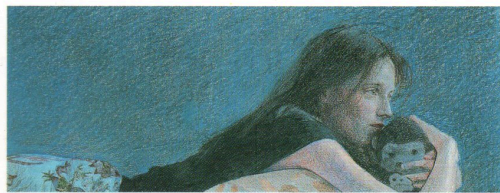
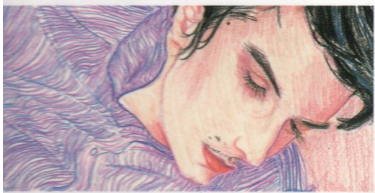
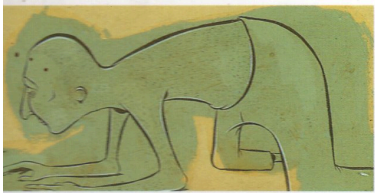
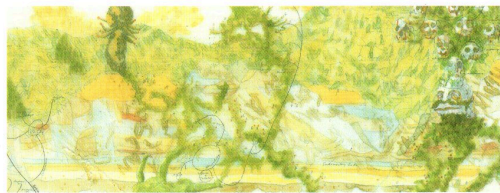
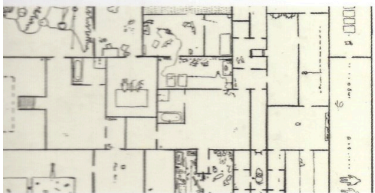
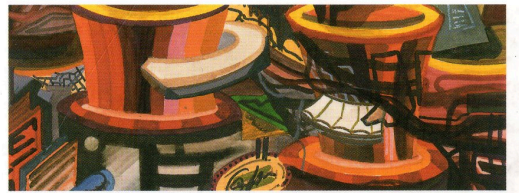


eight propositions



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Cover: Details of one work by each artist represented in *Drawing Now*, shown left to right, top to bottom, in the order in which they appear in the book

drawing now:
eight
propositions

laura hoptman

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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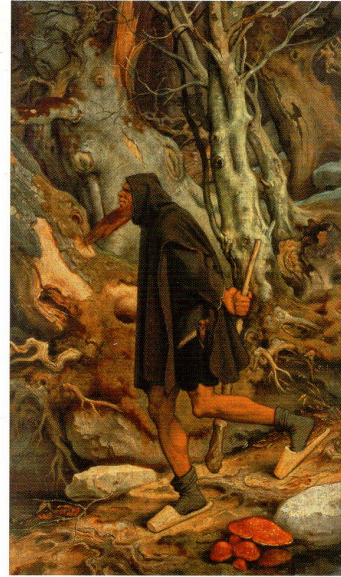
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SIX

popular
culture
and national
culture

kai althoff
kara walker
shahzia sikander
jockum nordström

1. Moritz von Schwind, *Rubezahl*.
1851–59. Oil on canvas,
25 7/8 x 15 1/8" (64.4 x 39.9 cm).
Schack-Galerie, Bayerische
Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich



The word “illustrative” has been somewhat derogatory in the context of art, because an illustration, as an image inspired by a text, implies an easy reliance on a source outside the artistic imagination! Like the equally pejorative “decorative,” “illustrative” also connotes a graphically lively, colorful kind of drawing produced for commercial purposes or entertainment. Above all, an illustration is readable, suggesting a lack of discursive complexity that has in the past sealed its banishment from the fine-art discourse. If the literary equivalent of the drawing might be the lyric poem, illustration finds its analogy in something closer to the ground: the narrative folktale, repository for the stock characters and the social and moral conventions of vernacular culture.²

A surprising amount of contemporary figurative drawing adopts the styles of vernacular illustration, most interestingly as a means to examine cultural traditions and reignite old myths or fashion new ones. Adopting culture-specific imagery, naive styles, or traditional techniques in full awareness of their sometimes dangerous connotations, Kai Althoff, Kara Walker, Shahzia Sikander, and Jockum Nordström embrace them with purpose and without sarcasm.

An artist in many mediums, including painting, sculpture, and installation, Althoff has found inspiration in German folk illustration and mid-nineteenth-century folkloric paintings by artists such as Carl Spitzweg and Moritz von Schwind (fig. 1). Althoff’s group of watercolors from the year 2000—intimate scenes of young men lounging in a field, gathering wood, or walking in a garden at sunset—bears a relationship to the middle-class sensibility

embodied by Spitzweg’s and von Schwind’s illustrative tableaux, even while its palette of purple blues, grays, and dusky pinks gives it a mysterious, even morbid air that is alien to nineteenth-century *Gemütlichkeit*. Althoff describes these works as “sad,”³ but that is too mild; these sweet, blurry depictions exude a profound sense of loss of and longing for some past time and place where youth and poetry cohabited harmoniously—some “pleasure garden of the young race”⁴ where Goethe, Schiller, and Fichte might roam the streets murmuring snatches of Novalis’s poetry.

