

An abstract painting by Shahzia Sikander. The central focus is a profile of a face, rendered in shades of blue and white, with a dark, textured area around the eyes and nose. To the left, there are stylized, coral-like or leaf-like structures in shades of purple, blue, and orange. The background is a mix of light blue, white, and green, with a dark, textured area at the top. The overall style is expressive and layered, with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER

First published on the occasion of the exhibition *Shahzia Sikander*
Curator: Rachel Kent

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
27 November 2007 – 17 February 2008

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Kent, Rachel.
Shahzia Sikander.

Bibliography.
ISBN 9781921034220 (pbk.).

1. Sikander, Shahzia, 1969- . 2. Artists - Biography. I.
Title.

702.81

© Museum of Contemporary Art Limited, the artist, author and
photographers.

Copyright for the texts in this publication is held by the Museum of
Contemporary Art and the author. Views expressed in these texts are not
necessarily those of the publisher.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing permitted under the
copyright act, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system or transmitted by any means electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the
publisher.

All images are courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York
and © the artist unless otherwise stated.

Cover images:
51 Ways of Looking, Group B: #7
2004
graphite, ink on paper
30.5 x 22.9 cm
Private collection, New York

Land-Escapes, Series 3: #3
2005
ink and gouache on prepared paper
15.2 x 25.4 cm
LAC Collection

All images on chapter title pages from the series
Plush Brush
2003
ink on gouache on paper
38.1 x 30.48 cm

'INTIMATE IMMENSITY':
SHAHZIA SIKANDER'S
MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ART



Shahzia Sikander is an artist who engages with historical tradition and contemporary visual motifs that repeat and reinvent themselves across media. Known for her embrace of miniaturist painting in the Indo-Persian style, she interweaves references to the past alongside playful, sometimes irreverent reflections on everyday life and its forms. At the core of this process is a longstanding investigation, not of narrative structure, but the process of painting itself: of compositional, colour, and spatial relationships. In these works, she notes, 'the formal concerns are primary and the meaning is secondary, or arbitrary'.¹

Sikander has described her adoption of the miniaturist tradition as an 'act of defiance' while studying at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan in the late 1980s.² A form that held little interest in the painting department of that time, miniature painting was an unconventional choice that conjured associations with imperialism on one hand and, on the other, deeply rooted local traditions of story-telling and popular mythology. Seeking to reconcile historical tradition with a contemporary significance, Sikander focussed upon structural elements within the miniatures that she painstakingly reproduced – elements usually sidelined or ignored in favour of romanticised narratives. Her works of the early 1990s combined figuration with increasingly non-linear, open-ended compositions. Through them she explored compositional constructs such as repetition, the placement of colour across the surface of the work, the use of a flattened, stacked perspective, and the relationship between image and border.

Sikander left Lahore in 1993 to undertake graduate studies in painting and printmaking in the United States, at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. There she continued to develop her visual vocabulary, incorporating local referents alongside fragments of text and repeated abstract motifs such as the grid, the circle, and concentric radiating lines, often overlaid across the image surface. This push and pull between figuration and abstraction, line and formlessness have continued into the present, while the use of layering gives an added dimension, both physically and conceptually.

While Sikander's primary materials include graphite, ink and gouache upon paper, she has also worked with digital animation since 2001, setting her miniatures into physical motion. Images break apart and re-form in new hybrid permutations, revealing the underlying instability of representation. She has also experimented with scale since the late 1990s, shifting between the intimacy of the miniature and the bodily proximity it requires for viewing, to much larger works on paper and even murals painted directly onto the gallery wall, the latter requiring viewers to stand back at a distance. A state of constant flux is evident in Sikander's works, carefully delineated areas of figuration standing in sharp contrast to blooms and stains of pigment that bleed into the paper, or explosions of abstract colour that encompass large parts of the wall or screen. The notion of transformation – from one form into another, human into deity, predator into prey, landscape into colour-

