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Shahzia Sikander

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## Shahzia Sikander in conversation with Fereshteh Daftari

Fereshteh Daftari

For almost a decade now, Shahzia Sikander and I have worked together on exhibitions and engaged in a number of conversations regarding her appropriation of miniature painting and its multiple readings, most recently at Hunter College in New York. Our first collaboration, however, dates back to 2000 when Sikander created a banner for a 'Projects' exhibition I organised at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Where the MoMA logo would customarily announce the presence of the museum, Sikander produced a banner that displayed the outcasts of the Western canon. This is not to say that difference or identity occupy the sole focus of her attention. Her investigations are often formal in nature, but they are not devoid of ideological implication. Exempt of didacticism, Sikander pursues her projects with a subversive mindset that is neither self-righteous, partisan, nor without a purpose. She questions everything including her own propositions. In a world so easily prone to judgmental categorisations, perhaps the point of her meanderings from one camp to its opposite – from say abstraction to narration, from pure geometry to the miscegenation of ciphers and myths drawn from a variety of cultures – is a way to sabotage the hierarchy of values and the domination of any single authority. Sikander embraces and insists on the irreconcilable. Her world is one of open-ended possibilities.

How do you define your relationship to miniature painting?

Shahzia Sikander

My relationship is akin to contradiction itself. Conceptually, metaphorically, as well as in terms of process, it is as much about accumulation as removal. The anchor for all my work is drawing. It goes hand in hand with erasing. Layers are built and abraded; paths are kept, their history etched in the work itself.

Definitions are critical. How one defines miniature painting in turn defines the work that claims a relationship to it. Examination of the canon and the discourse is important. New ways of looking have to happen. Persian and Indian miniature painting has been subjected to an interpretation borne out of the conditions of its complex provenance as it was often dislocated from Eastern sources and historical contexts, a phenomenon intensified during the colonial period which now presents a challenge to critical discussion. The movement from East to West has been reversed



as institutions located in the Middle East and Asia are now seeking to reclaim their heritage. It is precisely the intersection of history and the origin of miniature painting that is exciting for me as it is full of potential for artistic intervention. This shifting status also sets the work on a path to confront its own legacy, its narrative and its description. It is just as important to note that my own knowledge of miniature painting from the mid-1980s in Pakistan was framed in part by studying catalogues written and printed by Western scholars and Western institutions such as the Smithsonian.

Fereshteh Daftari

In retrospect it is quite clear that you have radically challenged the notion of miniature painting as historical objects collected by connoisseurs in the West, or its provenance as you call it. You have turned the table around and contributed to a new phenomenon I would term Post-Orientalist. Can you explain, however, what was originally rebellious in your choice to study miniature painting and defiant against which norm?

Shahzia Sikander

I would say against complacency. I was more than eager to locate and engage in an act that went against the grain of acceptability. Unlike now, in 1986 the miniature painting department at the National College of Art in Lahore was far from popular. At the time this type of expression was perceived as a craft-ridden, anti-intellectual form. The potential to change that status presented a challenge as well as reinvigorating dormant possibilities – pursuing this creative path was liberating in every sense.

Fereshteh Daftari

With hindsight do you consider your choice of this tradition as complying with any larger political agenda?

Shahzia Sikander

At a fairly young age, my decisions and judgments were mostly intuitive and yet I gravitated towards those who were questioning the status quo. The desire to be subversive and find one's voice is, I think, an outcome of a coming of age in the unstable and oppressive political climate of Zia ul-Haq's military regime.

Fereshteh Daftari

Stereotypes are stubborn and understanding can become entrenched; for instance, Expressionist painting simplistically associated with angst, miniature painting with beauty. How would you define beauty and to what extent do you allow it to enter your work?

