techniques, Sikander has been drawn to the printed page, the primary medium through which she acquired much of her visual knowledge of the Indo-Persian miniature. In 2009 she produced a large print entitled *I am also not my own enemy* (2009, [Plates 26 and 32](#)). This two-part work echoes the format of an open book: the two pages come together in the center of the frame as pages attach to a book’s spine. Fittingly, the pages slope out and downward as though the book were open and resting on a table. Despite the use of the printed medium in both the material and format of the work, Sikander intervened on the surface of the page by inserting text that disrupts the carefully articulated borders, interior landscape, and architectural scenes. The insertions are graffiti-esque, playing against the preciousness of the written word that one typically encounters in such an object.

**Fig. 7** (opposite page) *Practice Makes Perfect*, 2011.  
Gouache and ink on paper. 228.6 x 157.5 cm.  
Private Collection, Hong Kong.



## HISTORICAL REDACTION

*I am also not my own enemy* also brings to mind the tensions surrounding the concept of a mother language and the problematics of translation. Sikander is fascinated by how history can be redacted, as she has explained:

I am interested in the nature of the relationships between text and image, and the process behind their segregation, especially in the Indo-Persian miniature-painting tradition. The paintings were often torn out of their original book context by collectors and dealers. This has created a disjuncture and visual unfamiliarity with the Arabic or Persian script that originally accompanied the paintings. Often my use of Urdu writing draws upon the implications of such processes of dislocation and redaction. Redaction is a critical issue, especially in terms of how history is constantly being rewritten in both the cultural and the political spheres.<sup>xii</sup>

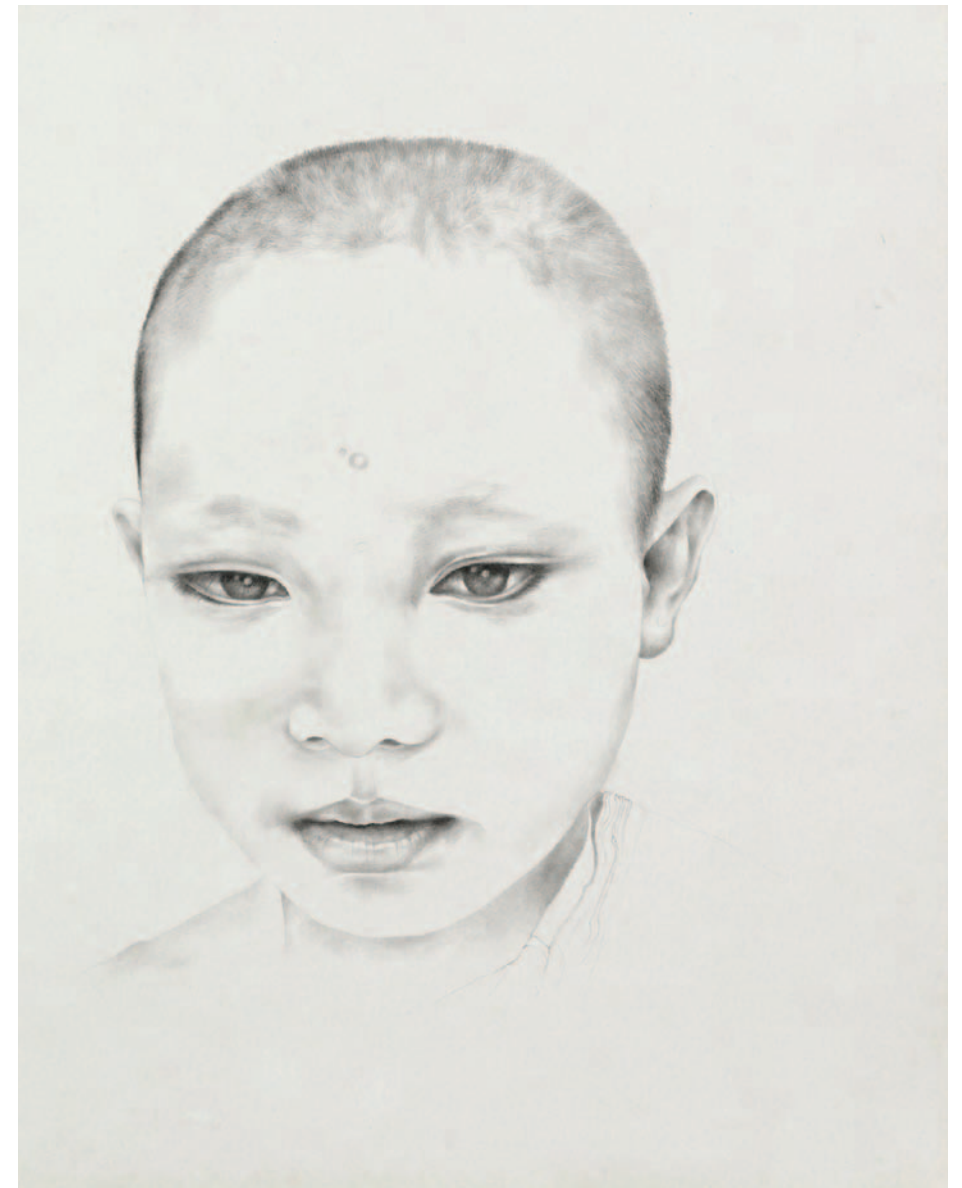
Historical redaction has been a concern for Sikander since she first began exploring the capacity of miniature painting to serve as a form of storytelling. She has addressed the operations of loss and removal by becoming obsessed with the pursuit of detail and labor within her own technique.