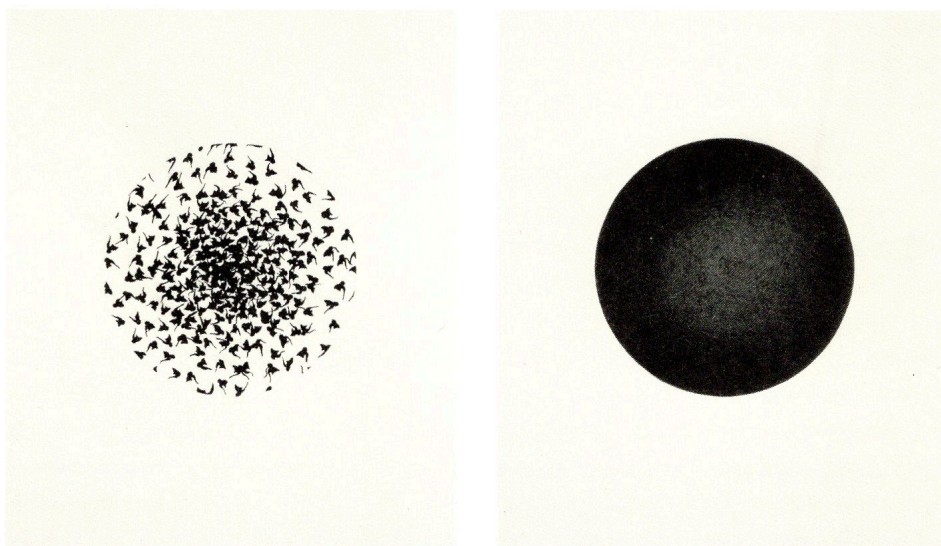
51 Ways of Looking, Group E: #24, #25
2004
graphite, ink on paper
30.5 x 22.9 cm each work
Collection of Lori Spector and Max Lang,
New York

field, constructed image into free-floating abstraction – lies at the core of Sikander’s art, suggesting a slippage between meaning and form.

The use of layering is significant for Sikander’s art in many ways. 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 between 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. Thus a traditional floral border might become a recurring visual theme within the central part of a given painting, while a favoured motif such as the turban might appear as a decorative element within its border, replete with jaunty ornamental feathers.

Images within images, borders within borders: all form active constituents in Sikander’s art of transformation. The notion of layering applies itself particularly well to the recent animated works, which rely on the repeated imposition and revision of visual information, frame by frame, to create the illusion of movement. Much of this is done by hand – requiring painstaking adjustment after adjustment – as well as with digital manipulation. Using tools such as Photoshop, layers of visual information are added and subtracted, modified and extended. Where the miniature paintings depend upon accumulated information within the space of one static page, like a palimpsest, the animations open this process out like a fan, constantly shifting and rotating as though viewed through a prism.

Although Sikander has produced many singular miniature paintings over time, she also works in wider series, creating extended bodies of work in which the relationship between



forms is developed and reworked. In some series, visual motifs are presented in single layers across multiple sheets, like a row of building blocks, rather than superimposed as multiple layers upon the one sheet. In this respect they literally lay bare the process of accumulation, presenting visual data as sequential evidence rather than abundance. The graphic series '51 Ways of Looking' (2004) illustrates this process well, with particular motifs and geometric forms repeated in ever more complex permutations over the fifty-one pages of the title. Created as a series of discrete groupings, each themed according to a particular concern (the border or frame; the use of circles; the grid; the creation of the 'composite' image from singular forms), '51 Ways of Looking' represents something of a visual guide or blueprint to Sikander's wider practice. In this series one image leads to the next, then to the next, and so forth. An ornamental frame or border might break apart over successive representations to become everything that was once contained within its centre; or a circle may become a void, which in turn comes to symbolise the universe and all matter within it, spinning into a hungry, bottomless vortex.

In all of Sikander's works, certain motifs recur as though in a dream, often floating and dissociated from their origin or source. They include forms associated with femininity, masculinity, divinity and ornamentation: among them the figures and stylised hair-dos of the 'gopi' devotees of Hindu god Krishna; the turban with its lavishly feathered plumes; winged figures, often headless, that are reminiscent of Classical statuary or angels; and decorative headdresses, costumes and high-heeled shoes. Rather than become confined by a politics of cultural representation or gender, however, Sikander has instead focussed upon wider notions of transformation as her subject, irrespective of associated meaning. Working across diverse cultural references – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Classical, mythological and folkloric – as well as popular culture and art history, her work transcends national boundaries and instead invites multiple (indeed, layered) readings.

