

An illustration of three stylized trees with green foliage and brown trunks, standing on a light green curved horizon line. Below the horizon, a dark, textured reflection of the trees is visible against a dark blue background. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER

DISSONANCE TO DETOUR

OTIS

Otis College of Art and Design



JENNIFER HOWARD COLEMAN DISTINGUISHED
LECTURESHIP AND RESIDENCY

BEN MALTZ GALLERY
OTIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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September 24 – November 12, 2005





JENNIFER HOWARD COLEMAN DISTINGUISHED LECTURESHIP AND RESIDENCY

Otis College of Art and Design and The Samuel Goldwyn Foundation have created a new program in memory of Jennifer Howard Coleman, artist and Otis alumna. It highlights and recognizes prominent contemporary painters by awarding an annual lectureship and residency.

Jennifer Howard Coleman was born in 1925 in New York City. She began her professional life as an actress working with The Actor's Studio and Elia Kazan. After moving to Los Angeles with her husband, Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., she raised her family of four children: Catherine Goldwyn, founder of Sound Art, a not-for-profit organization that brings music education to inner city schools; Francis Goldwyn, Managing Director and Chief Operating Officer, Quorum Associates LLC, an international executive search firm specializing in recruiting senior executives for global companies; John Goldwyn, an accomplished motion picture producer; and Tony Goldwyn, a versatile actor and talented director. She continued performing as an actress until the early 1960s, when she discovered her love of painting and attended drawing and painting classes at Otis. Her most innovative and important work was a series of watercolors that she created over a ten-year period. They are indicative of her love of everyday objects and her keen sense of color. Until her death in 1993, Jennifer Howard Coleman was dedicated to the artist's vision in all parts of daily life. She felt that the creative process, no matter how it comes about, offers artistic freedom to any student who is prepared and willing. She supported many local artists and was deeply committed to open dialogue and collaboration in all aspects of artistic learning.

STOCKPILING AND DISSEMINATION

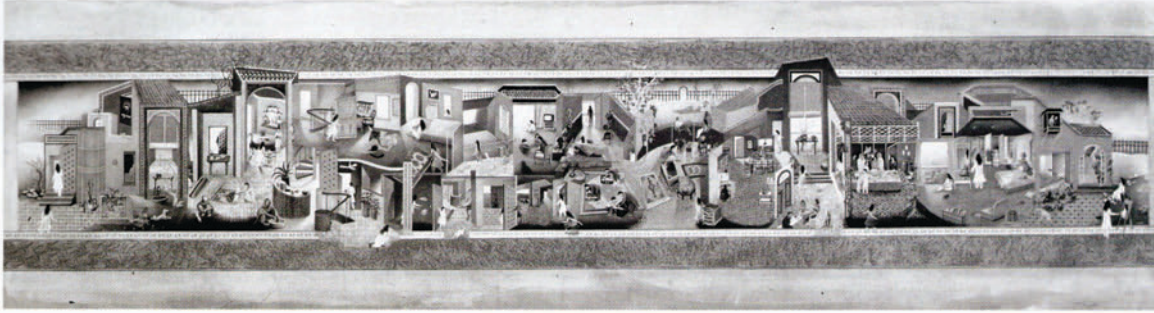
Meg Linton

*Director of the Ben Maltz Gallery and Curator of the Exhibition
Otis College of Art and Design*

Shahzia Sikander began her formal art training by studying miniatures in Lahore, Pakistan at the National College of Arts, where she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1992. Thirteen years later, after moving to the United States and procuring a Master of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1995, her innate, voracious curiosity continues to compel her to investigate a variety of materials, forms, and ideas. Her work springs forth from a strict and disciplined visual canon connected to ancient literary texts into a subjective realm of self-exploration to discover her individual aesthetic voice.

As a student, Sikander's initial choice to engage in miniature painting was a calculated decision about finding an art form that exaggerated contradictions of scale versus labor, precision versus gesture, and formal versus subjective.¹ This discipline enabled her to connect with a particular aspect of Pakistani art and history that had been reduced to kitsch for the tourist marketplace; to understand the original significance of miniatures; and to reinvest the form with her present day images and concerns. She uses her early training as a springboard for composing formal images that transcend other genres, styles, and techniques. Combining a flurry of media images, the annals of European art history, and her own vivid imagination, this methodology provides her with a rich image bank for her elaborate and beautiful compositions.