Astute physical observation is a key way in which the artist confronts such omissions. Driving is a source of research for Sikander and has informed the scale with which she investigates landscape in her work. While a student in 1989, she took a road trip through Europe and ended up in London, where she saw an Anselm Kiefer exhibition that sparked her fascination with the intersection of painting and sculpture. In 2004 she took road trips in Southern California and Mexico, through the Sonoran and Anza-Borrego deserts. This informed her animations *Pursuit Curve* (2004) and the *Land Escape* series (2005), which evacuate human and architectural forms and instead take the desert landscape as their subject. As part of her research for

*Parallax* (2013, [Plate 96](#)) she did another desert road trip in 2013 through the United Arab Emirates. There she drove along the Strait of Hormuz, to Ras al-Khaimah and Dibba al-Fujairah, through the Kalba, along the coast (on the side of the Gulf of Oman), and across the desert from Sharjah to Khor Fakkan. She has said that she was “interested in condensing thoughts and narration through drawing. I thought of drawing as libretto, and, in addition, driving as drawing. Driving for me was like navigating the terrain of drawing. In this respect, driving was an intentional act to tease out the experience of the space while in motion, akin to the experiential dimension of *Parallax*.”<sup>xiii</sup> Confronting various landscapes from behind the wheel of an automobile informs not only the iconography of her work, but also the scale with which she confronts the miniature.

In addition to close observations of landscapes from inside a car, Sikander has also made slow and studied human portraits part of her project. She produced *Monks and Novices*, a series of more than fifty graphite portraits, between 2006 and 2008 during an artist residency in Luang Prabang, Laos, with an independent organization called the Quiet in the Land ([Plates 42–46](#)). The monks and novices of the project’s title are from the Vat Pak Khane and Vat Xieng Thong monasteries. They are a major part of the town, and tourists are drawn to the spectacle of their morning alms round. As a result, stereotypical depictions show them in long lines wearing their matching orange robes. Sikander’s approach resisted these clichéd portrayals and the homogeneous rendering of nameless monks and novices that tourist photographs often promote.<sup>xiv</sup> Instead, the artist asked the abbot, Sathou Nuai One Keo Sitthivong, if she could draw individual portraits of the monastery’s residents. He agreed. She photographed several of the monks and novices and then made sketches from the photographs, including one of the abbot ([Plate 42](#)). Titled individually with the name of each monk or novice depicted, as in *Monk Viengmixay* ([Plate 46](#)), Sikander’s portraits resist

the voyeurism perpetuated by both interior and exterior forces in the history of Laos, including the poverty and exploitation that is part of the complicated French colonial residue there. Additionally, Sikander donated money from the sale of these works to the monastery to build a community *sala*. Portraiture, one of the classical tropes of miniature painting, has always been an obsession for Sikander. However, through these portraits Sikander served to highlight some of the complexities inherent in the genre, both by challenging the idea of who we assume the other is and by investigating the idea that a portrait need not be rigid. In order to explore these concepts, Sikander chose to focus on the younger monks, those between eight and twelve years of age, and to draw them over the course of two to three years, as is evident in the youthful facial physiognomy of *Novice Chanton* ([Fig. 8](#)). These portraits evoke a sense of intimacy: the process allowed the artist to gain familiarity and trust with the monastery’s residents, and she even taught portraiture to some of the novices, encouraging them to look at themselves and one another through a new lens.