Shahzia Sikander

Beauty is as subjective as the notion of art itself. Beauty and its subsequent context go in and out of fashion every decade it seems. I was interested in violating the preciousness of the miniature as an equivalent to what might be considered an anti-heroic gesture. At the same time I was interested in process, labour, time, traditional skills, virtuosity of technique and formalism. Despite my investment in understanding and studying miniature painting, I was equally irreverent towards its traditions, mixing them in many unorthodox ways. If we were to equate 'beauty' with 'authenticity', then a subversive attitude, one that is open to contamination, would most accurately define my relationship to it.

Fereshteh Daftari

Can you give some examples of unorthodox processes you have applied to miniature painting?

Shahzia Sikander

Miniature painting has been ripe for deconstruction. Tradition is altered through many strategies, a change of scale for instance or when I paint a mural; a change of medium or abstracted forms from miniatures animated through video projection. Animation is a whole new territory for ideas that used to reside on paper. Another way to disrupt tradition is through the transformation of a single motif. A turban in Pursuit Curve (2004) for example, may be a traditional form but through the device of multiplication, it releases new associations. While perceived as a sign of race, religion, ethnicity or gender, it converts itself into an insect or butterfly while simultaneously pointing to a graphic mark that is set in motion; the visual vocabulary conforms to set rules but the interpretation is in flux. The same could be said about my use of the hair silhouette. It sheds its reference to Gopis (the female lovers of Krishna portrayed in Indian miniatures), to gender, and when isolated and multiplied turns into bats, floating helmets or even abstract but whimsical signs. To achieve this constant state of transition is important. I noticed the same kind of evolving mechanism in Modo de volar (A Way to Fly) from Los Disparates, Goya's print series, where the human and the mechanical, the grotesque, the absurd and the comical come together as a device for satire.

Fereshteh Daftari

Moving on from this, let's discuss how time is incorporated into your work.



See p. 31–34

Shahzia Sikander

Compression of scale does not necessarily imply a compression of time: on the contrary, small space can be more demanding as it requires a certain condensing of ideas. The pursuit of detail – not the decorative kind but of the nano – is an engagement with time. Digging deep to find the minutest of detail tends to make one see things differently. Intensive labour is one of the facets of time. Another way my image-making process evokes this is through memory, which to me always implies a certain loss. It is a different process than appropriation. The memory of an image is selective and translates into different versions of the original on different occasions. A third manifestation of time is the actual removal of previous work. The application of a dot, or a grid composed of dots, obliterates underlying information. This process suggests the trapping of time and repeated removal of marks or layering leads to an accumulation of loss. This process is visible in several works including Perilous Order, Then N.O.W. Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella, Hood's Red Rider, and Red Riding Hood.

See p. 60

Fereshteh Daftari

Can you walk us through some of the spaces you map out?

Shahzia Sikander

As with a Samuel Beckett play, in trying to capture the passage of time, the device for me is to invent the interstitial space. It is the gap, the silence, the break, the lacuna that acts as a foil to the narrative implicit in time. This particular idea has been at the core of my investigation, drawing on references from Homi Bhabha's 'third space' to post-structuralist de-centred space; to political space, to transgressive space, to the space of the ideal, the fantastical, the subliminal. The focus is never on one polarity or another. What matters are the detours from both, which is similar in many ways to recalling or revisiting an image through memory. For example, the animated video piece Dissonance to Detour (2005), made for 'Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking' at MoMA, is a search for something beyond one's reach, something fleeting and constantly evolving. In this piece it is the coexistence of order and anarchy that define the third space.

See p. 20

Ambivalence as an open-ended attitude, as an impetus towards opposite directions, can be conceived of as a third space too. Another way to highlight this is through a split, a division, which creates the interim, the interstice, the pause, the interval, the separation between two points. An example is a new video work titled Interstitial (2008). Here images of two novices merge and separate in a time frame I call interstitial – the gap between two positions.