Sikander's decision to embrace the miniature in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time of international celebration of grandiose painters like David Salle, Francisco Clemente, and James Rosenquist, can be seen as a defiant act. Focusing on a frame smaller than 8 x 10 inches, she created intimate, disciplined, labor-intensive works on paper using stacked perspective, historical and stylized imagery, and ancient painting techniques. These earlier works, like *Mirrat I* and *Mirrat II* (1991-92), combine tediously rendered borders, architecture, and realistically executed figures placed in multiple



aspects of the painting to imply narrative. Moving on, Sikander begins to defy her self-imposed scale limitations and creates *The Scroll* (1991-92), a $13\frac{1}{2} \times 63\frac{7}{8}$ inch meticulous genre painting depicting her daily life as a young woman, family member, and artist. It is a personal narrative rather than a historical epic defined by centuries of tradition.

Like many artists coming out of an American graduate art program in the mid 1990s, Sikander struggled with issues of identity. In her case, what did it mean to be a progressive, independent, freethinking, educated, traveled, Pakistani woman working in Rhode Island—a foreigner who did not fit the American stereotype of an oppressed, veiled Muslim woman? Sikander has never worn a veil and she often found herself being inappropriately categorized. Her reaction was to experiment with the stereotype, so she veiled herself in several social situations to gauge public reaction. Surprisingly, the inevitable expectation of the veil—always read as restrictive—led her to discover the compelling power of anonymity. *Venus' Wonderland* (1995-97), *Who's Veiled Anyway* (1994-97), and *Separate Working Things II* (1993-95) speak to this duality and confusion of warring truths; freedom within discipline became the platform for her dissent. She broke down borders of the page compositionally and infused her tiny, tight, precise images with gesture, fluidity, and a bit of chaos. She defaced her pristine surfaces with her own graffiti and collaged elements. Life spilled over, muddied the implied narrative, and formed sedimentary layers of information.

Ultimately, layering is both a technique and metaphor for Sikander. Her paintings resemble palimpsests in which she places one image on top of another and leaves visible a trace of what came before. In her wall murals and site-specific paper installations like *Chaman 3* (2001) at the Cleveland

The Scroll, 1991–92

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea, on hand-prepared paper
 $13\frac{1}{2} \times 63\frac{7}{8}$ in.

Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

Center for Contemporary Art and *Pathology of Suspension* (2005) at the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, a sense of depth and mystery emerges from the layering of painted images and the use of translucent tissue paper. The image is never seen clearly or in its entirety and thus can never be defined. The ephemeral nature of the projects; the seductive beauty of the paint, figuration, and patterning; and the inability to find a concrete story keep the eye roving over the work and the imagination engaged. In the artist's words, "I want to frustrate meaning by maintaining that edge of multiplicity and contradiction."² Sikander intentionally convolutes visual information to obfuscate any hint of a linear narrative, frustrating the natural inclination to derive meaning and define the world in order to comprehend human existence. To be left hanging is to be anxious, to be full of wonder, and to be forced into the present.

Sikander maintains she is not interested in symbolism or illustration and emphasizes, "the formal concerns are primary and the meaning is secondary or arbitrary. It is not personal."³ By "personal," she means the work is not an intimate narrative of her daily experiences as depicted in *The Scroll*, but instead an attempt to use the formal characteristics of pattern, repetition, shape, color, and size to tap into overarching themes she finds compelling: mutability, translation, obliteration, duality, accumulation, reduction, multiplicity, and interconnectivity. She carefully chooses her structural devices—whether a circle, a rectangle, or a bisecting line—as the basis for the more figurative elements of disembodied headgear, morphing animals, and fragmented people. In *Several Sided Circles 1* and *2* (2005), and in the beginning of the video animation *Pursuit Curve* (2004), all the elements rotate around, gravitate to, and repel from the circle. Sikander's appropriation of loaded imagery like the Gopi, griffin, or turban is complicated. On the one hand, she employs symbols with multiple associations in various cultures and on the other hand she appears to be hunting for a simple form that she can map endlessly. She embraces the notion of representing divinity with a visual form that successfully exists as a single unit and also through repetition becomes a critical building block for the monumental. This patterning, both in the making and in the viewing, is a



Who's Veiled Anyway, 1994–97
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea on wasli paper
11 ¼ x 8 ⅝ in.
Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.



physical and visual metaphor for personal and universal experience. The individual forms such as the turban may represent gender, mind, a region, a race of people, a religion, the enemy; or they may simply be graphic stand-ins for everything and nothing to demonstrate the process of stockpiling and dissemination.