**Fig. 8** *Monks and Novices: Novice Chanton*, 2006–8. Graphite on paper, 69.9 x 62.2 cm. Collection of Honus Tandijono, Hong Kong.



## UNEXPECTED JUXTAPOSITIONS AND MAGICAL REALISM

Sikander's work suggests multiple literary devices and styles, ranging from magical realism to epic poetry. Authors interested in magical realism, such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Gabriel García Márquez, employ unexpected juxtapositions and disrupted narratives as storytelling devices. This strategy is also at play in Sikander's work in terms of both form and technique.

Sikander's most common means of disrupting the arrangement of forms in her compositions is the layering of images. *Perilous Order* (1997, [Plate 7](#)) deliberately confuses the standard production process of the miniature. For this painting, the artist employed the decorative technique of marbling as the first layer of the composition rather than the last. She made it over the course of eight years: she created the initial layer in 1989, while a student at the NCA, and completed it in 1997. The marbled surface serves as a border for the figurative subject matter, nestled inside several additional borders. A thin blue register, several lines, and an oval-shaped window covered with gold circular forms serve as a frame for a man seated in a chair against a blue background. By incorporating the facial features of a friend of hers at the time, Sikander inserted a personal and contemporary physiognomy into a court portrait trope. In subsequent years she would further disrupt the formal composition of the painting by inserting four *gopi* goddesses. These *gopis* gaze at the central figure from different perspectives in the frame. Further disrupting the original composition and its male-dominated portrait is the presence of the headless female form. Authority is order, and Sikander's reordering of the act of creation challenges the authority of miniature painting as a tradition.

Sikander's work also plays with layering of materials, another integral component of miniature painting, and explores its potential for deconstruction. The curator Rachel Kent has observed, "A formal visual device, Sikander's superimposition of image upon image in her miniature paintings creates a sense of concealment, while simultaneously revealing fragments, edges, and often surprising, elliptical links before component

parts. Similarly, the rupture of image and border creates an indeterminate space in which things are at once contained, but also allowed to break free."<sup>xv</sup> In addition to combining very thin layers of gouache, graphite, ink, and paper to form the intricate details of the myriad tiny forms of her compositions, Sikander digitally transposes images, a practice she began in 2001 during a residency at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas. There she made *Intimacy*, a roughly four-minute video animation in which human figures, animals, text, and a rotating spiral are progressively layered, entering into and disappearing from the pictorial field at various points. By activating the space of the miniature through animation and making the mechanics of layering visible in the digital field, the work emphasizes the variations in Sikander's forms. Though this first animation is short and does not include sound, it introduced the digital as a new immersive dimension for the artist. Following this first foray, she made four more animations between 2003 and 2005: *Nemesis* (2003), *SpiNN* (2003), *Pursuit Curve*, and *Dissonance to Detour* (2004).<sup>xvi</sup>

Contemporary technology, for Sikander, has proven a means of reinventing and staking a new claim on a centuries-old technique. The artist has said that digital media have allowed her to experiment by further destabilizing the space of the miniature: "Working digitally allows me to exacerbate the space of *pardakth*, whereby the use of transparency and opacity are critical factors in the layering of images. These micro or non-visible layers emerge as a clearly defined and quantifiable space to work in the digital realm, as opacity and transparency become a field to navigate on a numerical scale."<sup>xvii</sup> Her animation work from 2010–13 is visually and sonically distinct from the earlier works. In part due to technological developments, her animations *The Last Post* (2010, [Plate 98](#)) and *Parallax* are larger in format and employ high-definition images and 5.1 surround sound. In New York in the fall of 2015 as part of a larger Times Square public art project called "Midnight Moment," Sikander installed *Gopi Contagion* (2015, [Fig. 9](#)) on several of the square's monumental screens.