Sikander's miniature painting 'Pleasure Pillars' (2001) is a case in point, conflating figurative references to Classical Greek statuary, traditional Indian dancers, and decorative patterns composed out of contemporary military jets, with their stylised wings and pointed bird-like noses. Other works such as 'Red Riding Hood' (1997) or 'Then and N.O.W – Rapunzel Dialogues Cinderella' (1997) invoke instead the world of Christian folklore, while playfully recalling the revisionist fairytales of feminist author Angela Carter. A recurring image of painted red toenails, peeping delicately from traditional Japanese platform shoes, adds to the visual complexity of the latter work. Here, and continuously since, Sikander up-ends cultural clichés and stereotypes, turning the proverbial mirror back upon her onlookers. Avoiding dualist interpretations of her subject-matter, images for Sikander can symbolise many things simultaneously. They can breed and intermingle, morph and shape-shift, in a constant rotation of form. The image of the serpent comes to mind, turning inward upon itself as it devours its tail to re-ignite the creative cycle of invention, destruction, and renewal.

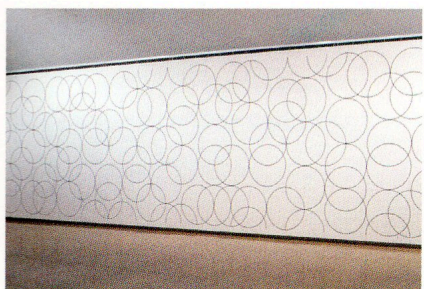
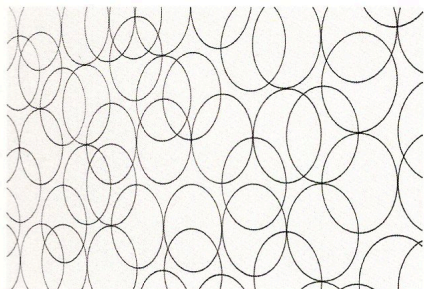
Pleasure Pillars

2001

vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolour, ink and tea
on hand-prepared wasli paper
30.5 x 25.4 cm
Private Collection
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York



Bridget Riley
Composition with Circles 4
2004
acrylic on plaster wall
392.2 x 1671.2 cm
Installation views, *Bridget Riley: Paintings and drawings*
1961-2004, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney,
2004-05
Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth
© 2007 Bridget Riley. All Rights Reserved.



The motif of the circle is recurrent in Sikander's art. Represented as floating orbs, flattened discs, small black dots or 'voids', radiating concentric lines, in singular and in multiple, it even assumes the globally iconic form of the soccer ball with its alternating black-and-white surface. Historically, the circle invites a range of associations. It is at once a complete unit, unbroken at any point so without a beginning or end; a spiritually charged symbol across cultures, associated with the continuity of the life cycle; and a form that simultaneously suggests contraction and expansion, the microscopic and the universal. Extending this idea, Sikander's art brings into focus the contradictory nature of miniature painting: at once so diminutive, yet harbouring such detail and complexity that it contains a whole world within itself.

Imagining the obsessive task of the medieval miniaturist, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard proposed, 'All small things must evolve slowly, and certainly a long period of leisure, in a quiet room, was needed to miniaturise the world. Also one must love space to describe it as minutely as though there were world molecules, to enclose an entire spectacle in a molecule of drawing.' For the viewer, he similarly concluded, 'In looking at a miniature, unflagging attention is required to integrate the detail.'³ Sikander's miniatures synthesise multiple elements and layers within the space of a single page, expressing the boundless immensity of the human imagination. Locating grandeur within the diminutive, they recall the words of the lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke: 'The world is large, but in us/ it is deep as the sea'.⁴

For Sikander, the creation of each miniature painting is a protracted process requiring long silences, scrupulous attention to detail, and an unswerving hand. The graphic works function similarly, the precise nature of the medium dictating a sense of linear containment and formality. Contrarily Sikander's recent watercolour series allow more room for chance and error by virtue of their medium, which is fluid in form. Unlike graphite, it can bleed and stain, creating blurred, impressionistic patches of colour alongside more controlled areas of line-work. For viewers, an effective engagement with Sikander's miniatures also requires slow and sustained consideration. Revealing themselves over time, the works offer respite in a world so often dominated by the compressed information and rapid sound bites of the news bulletin, or advertising jingle. Interestingly, the underlying role of photography in the creation of Sikander's works is rarely discussed. Yet the artist carries a camera with her daily, documenting people and objects, streetscapes and domestic interiors, which are frequently assimilated into her works in some shape or form. She also travels frequently – between America and Pakistan, across Europe and Asia – documenting her voyages assiduously in the form of an extended travelogue. Combining the imaginative alongside the everyday, her imagery is one of creative invention and encyclopaedic accumulation.

