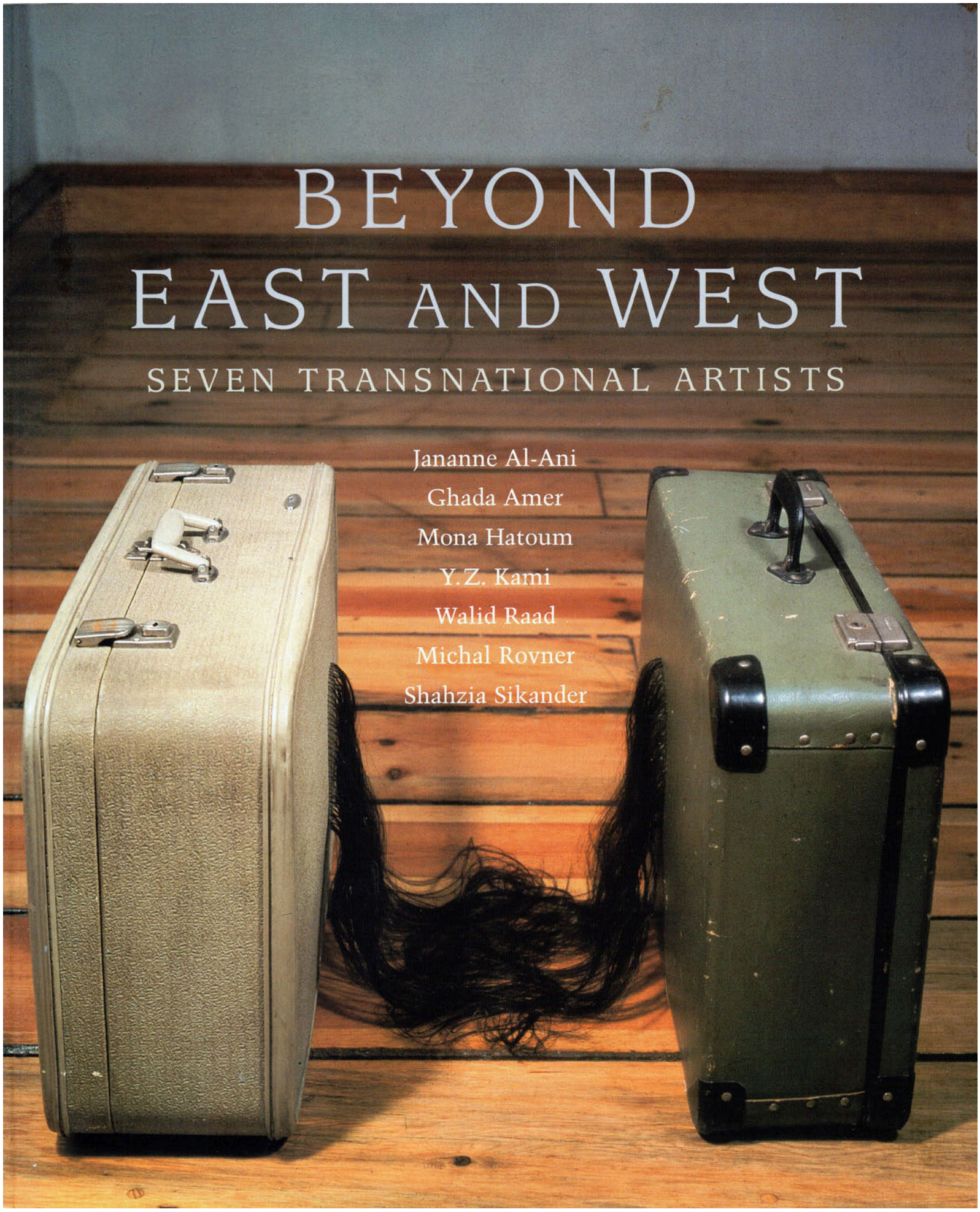
BEYOND
EAST AND WEST
SEVEN TRANSNATIONAL ARTISTS
Jananne Al-Ani
Ghada Amer
Mona Hatoum
Y.Z. Kami
Walid Raad
Michal Rovner
Shahzia Sikander

EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

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CONTENTS

BEYOND EAST AND WEST: SEVEN TRANSNATIONAL ARTISTS

David O'Brien

THE ARTISTS IN THIS EXHIBITION come from the region stretching from Egypt to Pakistan, but they have lived much of their lives in Europe or the United States. We have chosen to exhibit them together because they all draw on their experience of displacement and knowledge of multiple cultures to offer alternative visions of the contemporary world. They have crossed or collapsed political, cultural, and religious borders, and disrupted conventional and stereotypical representations of time and place, of history and geography. Their art offers new kinds of inter-cultural understanding.