**Fig. 9** *Gopi Contagion*, October 2015. Installation on digital screens as part of "Midnight Moment: Times Square Arts," Times Square, New York. Courtesy the artist. Photograph by Ka-Man Tse.

## THE POETIC VERSE AND THE SPACE OF THE WALL

Epic poems such as *The Odyssey*, *The Hamzanama*, and *Bhagavad Gita* relay spiritual journeys via metaphor. The Lao epic poem *Sang Sinxay* served as a point of departure for a large-scale series of drawings Sikander created in 2006–8. The classical nineteenth-century Urdu poetic form the *ghazal* (derived from Persian) as well as revolutionary poetry (such as the work of Muhammad Iqbal) are visible in works by Sikander that employ text. The *ghazal* is used for conversation with a mortal or divine beloved and consists of five to fifteen couplets called *shers*. The poet Ghalib (1797–1879) made the most emphatic use of this form in his poetry from the nineteenth century, a body of work Sikander alludes to in both the visual repertoire of her art and in titles such as *I am also not my own enemy* and *The Cypress Despite Its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden* (2013).

Sikander's works exploring abstraction and loss of materiality can be read as visual poems. Take for example the large-scale wall drawing she produced at the Renaissance

Society at the University of Chicago in 1998 (Fig. 10). This installation brought together both painting directly on the wall and work on paper. Following that project she became interested in adding material depth to her drawings beyond the two-dimensional sphere by creating ephemeral installations out of multiple sheets of translucent paper placed at a depth of anywhere from several inches to several feet. The resulting works not only gave new dimensionality to her forms in painting and drawing, but also introduced a larger scale to her drawing practice. She uses the white gouache technique to add an additional layer of complexity to the work. Along with the Renaissance Society project, her early wall drawings included interventions at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (1997), the Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis (1998), Deitch Projects, New York (1998), the Whitney Museum of American Art, Philip Morris Branch, New York (2000), the National Gallery of Ottawa (2001), Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC (2002), the Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York (2004), and the San Diego Museum of Art (2004). After the works were installed in situ at these venues, they were all destroyed at the end of each show with the exception of the tissue paper works, some of which remain as individual pieces.

The use of layering as both technical operation and formal device is also evident in another mode



**Fig. 10** Wall drawing installed at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 1998.

of Sikander's production: projection. This process is integral to the execution of her wall drawings, as one can see in her exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, in 2007 (Fig. 11). For the installation of *Unseen* at Doris Duke's Shangri La in 2011, Sikander used projection to play on the notion of visibility and invisibility. As part of the exhibition of that work at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York in 2013, Sikander projected one of the Doris Duke images onto the building's facade overlooking Columbus Circle. In 2012 she projected *The Last Post* onto Norman Foster's Kogod Hall at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. She has since made projections at the Khorfakkan Cinema in Sharjah (2013) and the Hall Foundation in Napa Valley, California (2014). These immersive and site-specific projections are completely devoid of materiality and use only light as a means of communicating an image.



**Fig. 11** The artist produces a wall drawing using a projection at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2007.

# SHAHZIA SIKANDER

## AT ASIA SOCIETY HONG KONG

*Apparatus of Power* is Sikander's first major exhibition in Hong Kong.<sup>xviii</sup> It is installed inside of Asia Society Hong Kong (ASHK), the former British Explosives Magazine Compound, a historical site bound up with the vestiges of colonial occupation. Hong Kong became a British colony in 1842 through the Treaty of Nanjing, which ended the First Opium War. During this time in Hong Kong, the British military occupied the northern area known as the Victoria Cantonment, and the current ASHK location demarcated the Cantonment's southernmost boundary. The former Explosives Magazine Compound was built between 1843 and 1846 and was first used as housing for British soldiers. Signage from the site indicates its former use as barracks (Fig. 12). Twenty years later, the compound was transformed into a production and processing plant for artillery. The building changed ownership from the British Army to the Royal Navy in the twentieth century as the governing powers reorganized.<sup>xix</sup>