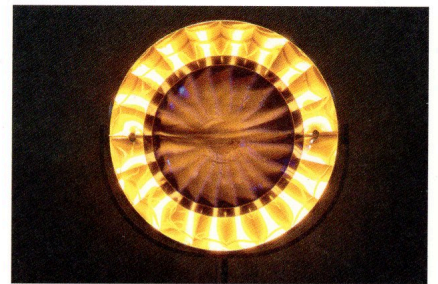
Multiplicity and repetition find expression in Sikander's art through the use of symbolic forms like the circle, which can be flattened out and repeated endlessly across the pictorial

surface. Viewed in this light, Sikander's ambitious use of the circle might be considered for example in relation to the reductive graphite studies, paintings and wall drawings of Bridget Riley with their monochromatic, interlocking, overlapping circular forms. The square finds similar expression in Sikander's practice, from singular units to all-encompassing grids, recalling the history of art and Western abstraction in particular. As a border or frame, a chequer pattern, a structuring device upon which networks of criss-crossing lines are superimposed along with figurative imagery, it is manipulated by Sikander in a variety of ways. Cross-referencing forms, Sikander's grids often take the form of multiplied circles (or dots), often overlain with larger circles or targets.

It might seem ironic that a strong interest in Western abstraction should have first compelled Sikander to study South Asian miniaturist painting, its purported opposite. Yet she has described her longstanding interest in the colour-fields of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Sigmar Polke's paintings as pivotal, along with the work of contemporary artists such as James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson.⁵ Finding profound meaning in Turrell's use of pure colour and light, or Eliasson's transformation of abstract elemental states, Sikander seeks out a range of practices through which to reflect upon the formal qualities of miniaturist painting, and her own practice as an extension. She says: 'In both their works the actual act of experiencing is further heightened by the anticipation. The awareness of expectation is there yet one is always surprised, the perception is always challenged. That moment of transformation is so powerful.'⁶ Sikander has cited Eliasson's light installation 'Eye see you' (2006) as particularly significant. Resembling the human eye with a ring of light surrounding a central nucleus (or iris), it produces a strong, monochromatic yellow glow, illuminating the space surrounding it, especially at night.⁷

Transformation and flux are central concerns for Sikander, embodied visually through the play between representational and abstract forms. States of ambiguity and tension are equally expressed in the strategic choice of titling for watercolour series such as 'Pathology of Suspension' (2005-06) and 'Phenomenology of Transformation' (2006). Moving away from the miniature format, these much larger works unfold the artist's imagery across multiple flesh-coloured sheets of paper that correspond to the vertical scale of the human bodies viewing them. Repeated animal forms – the deer, rabbit, serpent, rooster and griffin – appear in the works alongside human and winged figures, confusing Earthly and divine realms along with Christian and ancient Classical motifs. They float within abstract space, loosely linked by sinuous interconnecting threads that weave their way across the pictorial surface. These metaphysical 'threads' have recurred in Sikander's art for a decade now, their delicate forms suggesting tendrils of hair fanning outwards in water, or the roots and branches of a tree unfurling down and upwards. A formal and metaphoric pictorial device, they convey the interconnectedness of all things: organic and inorganic, seen and imagined, concrete and formless.

Olafur Eliasson
Eye see you
2006
stainless steel, aluminium, colour-effect filter,
bulb, cable
230 x 120 x 110 cm
Commissioned by Louis Vuitton Malletier
© Olafur Eliasson