Althoff’s earlier endeavors have included an album of classic German folk songs (if in heavy-metal interpretations), and it is tempting to see his drawings as expressing a subtle but insistent nostalgia for a specifically German past. But as their allusions to different German golden ages proliferate—they are Romantic in inspiration, somewhat Biedermeier in style, decidedly fin-de-siècle in tone, and suspiciously current in imagery—it becomes harder to see them as nostalgic for a particular era. Instead, in their depiction of brotherhood, nature, and village innocence, they seem less a lament for the past than a kind of hopeful prescription for the present.

Walker too mines history to comment on the present, but the past she retrieves is a shameful episode in history: the story of African enslavement in America. Working both in drawing and in room-scale installations of cut-paper silhouettes, and using imagery from sources as diverse as cartoons, minstrel shows, broadside advertising, and later soft-porn bodice-rippers about life on the old plantation, Walker

graphically depicts transgressive, sometimes horrific doings in an antic style that only emphasizes the disturbing nature of her subject.

"It took me a really long time to realize that what I like about art is pictures that tell stories that people can understand,"⁵ says Walker, explaining her fascination with the silhouette, an eighteenth-century technique stereotypically known in the American visual-arts tradition as an antebellum ladies' pastime. Although Walker's silhouettes are her best-known work, she has also produced many drawings, in charcoal, ink, pencil, and gouache. Once mainly preparatory works for silhouettes, they now stand on their own, combining old master virtuosity with a feel for caricature worthy of George Cruikshank or Robert Crumb. Some of these works are gathered in an ongoing series called "Negress Notes" (begun in 1995)—a half dozen folios of notebook-sized pen-and-ink drawings, sometimes accompanied by snatches of dialogue or narrative related by one "Miss K. Walker, a Free Negress of Noteworthy Talent." The "Negress Notes," like the silhouettes, are inspired by vernacular material—what Sydney Jenkins has called "bits of nineteenth-century pop culture," like children's-book illustrations, sign painting, and woodcuts.⁶ They have another nineteenth-century precedent in popular novelizations of the travails of slaves, supposedly told in the slave's "own voice" and published for white readers by antebellum abolitionists. Walker is interested, she says, in "truthful forms of historical fiction," and in using that "remove of history to access contemporary concerns."⁷

In "Negress Notes" and other projects Walker renarrates mythologized tales of slavery,

from the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to the movie *Mandingo* (1975), reclaiming them by telling them as a victor, not a victim. Sikander, a Pakistani artist living in New York, is similarly involved in using traditional methods to retell old stories. As an art student in Lahore, Sikander stood out through her focus not on contemporary art but on traditional Asian miniature painting. Fascinated by their craft orientation and labor-intensiveness, she became adept at figure styles from the Persian, Mughal, Kangra, Deccan, and Rajput traditions. "The consensus was that miniature painting was a stylized and faded genre that had more to do with craft and technique than genuine expression. But, clearly, we have some relationship to the form even if it is just nostalgia," she has said.⁸ Over the past several years, whether as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design or as an artist based in Houston and now in New York, Sikander retains the materials, techniques, styles, and even some of the characters of traditional Asian miniature painting but in a radically altered form. Addressing a "timeless" tradition in which rigorous rules govern everything from the preparation of the paper to the poses of the figures, Sikander creates altogether contemporary work not by breaking conventions but by inverting them.

In Sikander's miniatures, the figures of women have invaded an art that, in its Muslim incarnations, once depicted only men. Hindu goddesses peak shyly from behind transparent Muslim veils, and references to Western myths and folktales, from Rapunzel to Red Riding Hood, infiltrate scenes of Hindu deities. Sikander usually sticks close to the formal conventions of her chosen stylistic traditions, but in a striking

pair of delicate pencil drawings from 1997 she makes a definitive break with them as well. Detailed but lacking color or other decorative embellishment, the drawings would be considered unfinished according to the codes of miniature painting, but if these female figures on white grounds do seem in a way naked, they also seem liberated from the heavily decorated backgrounds that in other works give them context but also the aura of the past. Some dancing, some smiling, they fairly beam their sensuality, like the contemporary women they are.