A map of Hong Kong from 1882 indicates the location of ASHK, as indicated by the diagram of the magazine along the southern boundary of the Victoria Cantonment (Fig. 13). During this time, when it had been converted into an artillery magazine, the barracks shifted north and west. In this map, to the north of Queen's Road above where the North Barracks are located, a small swimming bath protrudes onto the harbor, to the west of the Naval Pier. The current exhibition makes use of this space as well. *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power* extends to the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, where a selection of Sikander's prints as well as her animations *Parallax* and *The Last Post* are on view. Located above the waters of Victoria Harbour atop Hong Kong's Central Pier 8, the Maritime Museum provides an appropriate vantage point from which to view these works, as its current location was once under the immediate purview of the British Navy. Accordingly, *The Last Post* and *Parallax* directly refer to Hong Kong's history with the British East India Company and the global maritime trade. Riffing on

such figures of colonial authority, who were ubiquitous in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, *The Last Post* takes a faceless, "exploding" East India Company Man as its subject. The Company Man appears several times throughout the course of the film: up close in a court theater apparatus, then floating through a dark landscape, and finally exploding atop a gouache background. This Company Man is precisely the type of official who would have lived in the Explosives Magazine Compound in the nineteenth century, and he was a visible figure in China during the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century as well. Accordingly, the final scenes of *The Last Post* suggest the dark history of the opium trade in China as a faceless monk topples over and, in the next frame, a man smoking a pipe appears (Fig. 14).

Like *The Last Post*, *Parallax* deals with several historical aspects of the British East India Company. The Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf played a crucial role in the history of the Company. The Portuguese took control of Hormuz in 1507, and it served as a base to control the Persian Gulf. A century later, the British East India Company joined forces with Iran's Shah Abbas I and captured Hormuz after a ten-week siege in 1622. The Strait of Hormuz and Hong Kong are similar in that they were both entrepôts and centers for maritime exchange for the British East India Company at pivotal points in its history. *Parallax* visualizes such aerial and aquatic routes.

As Nick Robins has written, "The East India Company casts a long shadow over a process of globalization that so many of its supporters claim is new to the world."<sup>xx</sup> The presence of Sikander's work in both the ASHK and the Hong Kong Maritime Museum offers rich potential for cultivating new associations. Spread across these two venues, the work invites us to consider the colonial complexity in the region, both historical and current. In doing so, *Apparatus of Power* explores several of the visual and verbal leftovers of colonial occupation.