See p. 76–95



Turb-in-Motion, 2005  
Watercolour, dry pigment, gouache on hand-prepared wasli paper



Red Riding Hood, 1997  
Watercolour, dry pigment and gouache on hand-prepared wasli paper

Fereshteh Daftari

With regard to miniature painting, one might view this as an accent or language you have cultivated, not necessarily one that has come to you naturally. It is important to note because this appropriation should not stand as a barrier for understanding the work; it is just part of an invented/created persona. I think the pursuit of a source (both real and fabricated) and an itinerary away from that starting point may also be linked to the permutations of your own evolving identity of your work. It seems disconcerting that some critics have assigned or labelled your work with a singular origin. How do you consider you have been defined, and also can you offer some insights on your own changes in self perception, while travelling from Lahore to Providence, Rhode Island, to Houston, New York, Berlin, and more recently to Luang Prabang in Laos?

Shahzia Sikander

This question is insightful as it opens up notions of multiple locations of reality. My appropriated (albeit altered) language of miniature painting has not been discussed in terms of its specific meaning for me: that is as an alter-ego, a disguise, as well as a refusal to be totally homogenised. It has been attributed to my culture, where, as mentioned earlier, this form of expression was considered devoid of any contemporary relevance – or misread as a desire on my part to be seen as 'exotic'. For me the invented persona is effective because this simulacrum allows me to exist in different spheres. It is hard not to think about Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' here. I have often felt exasperated at my work being held hostage via emphatic biographical introductions including country, ethnicity and religion. Choosing to focus on miniature painting was never about 'cultural revivalism' or about a return to authenticity. In fact I gravitated towards this genre to engage with all its contextual complexities. When I started toying with the possibility of pursuing 'miniature painting' the reactions around me were so partisan I knew I had stumbled onto something exciting in an otherwise lukewarm academic climate during Zia's military regime in mid-1980s Lahore, Pakistan. Moving forward a quarter of a century and the questions about authenticity still ramp up the discourse of ownership. The American perception keeps the East/West paradigm polarized. At the same time there is another type of criticism which claims that cultural authenticity can only be produced locally and not in the West. To paraphrase Homi Bhabha, this line of thinking has more to do with cultural authority than authenticity. Perhaps a good metaphor for the real and the fabricated, for this duality, is a chase where hunter and prey are entangled. The title of Pursuit Curve refers to a mathematical term for a path an object takes

when chasing another object. The point of the work is the chase itself. Who is pursuing who and when does the pursuer become pursued?

Since arriving in America from Pakistan in 1993, there have been many stops in different cities and many absences also. I have worked outside of the US recently, in Berlin and Laos, and even back in Pakistan. Art remains a way of observing the world and bringing into effect a process that creates meaning for me. I am interested in recorded histories and their paths of evolution in terms of what gets culled and elaborated. What is usually left out is the space imagination fills in. Drawing upon literature, political and national histories, art history, media and language, and lived experience, I find shifting geographical locations compelling. The indisputable concept of plural identity versus the assertion of a monolithic one, the fear of the other, politicised ideas of patriotism, constantly evolving truths and all the bizarre shifts between reality and perception are but some of the elements that provide paradox, humour, irony and material for me. I am just as interested in these notions now as I was in 1985 when I first started making work.

Fereshteh Daftari

To change the subject, could you elaborate on your use of text as well as some of the major works that have attracted your attention such as *Sinxay*, the national epic poem of Laos?

Shahzia Sikander

In general, I am interested in the segregation of text and image that has been the plight of many illustrated manuscripts. I am also intrigued by the contemporary perception of Arabic script which elicits fear and is stigmatised in certain circles – it is not recommended reading material on a plane. In my work however, I revisit the tradition where text incited awe and admiration but not fear, where it was used for its visual or formal power. Although trained in calligraphy the use of text in my work often morphs into images and motifs.

Texts that I continually return to range from writings by Sadat Hasan Manto – a writer whose fiction examines the dismal social climate around the partition of India and Pakistan and highlights the post-partition reality of the subcontinent – to Paul Auster's 'New York Trilogy' and his notion of deceptive and shifting identities. Other memorable texts are Joseph Beuys's lecture, *Energy Plan for the Western Man* alongside Arundhati Roy's *Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free)* and especially the classical form of Urdu poetry of the 19th century, known as the Ghazal, a form derived from the Persian language. It was recited tirelessly and with great devotion in all literary and non-literary circles. Another aspect of Urdu poetry

is revolutionary poetry – a philosophical and critical launch to combat the colonial forces and mindset. Iqbal's writings, for instance, challenge man to mobilise his potential via a journey fuelled by imagination.