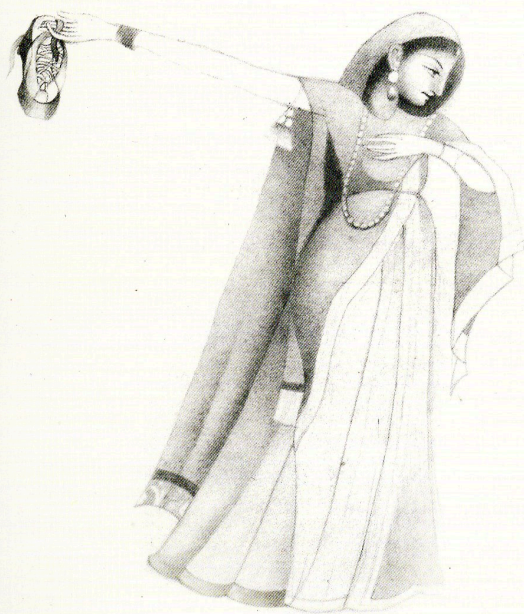
Where many critics see a clash of cultures in Sikander's work, the historian Faisal Devji perceives complex dialogues among cultures and religions and the discovery of common ground through shared myths. Remarking that Sikander "neither combines Hindu and Muslim images into a homogenous national culture, nor arranges them side by side to conjure a liberal pluralism," Devji argues that she allows each image to remain exotic for its opposing viewer, in a kind of "exoticism of mutual intrusion." Far from illustrating difference, he writes, Sikander "is in fact stating...that the failure of translation, the failure to find a universal language, fuels desire."⁹

The notion that a foreign image, technique, or style might fuel desire rather than incite critique is illuminating in reference not only to Sikander but to many artists who insert elements of a vernacular or local tradition into fine-art production. Nordström's untutored-looking images could not look more different from Sikander's precise miniatures, but both oeuvres simultaneously exemplify a devotion to a traditional style and a rethinking of it in terms of hybridity, mystery, and desire. In addition to making art,

Nordström has been a successful children's-book illustrator in his native Sweden. Although his drawings and cut-paper collages only cursorily resemble his commercial work, their style illuminates his interest in art both for and by children.

In his collages Nordström consciously retains a clumsy pictographic style; the drawings are more finely detailed but similarly primitive. The imagery in both kinds of work — stylized trees, elfin figures — has the look of folk illustration, but what folk might that be? The collages could be construed as vaguely Nordic, but only through imaginative sympathy; no details argue for this placement, nor can we identify the iconography or recognize the characters. In fact Nordström seems to have created his own cast of folkloric characters, none of them corresponding to a known type. Arranged in poetically ambiguous or even bizarre or surreal tableaux bearing no resemblance to any folk tradition but one created by Nordström himself, these collages gleefully destroy just what is most treasured in the folktale: its familiarity.

1. See Kimerly Rorschach, *Blake to Beardsley: The Artist as Illustrator*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Rosenbach Museum and Library, 1988).
2. See David Blamires, *Happily Ever After: Fairytale Books through the Ages*, exh. cat. (Manchester: John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1992).
3. Kai Althoff, in an interview with the author, June 2001.
4. Gert Schiff, *German Masters of the Nineteenth Century: Paintings and Drawings from the Federal Republic of Germany*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1981), p. 10.
5. Kara Walker, quoted in Sydney Jenkins, "Slice of Hand: The Silhouette Art of Kara Walker," in *Look Away Look Away Look Away* (Annandale-on-Hudson: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 1995), p. 17.
6. See Jenkins, "Slice of Hand," pp. 25–26.
7. Walker, quoted in *Kara Walker: An Interview with Larry Rinder*, exh. brochure (San Francisco: California College of Arts and Crafts, 1998), n.p.
8. Shahzia Sikander, quoted in Homi Bhabha, "Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha," in *Shahzia Sikander*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998), p. 17.
9. Faisal Devji, "Translated Pleasures," in *ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.



106. Shahzia Sikander
*In Your Head and
Not on My Feet.* 1997
Pencil on paper,
10¼ x 9½"
(27.2 x 24.2 cm)



105. Shahzia Sikande
*Where Lies the
Perfect Fit.* 1997
Pencil on paper,
10 1/4 x 7 3/4"
(27.2 x 19.7 cm)



107. Shahzia Sikander
The Resurgence of Islam. 1999
 Vegetable color, dry pigment,
 watercolor, gold leaf, and tea
 on hand-prepared "wasli" paper,
 15¼ x 19¾" (40 x 50.2 cm)



UNITY
FAITH
DISCIPLINE



WHO'S VEILED
ANYWAY?

DAUGHTER
OF THE EAST?

SO THAT IN THE END WE BELIEVE
THAT ALL OF THE PROPHETS WHO CAME FORTH
ON THIS EARTH TAUGHT THE SAME RELIGION...
I AM A MUSLIM... AND IT DOES SAY IN
THE KORAN THAT THIS RELIGION WILL
OVERCOME ALL OTHER RELIGIONS.
-MALCOLM X

CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM WAS ENCOURAGED
IN THE U.S.A. BY REAGAN AND BUSH. THEY ALSO USED
IT TO FIGHT AGAINST THE SOVIET UNION AND
COMMUNISM.
-NAWAL EL SAADAWI

TRUST
إيمان الله بكتبه
وأنبيائه