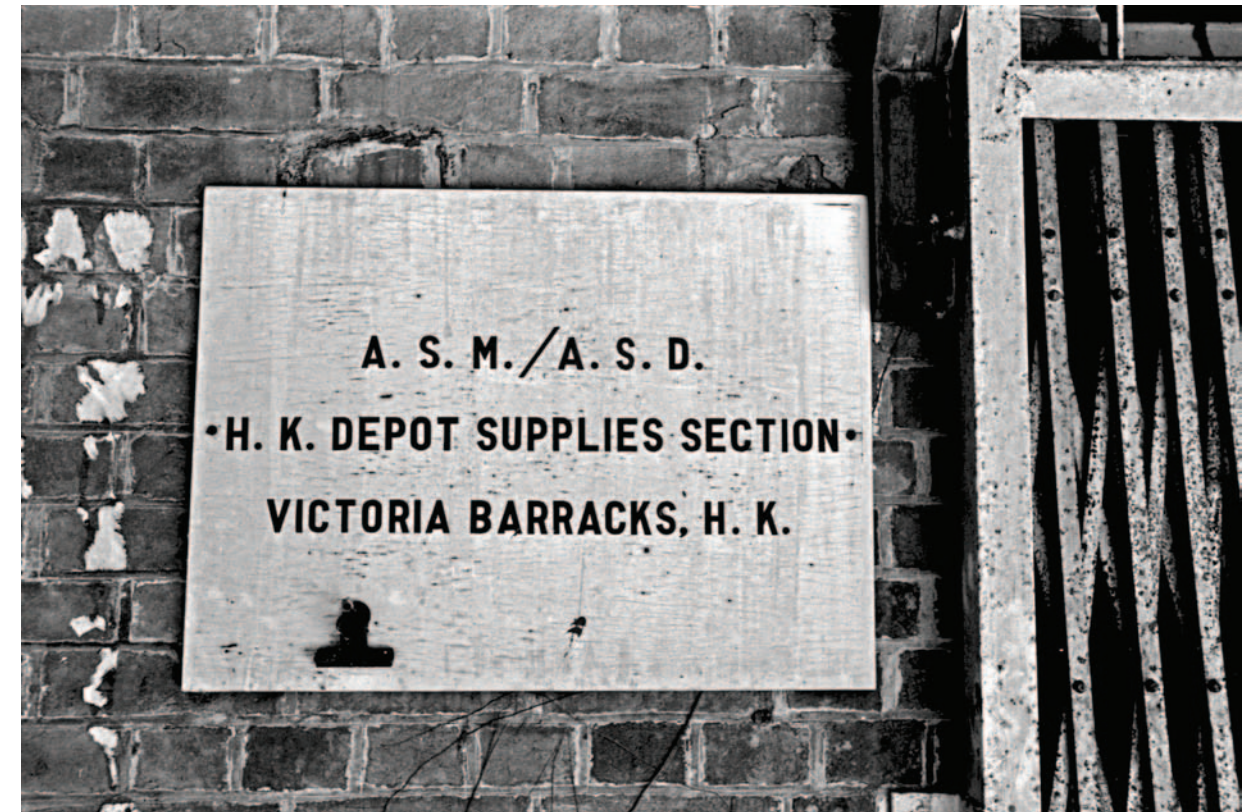


Fig. 12 Site Signage in the Former Explosives Magazine Compound, 2004. Image by John Nye.



Fig. 13 Author unknown, hand-drawn map of Victoria Cantonment, 1882. Courtesy Wattis Fine Art.



**Fig. 14** Final frames from *The Last Post*, 2010. Single-channel HD digital animation with 5.1 surround sound. 10 minutes. Edition of 8, 2AP. Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio, Texas. Music by Du Yun.

## NOTES

i. Discussion with the artist, July 20, 2015.

ii. Discussion with the artist, January 8, 2016.

iii. Ibid.

iv. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. George Kubler (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 61.

v. Ibid., 65–66.

vi. Ibid., 36.

vii. For the artist's thoughts on contemporary storytelling, see Shahzia Sikander, "The World Is Yours, the World Is Mine," *New York Times*, December 4, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/opinion/shahzia-sikander-the-world-is-yours-the-world-is-mine.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/opinion/shahzia-sikander-the-world-is-yours-the-world-is-mine.html?_r=0).

viii. Susan Sellers, ed., *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xxix.

ix. Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), in *ibid.*, 39–40.

x. Discussion with the artist, January 8, 2016.

xi. Ibid.

xii. Shahzia Sikander in "Intertwined Identities: Shahzia Sikander in Conversation with Vishakha N. Desai," *Art Asia Pacific* 85 (2013): 89.

xiii. Shahzia Sikander in "Notes on *Parallax*: Claire Brandon in Conversation with Shahzia Sikander," in *Shahzia Sikander*, ed. Cecilia Andersson (Umeå, Sweden: Bildmuseet Umeå, 2013), 4.

xiv. France Morin and John Alan Farmer, *The Quiet in the Land: Luang Prabang, Laos* (New York: The Quiet in the Land, 2009), 173.

xv. Rachel Kent, "'Intimate Immensity': Shahzia Sikander's Multi-Dimensional Art," in *Shahzia Sikander*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney, 2008), 12.

xvi. For an extended discussion of Sikander's animation, see my essay "Drawing in the Digital Field: Shahzia Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010)," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 3, eds. Timothy Mitchell and Anupama Rao (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015): 492–504.

xvii. Discussion with the artist, June 21, 2015.

xviii. Earlier exhibitions in which Sikander has participated in the Asia-Pacific region include the Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art—APT 3 (1999–2000); *Beyond the Future*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (1999–2000); *Authority as Approximation*, ParaSite, Hong Kong (2009); *Transformation*, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2010); *By Day, By Night, some (special) things a museum can do*, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2010); and most recently *If you were to live here*, Fifth Auckland Triennale (2013).

xix. See S. Alice Mong et al., *Asia Society Hong Kong Center: Heritage Revealed* (Hong Kong: Asia Society Hong Kong Center, 2014), 20–21.

xx. Nick Robins, *The Corporation That Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 213.