The art in this show addresses various experiences of travel, exile, diaspora, alienation and integration, feelings of longing and belonging, memories of places and people, encounters with divergent views of sexuality and gender, alternate political understandings of the world, and cultural practices that both divide and unite us. It draws on and speaks to multiple cultural traditions and attitudes, in some instances in ambivalent, hybrid, or universalist forms, and in other instances by giving voice to the specific concerns of local communities or pointing to existing cultural antagonisms. These artists address the vexing problem of pursuing our mutual interests as human beings while respecting the differences that divide us, even as they point to the practical difficulties of this ideal on the ground and engage in charged political debates.

These artists are cosmopolitan, but they preserve important particularities from their individual histories and those of their homelands. SHAHZIA SIKANDER has explained her attraction to historical styles of South Asian miniature painting by stating, "I was interested in an art form whose present was in the past."[1] While her iconography is emphatically cross-cultural and hybrid, her historicizing style carries rich, culturally specific associations that spur us to reflect on present continuities and discontinuities with the past. GHADA AMER's paintings of autoerotic or lesbian sex engage familiar debates about feminism and sexuality, but they also raise very different debates when viewed in an Egyptian or Muslim context. When WALID RAAD imagines the historian Fadl Fakhouri's reaction to the Lebanese civil wars in his installation *The Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness is Dead: Fadl Fakhouri File in the Atlas Group Archive* (cat. 15), he helps us to recognize the narrowness of American coverage of these events and the many different histories that might be written about them. Some of the works in the exhibition invite those unfamiliar with the region from Egypt to Pakistan to learn something of its history and culture. Sikander's *The Resurgence of Islam* (cat. 21) confronts us with a

complex recent history of Islam and refers to such figures as Benazir Bhutto, Nawal el Saadawi, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. To begin to appreciate why, for example, Benazir Bhutto appears above a banner inscribed with "Daughter of the East?" and wears a dupatta formed from the American flag, it helps to know that this former prime minister of Pakistan penned an autobiography entitled *Daughter of the East*, even though her education came in elite, English-speaking schools and at Harvard and Oxford, and that the man who appears above her, Zia ul-Haq, deposed and executed her father, the elected prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, worked for an "Islamization" of Pakistan, and received significant financial support from the United States under Ronald Reagan.

At the same time, much of the art in this exhibition makes the artists' personal experience of crossing cultures accessible to and compelling for a broad audience. MONA HATOUM uses the devices of Minimalism and Surrealism to transform her individual perceptions of displacement and alienation into abstracted, generalized forms. JANANNE AL-ANI's videos appear to recount the personal experience of her family, but they contain few details of place and time and few references to specific cultures or people, making it easy to follow their narratives and empathize with their characters' encounters with war and separation from loved ones. MICHAL ROVNER and Y.Z. KAMI help us to envision our common humanity, but through opposite means: social relations in Rovner's videos take place in a world devoid of signs of race, nationality, gender, or ethnicity, while Kami's painstakingly particularized portraits of anonymous individuals find beauty even in the most humble of subjects. The very fact that these artists attempt to treat such subjects as intercultural understanding, displacement, alienation, and war in general terms helps to create and confirm a transnational public whose concerns extend beyond those of either local communities or the global networks and markets envisioned by transnational corporations. There is much in this art that impresses upon us an awareness of our common nature and encourages us to surmount the customs, interests, and other particularities that divide us. In short, this art helps us to recognize the possible common ground for an equitable global community.

We selected the title *Beyond East and West* in order to both recognize the importance that the concepts of "East" and "West" have had for understanding the intercultural relations at issue in the exhibition and emphasize their present inadequacies.[2] East and West have been used since antiquity to conjure up, at one and the same time, geography and difference. They have referred to divisions between the Greeks and the Persians, between parts of the Roman Empire and branches of Christianity, and between the Christian and Islamic worlds. Beginning in the sixteenth century, European geographers began to use the East broadly to refer to lands stretching from the Mediterranean to Japan. By the eighteenth century, the

notion of Western civilization had come to mean the forms of historical development in Europe and its colonial settlements associated with progress, refinement, and order. Over the course of the nineteenth century, with the growth of colonialism and world travel, the East came to stand for many different and often contradictory ideals: a world of exoticism and escape from the constraints of modernity, but also a world in need of a civilizing mission; a land of fanaticism and barbarism, but also of enduring religions and complex traditions. In the same period, the West became virtually synonymous with modernity.