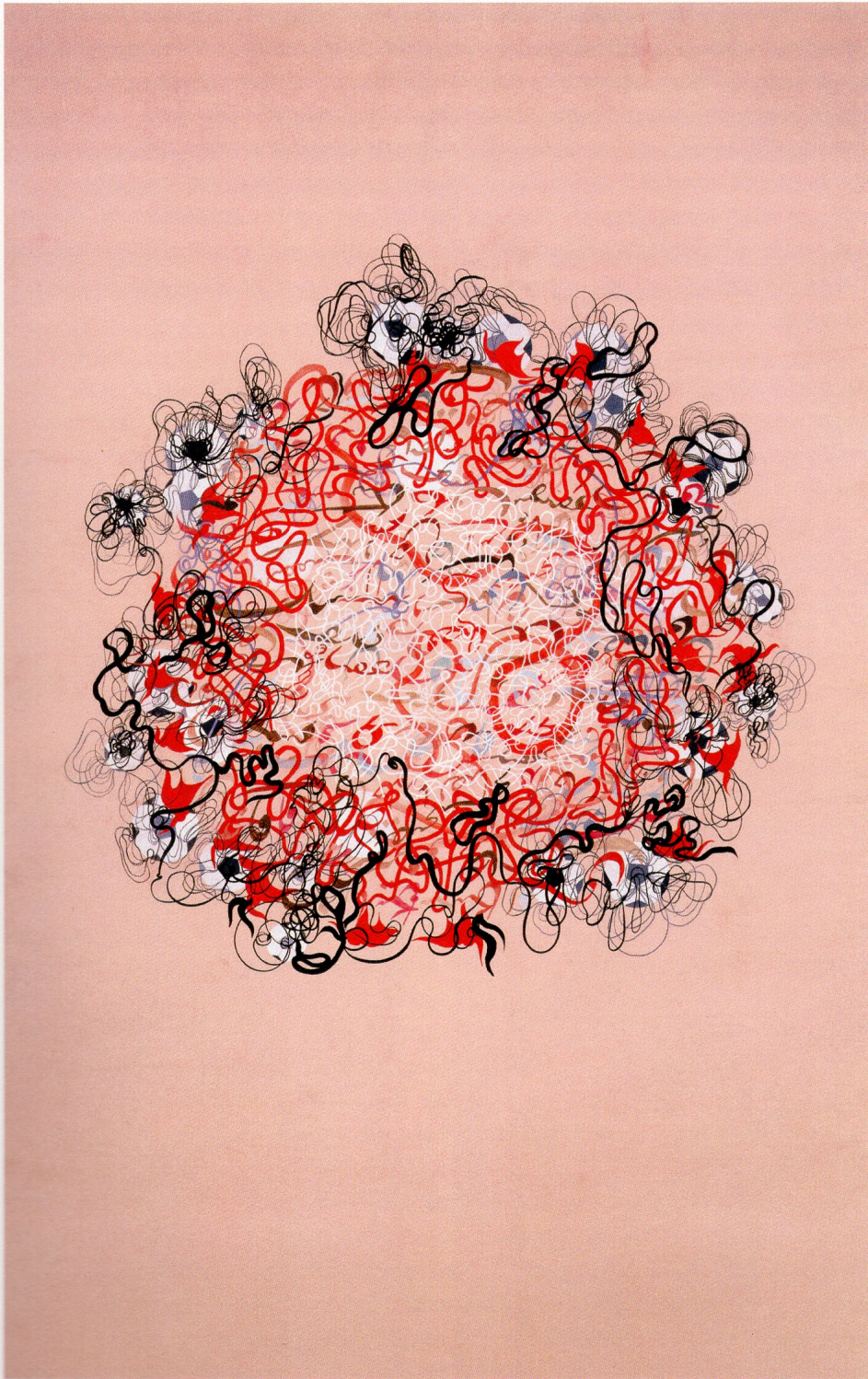


SpiNN (II) (still)
2003
digital animation with sound and colour
6:38 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York

The written word has also long featured within Sikander's miniature paintings and, more recently, within the larger watercolour series. In the latter works language itself is unravelled as a series of ornamental lines and curls: calligraphic markings that bear little correlation to a direct meaning or narrative. In 'Pathology of Suspension #11', word fragments become so entangled within a wider mesh of connected threads that they lose their meaning altogether; while in 'Pathology of Suspension #6' they whirl furiously inwards (or disperse outwards) as though caught up in a wind storm. The tug of imagery inwards, towards a central point, and propulsion back outwards again is a recurring feature of Sikander's art. Suggesting the energised centrifugal pull of the cosmos, it is articulated by Bachelard thus: 'Because every universe is enclosed in curves, every universe is concentrated in a nucleus, a spore, a dynamized center. And this center is powerful, because it is an imagined center.'⁸

The motif of the vortex is set into physical motion in Sikander's animated film 'SpiNN (II)' (2003). In this work a dense mass of abstracted imagery spirals inwards, hovering like an angry black swarm of crows. It billows back outwards again, eventually settling into the image of a traditional Mughal durbar hall incongruously populated by Rajasthani-style figures – specifically, the *gopi* women or devotees of the Hindu god Krishna, whose abstracted black hair-dos comprise the central imagery of the work. In Sikander's imagery the *gopis* are winged, giving them the appearance of angels, a theme that Sikander extends by introducing cherubs or *putti* associated with European Renaissance iconography into their midst. Music accompanies the work, a fusion of compositions by Stravinsky and