The swelling and deflating visual rhythm of Sikander's new imagery moves from medium to medium, allowing her to twist figures into a myriad of contorted combinations. She has a penchant for showing states of transition—

morphing people into landscapes, a cadre of demons into an elephant, and turbans into a flock of birds. Using highly stylized arabesque lines, she interconnects disparate human, animal, and architectural elements. Morphing implies a beginning, middle, and end, but Sikander manages to keep linearity at bay and sustain the non sequitur whether in a painting on paper or a digital animation with sound. The transparency of the gouache or digital manipulation of atmosphere, combined with the detailed rendering overlaid with a rapid-fire gesture, give the work a dynamic undulating breath. She takes command of the strict rules of her training to forge her own path with a distinctive use of scale, labor, precision, and gesture, whether formal or subjective. Both the artist and the work are in constant flux, ravenously receiving and disseminating experience and information. Perhaps this is why Sikander is attracted to composite mythical creatures like the griffin—entities in perpetual struggle against their dual nature, trapped between aggressive and domestic desires, beasts that defy understanding or categorization. Like artists, these misfit beings are always evolving, challenging what came before, reinvesting the past with the present, and providing no absolutes.

1. **Threads of Vision: Toward a New Feminine Poetics**, by Roxana Marcoci, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Arts, 2001, p. 38

2. **Interview with Shahzia Sikander** by Meg Linton, March 19, 2005, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York City

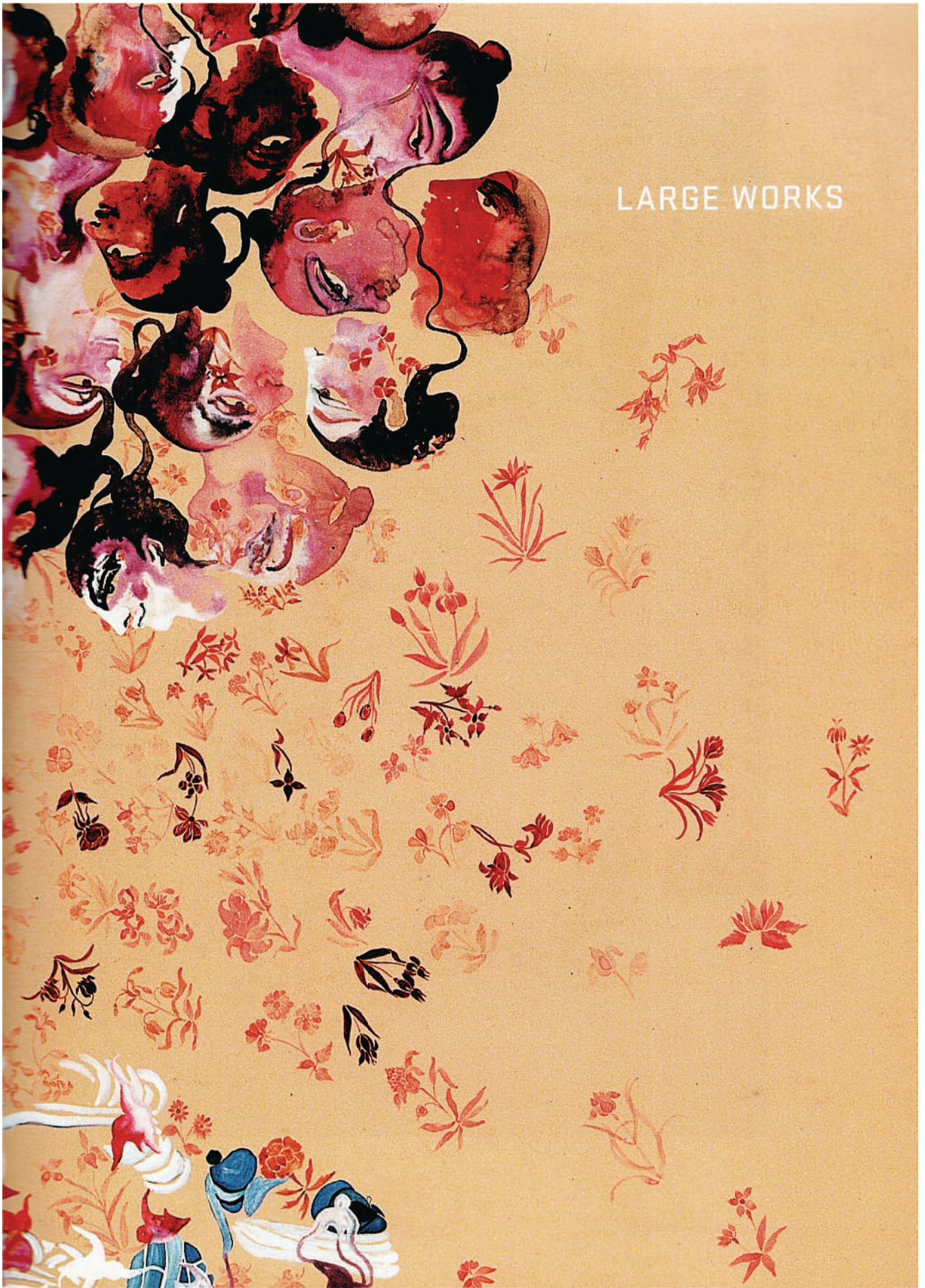
3. **Ibid**

Venus's Wonderland, 1995–97

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea, on hand-prepared paper
12 x 10³/₄ in.