The notion of modernity was applied irregularly to describe social, cultural, and political changes across the globe over the course of the twentieth century, confounding older distinctions between East and West. The West was also used to designate the capitalist world, and the East the communist. Such developments gave rise to convoluted geographies: the Soviet bloc was in the East, but Japan was sometimes in the West, and sometimes in the East, depending on whether economics, politics, religion, or culture were at issue. The notion of the East has fluctuated enormously depending on who has defined it, and for what purpose. The East's identity has been so vague and shifting partly because it has served as a foil for defining Western civilization. As Edward Said puts it, the East is the West's "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."[3] The evident weaknesses of using the East to refer empirically to a particular place or culture has diminished its importance in academic discourse today, but it remains a surprisingly resilient concept in popular discourse. The West continues to be invoked by scholars and the popular media alike despite the many alternative ways of dividing its cultures, economies, and governments. The fact that commentators at present speak readily of a single West in regard to the Middle East despite great foreign policy differences between, for example, the United States, Britain, France, and Germany suggests how much is at stake in maintaining the idea of a Western civilization united against other civilizations. We live in a dangerous historical moment when cultural commentators continue to represent the East and the West as clashing civilizations, and when dormant stereotypes and prejudices about the East are being revived with little awareness of their origins.

Though the manner in which these terms are sometimes employed may suggest otherwise, East and West are now more than ever representations attached only loosely to actual places. They are products of the imagination, and their contours cannot readily be drawn on a map. Yet, Western Europe and the United States are almost always at the heart of constructions of the West, and the region from Egypt to Pakistan falls squarely within the land conjured up by most contemporary understandings of the East, especially those that use the term to designate explicitly an Islamic world in competition with the West. Indeed, this region corresponds closely to the "Middle" East.

This exhibition engages with both historical and current constructions of East and West; some of the work addresses these constructions explicitly. We have chosen artists who have crossed the divisions they mark and whose work helps us to see the shortcomings of these categories. These artists explore ways of negotiating cultural differences, but they also point to experiences that cut across cultures. For example, the work of Al-Ani and Amer reminds us that while gender and sexuality are differently constructed in the various lands in which they have lived, repression of women's rights and homosexuality exists in all of them. It reminds us of the hypocrisy of those who use the oppression of women as an argument for intervention in foreign countries while doing nothing to attack it at home.

A number of recent exhibitions have focused on artists from East Asia and especially from Africa whose work asks us to think across cultural divisions. The region covered here has, however, received comparatively little attention, despite the wealth of talented artists it has produced and its prominence in world events. Perhaps this has been to avoid the controversial politics of the region. But the lack of attention partly reflects the fact that there are so many overlapping ways of conceptualizing the region's geography: the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, the Arab world, the Islamic world, the Mediterranean world, the Third World. The region is one of enormous national, religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Any empirical exploration of the region associated with the East will inevitably point up the differences kept uneasily together by the concept.

There are, of course, concrete features that unify the region from Egypt to Pakistan today: a struggle between secular and theocratic visions of the state, an intense awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a recent history marked by war, a long and current struggle with European and American domination. Much of the region also shares a common set of representations in American and European media, the very set of representations that is the East. Many of these themes are taken up in the work of these artists, as one would expect, but the exhibition's goal is not to define a culturally specific aesthetics or politics that unifies these artists, and certainly not to propagate an artistic movement. Rather, the exhibition focuses on a variety of cosmopolitan interpretations of displacement and intercultural experience by artists who have followed a specific trajectory.

Mona Hatoum has remarked: "I'm often asked the same question: What in your work comes from your own culture? As if I have a recipe and I can actually isolate the Arab ingredient, the woman ingredient, the Palestinian ingredient. People often expect tidy definitions of otherness, as if identity is something fixed and easily definable."[4] These comments remind us that an artist's land of origin is just part of the material from which she makes her art, and its role cannot be easily disentangled from the whole. They also reveal how much Hatoum's reception in Europe and the

United States, like that of the other artists in the show, has been conditioned, for better and worse, by an awareness of difference as summed up in the concepts of East and West. These artists have sometimes been pigeon-holed through their cultural and geographic origins, their art reduced to this aspect of their identity. It would, however, be equally distorting to eliminate such issues completely from discussions about contemporary art. We wish to perform a delicate dance: to explore the common trajectory and overlapping experiences of these artists while maintaining their diversity, to focus on cross-cultural themes while accepting that these are but one aspect of their art.