Pathology of Suspension #11
2006
ink and gouache on prepared paper
197 x 131 cm
The Angel Collection of Contemporary Art, Israel

Mahler that have been reworked and played upon Iranian instruments.⁹ Described by Sikander as a 'navigational tool', the use of sound is significant in the animated works. She notes: 'At times the sound adds more drama as in the crescendo emphasizing the 'dark' or 'sinister' underpinnings of the gopi hair movements in SpiNN (II).'¹⁰ The vortex recurs in the animation 'Dissonance to Detour' (2005) as a clouded imaginary vista in which calligraphic and landscape forms blur together in an inwards spiral, around a central nucleus of light. Myths of origin are suggested – darkness into light, nothingness into being – recalling the Sufi poet Rumi's words: 'We came whirling/ out of nothingness/ scattering stars/ like dust. The stars made a circle/ and in the middle/ we dance. The wheel of heaven/ circles God/ like a mill...'¹¹

Sikander's ambitious, multi-layered practice has attracted critical acclaim in recent years and now forms the focus of a major survey exhibition here at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Introduced by early works produced while still in Pakistan, it reveals the range and depth of Sikander's artistic output over sixteen years. Miniature paintings, large and small-scale watercolour suites, graphite works, and all four of the artist's animated films are featured. A major new wall painting has also been created on-site by the artist in the Museum's expansive double-height gallery, for the duration of the exhibition. Sikander's MCA exhibition is contextualised by the inclusion of selected historical miniature paintings in traditional Mughal and Rajasthani styles. These works reveal some of the many formal elements and visual motifs – Muslim and Hindu, secular and divine – that permeate Sikander's own practice in the present.

A further grouping of historical miniature paintings is featured prominently in Sikander's MCA exhibition alongside watercolours by the artist that respond directly to them, extracting and reassembling visual elements afresh. Sikander's 'partner pieces' are the result of research undertaken by the artist in 2004 at the invitation of the San Diego Museum of Art, California, where she studied the historic Edwin Binney 3rd Collection of miniature paintings.¹² They are collectively entitled 'Flip-Flop' (2004), suggesting the movement back and forth between historical and contemporary realms. Individual subtitles are attributed to the watercolours, each proposing a different sensory or emotional condition – 'To Desire', 'To Touch', 'To Mistake', and 'To Reflect' among them. Sikander frequently suggests the possibility of narrative fulfilment through her titling, while resolutely focussing on the formal elements of the image's construction: in itself another kind of 'flip-flop'.

The delicate beauty of these works with their pale, luminescent washes of colour upon pink paper is balanced by the playful cross-pollination of motifs and metaphors. One of Sikander's 'Flip Flop' watercolours is inspired by a late 16th century miniature painting of a female falconer receiving prey from her attendant. Sikander's interpretation depicts only the touch of the pair's outstretched hands, as they exchange a small bird that the falcon has killed. Emerging directly from the floral detailing of the original, the disembodied arms

(minus their bird) touch fingertips in the manner of Michelangelo's 'Last Testament', a sly visual pun that traverses histories and cultures. In another watercolour, a 17th century beauty with a pearl necklace is depicted by Sikander in double. She appears as though reflected in water and enveloped in a web of tiny white dots that recall the artist's characteristic metaphysical 'threads'. The play here is one of reflection, literal but also metaphoric, as the subject ponders her curious transformation across time.

Sikander has spoken at length about the relationship between her static and screen-based art forms. Visually and conceptually intertwined, her paintings and animated works inform and build actively upon one another. This is illustrated in Sikander's animations 'SpiNN (II)' and 'Nemesis (III)' of 2003. 'SpiNN (II)' is presented upon a small screen in a purpose-built corridor, which viewers enter into. Facing it on the opposite wall is a miniature painting by the artist, its content relating directly to that of the animation. Demonstrating literally the play between still and moving forms, this installation is extended by Sikander's 'Nemesis (III)' installation in which static and moving forms are placed side by side, in identical twin frames. In the animation, a variety of animal forms is combined like building blocks to create a composite entity (an elephant), which is then broken down again by winged demons clutching mallets. Sikander's animated works extend the role of painting. They act like moving tableaux that unfold dramatically, sometimes ominously, before the viewer's eyes.