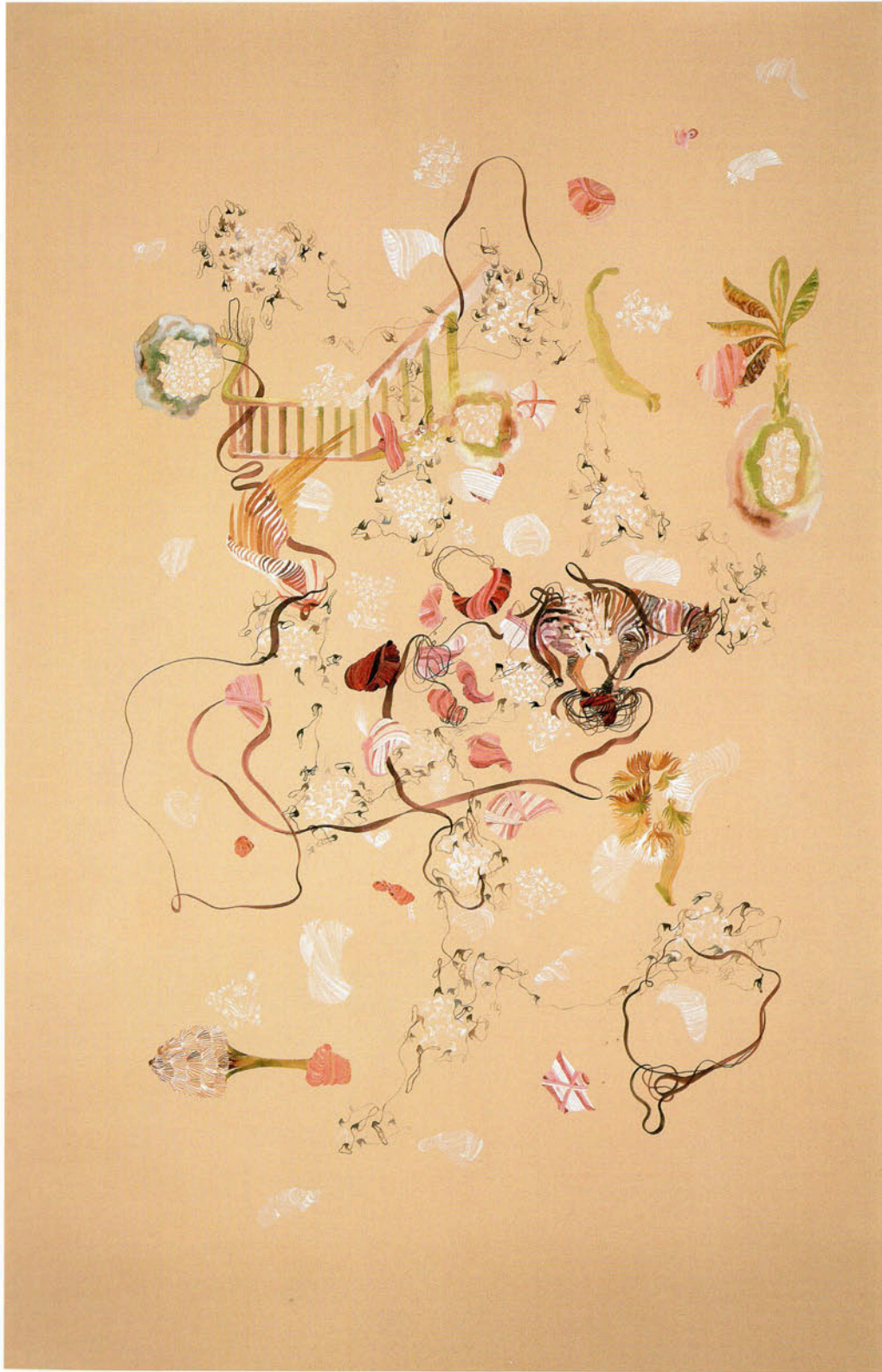
Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

LARGE WORKS





Several Sided Circles 2, 2005



Pathology of Suspension #8, 2005



Several Sided Circles 1, 2005

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