The remainder of this essay introduces the artists in the exhibition, highlighting the importance of cross-cultural experience to their art. These brief summaries cannot do justice to the full breadth and sophistication of their work, but they will, I hope, provide a point of entry for visitors to the exhibition unfamiliar with their work.

JANANNE AL-ANI

MUCH OF JANANNE AL-ANI'S EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY critiqued representations of the female body in Western art, and in particular the fetishization of women in Orientalist painting and photography. That concern can still be seen in her video *The King's Chamber* (cat. 2), originally shown in Lauderdale House, London, where Nell Gwynn, mistress of Charles II, reportedly lived. The small video screen offers the viewer a voyeuristic glimpse into a bathroom, where a woman disrobes, bathes, relaxes, reads, and sips wine. Though it is titillating, the absence of any explicitly erotic activity in the video continually undoes its promise of erotic pleasure. The woman reenacts many of the poses and activities commonly found in Orientalist images of harems, baths, almehs, and odalisques, yet, in a humorous reversal, the title and setting situate this woman not in the East, but in the king's chambers. The West, not the East, becomes the site of Orientalist fantasy.

Partly in response to the press coverage of the first Gulf War in the United Kingdom, which she felt was deceptive and misdirected, Al-Ani created a series of photographs in the mid 1990s that explored how the medium has shaped our view of the Arab world. In response to the second Gulf War Al-Ani has produced *Sounds of War* (cat. 4), a more direct critique of the celebratory, spectacular coverage common in mass media in Britain and the United States. The work is a soundtrack that juxtaposes the noises of various weapons with a canned response—applause, cheering, or booing.

Al-Ani's personal experience of displacement provided the inspiration for a number of video installations from the late 1990s. She was born in Kirkuk, Iraq, to an Irish mother and an Iraqi father, but she left with her family for Britain at the

FIG. 4
Michal Rovner, *Overhang*, 2000. Video projection on 17 windows of the Chase Manhattan Bank at 410 Park Avenue, New York.
Courtesy of the artist

autonomous activities, but in greater or lesser relation to a larger group. At times, too, the figures resemble animals or the blurry images of chromosomes viewed through a microscope: they appear to belong more to nature than to culture.

Rovner's art can be productively compared to classical history painting during its heyday, when the antique dress of the figures was meant to remove all signs of class, nation, and social rank in order to focus the viewers' attention on a moral lesson true, in theory, for all people. Rovner's figures have been stripped of all signs of nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. They encourage the viewer to think about human conflict in the most general of terms—to forget, for a moment, the particularities that divide us and to focus instead on our common humanity. Rovner's videos also frequently emulate the public address of history painting in the grand manner: they are intended to be seen in public places and to engage the interest of a broad audience. Rovner's large still images, sometimes printed using the same technology as billboards, retain this generality and scale. Rovner's art lacks the didacticism typical of classical history painting, but like those painters truest to the spirit of the high genre, she presumes a broad public seeking to recognize its common interests through art.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER

WHEN SHAHZIA SIKANDER WAS WORKING toward a B.F.A. at the National College of Art in Lahore, Pakistan, Modernism dominated the curriculum. Miniature painting was generally considered an ossified practice, kept alive by tourism and of little relevance to the contemporary world. (This fact alone demonstrates how absurd it is today to continue to ascribe Modernism to the West.) There remained, however, one teacher in the National College of Arts who taught miniature painting, and in a rigorously traditional manner. The art form appealed to Sikander for a variety of reasons: because of its precise, labor-intensive techniques whose mastery required submission to a difficult training, but also because of its rich history and many different schools in a variety of cultures. From early on she recognized that she could play with the historical, cultural, and religious associations carried by its conventions and iconography—she recognized, in short, that there was a conceptual aspect to the miniature tradition. She began to mix styles, combining, for example, elements of Muslim and Hindu schools of miniature painting. In Pakistan, this was, of course, a pointed gesture, as it melded the iconographic traditions of religious groups that have often clashed violently.