Artist unknown
A beauty at a window with a bird
c.1675
opaque watercolour and gold on paper
25.5 x 16.7 cm
San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection

Shahzia Sikander
To Reflect from the series **Flip-Flop**
2004
ink and gouache on prepared paper
38.74 x 28.89 cm
San Diego Museum of Art, Museum purchase



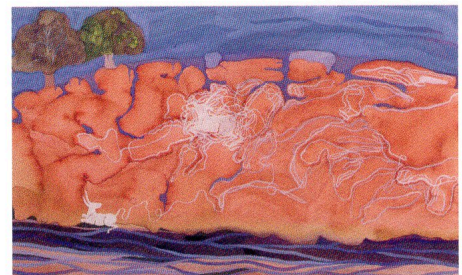
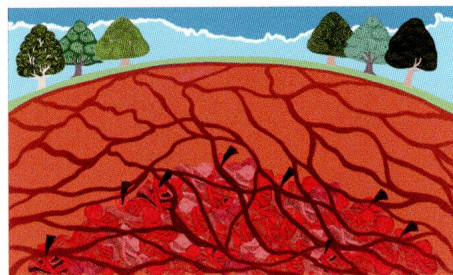
Pursuit Curve (still)
2004
digital animation with sound and colour
7:12 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York

Land-Escapes, Series 3, #6
2005
ink and gouache on prepared paper
15.2 x 25.4 cm
Private collection, New York
Courtesy of Edward Boyer Associates,
Fine Art Advisory

Sikander's more recent animation works 'Pursuit Curve' (2004) and 'Dissonance to Detour' (2005) have taken the form of much larger wall projections without an attendant miniature painting. In both works however links are made to the artist's miniatures and particularly her more loosely rendered, impressionistic watercolours. 'Pursuit Curve' explores the landscape with its horizon line and imagined planetary contour, capturing the progression of light from dawn through to dusk. Its imagery cuts vertically down from the Earth's surface to the soil below, with its shallow network of roots and deeper subterranean plates. It then reorients back up towards the cosmos with the appearance of firework blooms, or distant star-bursts.

'Pursuit Curve' draws upon mathematical and military terminology in its title. Seen in this light, the star-bursts depicted on the horizon might equally refer to bomb blasts, as missiles reach their intended targets. Sikander reinforces this allusion by sampling the sounds of exploding bombs in the accompanying soundtrack, creating a palpable tension between beauty and horror. This tension, and the distorted polarisation of 'good and evil' by news agencies during a time of heightened world conflict, is reflected in other works by Sikander as well as their titling. 'SpiNN (II)' is a case in point: a direct reference to CNN news, its title suggests in the artist's words 'the spinning of tales, often with no connection to each other.'¹³ Other works evoke a sense of the sinister and of contemporary political machinations through their titles, among them 'Web', 'United World Corp', 'Uprooted Order' and, of course, 'Nemesis (III)'.

'Pursuit Curve' is visually connected to Sikander's watercolour suite 'Land-Escapes' (2005). Smaller in scale than her large pink watercolours, these works assume a horizontal (or 'landscape') format rather than the vertical (or 'portrait') format associated with the miniaturist tradition. Moving away from her densely populated miniature paintings, the 'Land-Escapes' reverse the conventional hierarchy of figures over background. Doing away with figuration and bringing the landscape to the fore, they reinforce Sikander's wider interest in formal, rather than narrative, issues. She says, 'Removing the figurative information of my earlier miniatures, I wanted to see if the landscape alone could 'hold' the image'.¹⁴



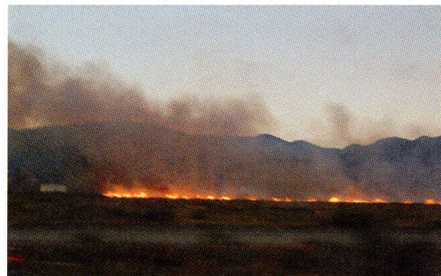
During 2004, while researching for her 'Flip-Flop' works at the San Diego Museum of Art, Sikander drove regularly between southern California and Mexico, observing the landscape as it unfolded about her through the car windscreen. Sikander has spoken of her experiences of the Sonoran and Anza-Borrego desert landscapes with their unique quality of light. She says: 'The intense colours of the desert were a constant reminder of the saturated colour palettes of Rajasthani / Rajput painting. Because I was seeking in my mind a relationship between the old paintings and my immediate environment, the light and its subliminal beauty in the surrounding desert scapes became the link to draw a relationship from.'¹⁵ Seeking to capture something of the desert's essence, Sikander commenced work on her 'Pursuit Curve' animation and related 'Land-Escape' watercolours, which she exhibited in Los Angeles late in 2005 as part of a residency at the Otis College of Art and Design.¹⁶ There is also a sense of the utopian suggested in the titling of the watercolour series, a concept that Sikander elaborates thus: 'My working with the subject of landscapes is also about exploring the notion of arcadia, perhaps an idyllic paradise or a state of exile, as in the literary metaphoric context of Urdu poetry which inspired my first large-scale installation 'Chamman', which in Urdu means "garden".'¹⁷