I am also interested in the concept of translation because of the distance or the gap it can create from the original. I am thinking here of my understanding of the national literary classic in Laos known as *Sinxay*. What captivated me in the translation from the original Pali was the visual dimension of the narrative and its ongoing survival through oral tradition. It was a dizzying experience recalling magic realism (Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, García Márquez), on par with the *Odyssey* or the *Hamzanama*, *Sinxay* is an open-ended system of information which inspired several of my works including the drawing series *Narrative as Dissolution* (2007–8).

See p. 12, 26

Fereshteh Daftari

Can you discuss some visual artists whose works have touched you?

Shahzia Sikander

Many artists have resonated with me at different times. Regarding ideas of capturing loss, I admire Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke and William Kentridge. Others, such as Cornelia Parker and James Turrell, even though very different from each other, have struck me for the way their intervention impacts or transforms space in much unexpected ways. The clarity of Ed Ruscha's and the fluidity of Raymond Pettibon's drawings are other qualities I find relevant. Pettibon excels in tackling pop culture with as much ease as he accesses his own subconscious. Bhupen Khakar and David Hockney are two artists who were helpful for me when I began looking at the depiction of space in Persian Safavid painting. They opened up the exploration of space from a personal, psychological standpoint. Francis Alÿs' use of repetition as a strategy is also of interest – how every repeated action, gesture or re-enactment in his work yields multiple readings.

Fereshteh Daftari

In harmony with your creative process, your 'chase', you have always been just as interested in types or generic characters – such as the Gopis – as you have been in specific individuals or portraiture. Can you discuss your new work in relation to this?

Shahzia Sikander

By isolating the Gopi character I emphasised its potential to cultivate new associations. The split from its feminine origin is indicative of my interest in exploring the space of sexuality and eroticism within a certain overt and controlled

system of representation. The introduction of anthropomorphic forms came about when I started to take apart Eva Hesse's work as a framing device back in 1993, as well as my exploration of the feminine via Cixous and Kristeva. In my miniature painting *Utopia* (2003), I take the generic representations of angels from Safavid painting and juxtapose them with an American flag appropriated from Jasper Johns. Removed from context these disparate simulacra are brought together to declare an event yet to happen.

See p. 41–51

As for portraiture, most recently the *Monks and Novices Series* (2006–8) from Laos, I use it to navigate a cultural terrain that remains inaccessible to foreigners. Using simple and inexpensive materials, graphite and paper, the portraits are intended to be intensely precise and yet ethereal. They appear both passive and aggressive. They pay homage to the personality of each novice and monk who otherwise, in the gaze of tourists, are lost in a line of uniformity and anonymity. I made the drawings with the constant awareness of tourism and its negative presence, almost as a way to defend my sitters against foreign intrusion.

Fereshteh Daftari

War and violence have been recurrent and subtle themes in your work. Now serenity in the images of the monks comes across in an unprecedented manner. Can you elaborate on a perceived spirituality in your work at a time marked by partisan religions as well as a backlash against it?

Shahzia Sikander

Serenity here is only surface deep; underneath is chaos. In the portraits, composed faces belie the complexity of Laos where monks and novices have had to harness economic and political challenges. The tension or encounter between the quiet and the chaotic is the thrust of my work. I see it in all representations, foremost in our media-frenzied world. Through powerful images global media identifies, controls, edits and dictates at a dizzying speed but the instability beneath the layer of representation is fraught with contradictions. In such a world, spirituality for me is really about awareness, vigilance; transcending partisanship by constantly questioning one's own assumptions.



*Utopia*, 2003  
Watercolour, dry pigment and gouache on hand-prepared wasli paper