Sikander brings the past into dialogue with the present by mixing traditional iconographies of miniature painting with images of the contemporary world. We are familiar with heroic accounts of avant-garde artists who have broken with tradition in order to embody new, modern experiences in painting. Sikander's art also operates in the opposite direction, using the past to critique the present. We see premodern societies of tolerance and diversity, premodern rituals that provided stability and meaning in life, sexual practices that do not fit with current norms. In the computer animation *SpiNN* (fig. 5), for example, she emulates the court style of Akbar, a Moghul emperor noted for his pluralism and efforts to blend Turkic, Arabic, Persian, and Hindu traditions. The angels in the animation are also products of hybridity insofar as they are styled after the Safavid school, which adopted elements of Christian devotional art and Chinese paintings. More examples of such hybrid figures can be seen in *The Resurgence of Islam* (cat. 21), where, in the top right, an armed Hindu goddess wears a veil, or in the lower left, where a winged horse (a hybrid beast found in the iconography of numerous cultures) flies across pictorial fields. The hybridity of this last figure is complex, for it is both a symbol of poetic inspiration and the trademark of the Mobil Corporation.

After Sikander came to the United States to study at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992, American motifs became common in her imagery, and she included Modernism more frequently as one of the historical styles referenced by her work. Her engagement with the contemporary and the transnational is especially evident in *The Resurgence of Islam*, where bold images of modern motifs and individuals disrupt the neat borders and delicate decorative imagery of painting. In the

FIG. 5
Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, 2003. Computer animation on LCD screen.
Courtesy of the artist and Brent Sikkema, New York

left panel, Liberty takes on Muslim and Hindu attributes, and the motto "In God We Trust" is juxtaposed with the Koranic refrain, "Then which of your Lord's blessings will you deny?" in the original Arabic. A veiled woman holds a sign reading, "Who's veiled anyway?" which, in conjunction with other imagery in the painting, suggests that concealed motives lie behind American cosmopolitanism. The guns pointing back and forth between Liberty and the Ayatollah Khomeini seem like a sly reminder of the Iran-Contra affair, in which the Reagan administration secretly sold arms to Iran and used the proceeds illegally to support right-wing guerillas in

Nicaragua. The imagery is rich in such commentary. This painting is exceptional in Sikander's oeuvre because it was commissioned by the *New York Times,* who asked the artist to address the recent history of Islam. She chose to include an enormously diverse range of figures, from the iconoclastic Salman Rushdie to the fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini. Special place is given to a disparate group of nationalist political figures whose visions have either complicated or facilitated the unity of Islam worldwide. Sikander also draws attention to women who have played important roles in causes related to Islam and pointedly offers more quotations by the feminist Nawal el Saadawi than by any other figure.

Much of Sikander's imagery asks us to think across cultures. *Maligned Monsters I* (cat. 22) and *Maligned Monsters II* (cat. 23) address cross-cultural perceptions of art by juxtaposing nude female figures from Indian and European traditions. The title of these prints refers to Partha Mitter's pathbreaking book *Much Maligned Monsters,* which explores European reactions to Hindu art.[7] Mitter demonstrates that, far from offering an objective view of South Asian art, European historians often judged it in relation to aesthetic norms based on classical Greek sculpture, which they assumed to be universal. They therefore found it decadent, over-ornate, even monstrous. Sikander's *Maligned Monsters I* intertwines the famous nude from Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegory of Love* (National Gallery, London) with a voluptuous Hindu figure, while in *Maligned Monsters II* a Hindu figure appears to place her arm around a classical Venus Pudica. These works playfully challenge the separation of East and West, in the first instance by pairing an Indian sculpture with a Mannerist nude that has itself been denigrated for its distortions and decorative qualities, and in the second by likening a Hindu figure to a canonical Greek nude. The images go still further by challenging traditional sexual norms and suggesting possible cross-cultural erotic liaisons, particularly in the relative placement of the figures in *Maligned Monsters I,* and in Venus's delicate insertion of her finger into her companion's necklace.

Despite its mix of iconographies and period styles, it would be a mistake to read Sikander's art as a translation of signs from various cultures into one homogenized language, or an easy celebration of hybridity. Many of the motifs and styles with which she plays are unique to specific cultural traditions; they defy translation from one artistic idiom to another, and Sikander makes no effort to translate them. Rather than sacrifice the specific beauties of a local culture in favor of a universal language (the sort of universal language Modernism has occasionally purported to offer), Sikander confronts viewers with unassimilated forms of expression. The formal beauties of her work—its detailed technique, spatial plays, sensuous forms, and jewel-like colors—and its rich grounding in tradition invite us to appreciate, to cross cultural boundaries, but we constantly run up against images that cannot

easily be interpreted. If hybridity is explored and championed in Sikander's work, so too is an acceptance and appreciation of difference on its own terms.

These artists adapt some of the central devices of progressive art to new purposes in order to address the types of experiences engendered by their cross-cultural movement. Their reliance on artistic practices developed in such places as New York, London, and Paris—and the fact that they have made their careers in an art world centered in such places—might easily lead them to a form of cosmopolitanism less global in perspective than American or European. Yet their art suggests that they are seeking different forms of address and broader audiences than those that have held sway in these centers. Their work provides an arena for competing interpretations and understandings of the world. A veil in the hands of these artists might appear at one moment like an instrument of patriarchy, at another moment like a weapon of colonial liberation or an assertion of resistance, and at another moment like a mark of hybridity. They offer critiques of longstanding discourses of East and West and important reflections on the significance of memory and former homes in their mobile lives. They give form to the joys and difficulties of cross-cultural experience in the contemporary world and provoke sober meditations on the ways in which the ruins of the past function in the present. They inform us about a variety of local communities even as they make these worlds graspable to a wide variety of viewers.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank Rachael DeLue, Marcel Franciscono, David Prochaska, Dana Rush, Zohreh Sullivan, and Tom Turino for their advice and suggestions.

Notes

1. "Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha," in *Shahzia Sikander,* exh. cat. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1999), p. 16.
2. Edward Said (New York: Vintage, 1994; originally published 1978). For a good selection of reading both elaborating and criticizing Said's views, see *Orientalism: A Reader,* ed. Alexander Lyon Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 2000). See also Edmund Burke, III and David Prochaska, eds., *After the Colonial Turn: History, Theory and Orientalism* (University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming).
3. *Orientalism,* p. 2.
4. Quoted in Janine Antoni, "Interview with Mona Hatoum," reprinted in Laura Steward Heon, ed., *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance* (North Adams, MA: MASS MOCA, 2001), pp. 19–32 at p. 19.
5. Rosa Martinez, "Interview with Ghada Amer," *Make, the Magazine of Women's Art* no. 92 (2002), pp. 72–74.
6. See Fatimah Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam,* trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991).
7. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; originally published 1977).

SHAHZIA SIKANDER

"As a student [at the Rhode Island School of Design] I remember people not giving me much feedback because they felt they didn't know the proper way to address my work. It's not that people in Pakistan know better; perhaps a handful of art historians may know all the styles and motifs I am using. I am playing with things that happened many, many years ago, over which nobody has ownership and to which anybody has access. It is not specific to Pakistani culture.

A lot of miniature painting, even for me, remains very insular, unapproachable, and distant. It's not accessible because it's too dated and distant. My interest in miniature, as an artist, begins when I am attracted to a painting for some reason. I am trying to discover what aspect of it makes it so compelling. And in there are issues concerning aesthetics and beauty.

I am very committed to understanding the miniature tradition much better. There has not been a lot of good critical writing about it. In that respect, for me, there's a lot of freedom, because you're navigating things that have never been addressed. But at the same time, I feel that there's a lot about miniature painting that can't be translated—that can't be explained in words or expressed in another visual language—and I like that aspect. Any translation also reveals a consciousness of who is going to consume the picture, so there is already a given that the audience needs an explanation of the picture, that their own interpretation is not trustworthy."

Quotation taken from conversations David O'Brien had with the artist during the summer of 2003.

21 · *The Resurgence of Islam*, 1998–99
Vegetable pigment, watercolor, tea, gold leaf on hand-prepared *wasli* paper, 15 3/4 × 19 3/4".
Collection of the artist

22 · *Maligned Monsters I*, 2000
Aquatint, sugarlift with chine collé, 29 3/4 × 22 1/4".
Michael Steinberg Editions, courtesy Jenkins Sikkema, New York

23 · *Maligned Monsters II*, 2000
Aquatint, sugarlift with chine collé, 29 3/4 × 22 1/4".
Michael Steinberg Editions, courtesy Jenkins Sikkema, New York

24 · *Nemesis*, 2003
Computer animated video projection.
Courtesy of the artist and Brent Sikkema, New York

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