Many artists have drawn inspiration from the Californian landscape with its open flat expanses and endless stretches of road. They notably include Ed Ruscha, whose early photographs and artist's books adopted the horizontal 'cinema screen' view of the car window, the result of regular commutes between Los Angeles and his home town in Oklahoma when he was still a student. Sikander has photographed the landscape of southern California obsessively, compiling a vast repertoire of archival imagery from which to create her watercolours and animation.

A different kind of landscape is unfolded in the artist's most recent major work, 'The Illustrated Page', which was produced during a 2006 residency with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. This work takes the form of two 'pages' presented side by side, like an open book, in a single frame. Combining printmaking alongside areas of detailed hand painting, it is a product of Sikander's experimentation across both miniature and larger, more gestural formats. Sikander has produced several print suites in the past six years, among them the nine-part suite 'No Parking Anytime' (2001). Historically, she

Pursuit Curve (still)
2004
digital animation with sound and colour
7:12 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York

pages 8-9, 21
Land-Escapes, photographic series
2005
digital photo
dimensions variable
Photo: Shahzia Sikander



Artist unknown
An Arrangement with Four Deer
1800-1850
gouache (or opaque watercolour) on paper
Collection: Indian Museum, Calcutta, no 396/719

Shahzia Sikander
The Illustrated Page (edition #1) (detail)
2005-07
gouache and hand painting, gold leaf, silk-screened
segment on paper
142.2 x 94 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Marion
Stroud Fund for Contemporary Art on Paper in honour
of Innis Howe Shoemaker, 2006
Produced in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop
and Museum, Philadelphia

notes, the study of miniaturist painting requires copying and reproduction from existing precedents. These skills are likewise characteristic of the printmaking medium, and they find expression in 'The Illustrated Page' through its use of reproductive techniques (screen-printing) and the 'extraction of details' from existing historical miniatures. Sikander cites one painting from the collection of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, as particularly influential: that of a 'composite' deer with four bodies fanned outwards around a single, central head and antlers.¹⁸ Repeated in the left border of 'The Illustrated Page', and re-imagined in its centre via a cluster of animals that cascades downwards across the right page, this motif is presented against a fantastical, arcadian landscape. Its simplified design and heightened colour build upon 'Pursuit Curve' and the 'Land-Escape' watercolours, as do its undulating hills and looped, metaphysical 'threads'.

Viewing Shahzia Sikander's infinitely complex miniature paintings, graphite and watercolour series, wall murals and screen-based works is like a journey in itself. It requires focus, persistence and clarity of vision; and it yields rewards only through the slowness of time. Writing of the human imagination, Bachelard articulated a state of daydream which attains a freedom unparalleled in the real or visible world. 'Immensity is within ourselves', he said, concluding that 'It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone.'¹⁹ These words are fitting in considering the art of Shahzia Sikander, which captures Bachelard's intimate immensity in its realisation while equally encouraging it in our response.

RACHEL KENT

SENIOR CURATOR, MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SYDNEY



- 1 Meg Linton, 'Stockpiling and dissemination' in *Shahzia Sikander: Dissonance to Detour*, exhibition catalogue, Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, USA, 2005, p.7.
- 2 Shahzia Sikander, 'Nemesis. A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry', in Ian Berry and Jessica Clough, *Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis*, exhibition catalogue, The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, New York, USA, 2004, p.5.
- 3 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, published 1958 and translated 1964, Beacon Press, Boston, USA, 1994, p.159.
- 4 Bachelard, *Ibid.*, p.182.
- 5 Discussions between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, unpublished, 1-2 August 2007.
- 6 Email correspondence between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, 9 September 2007.
- 7 Eliasson's 'Eye see you' was commissioned by Louis Vuitton for display in its store windows internationally as part of an ongoing series of contemporary artists' projects. Funds generated from the sale of a related edition are donated by the artist to the relief organisation 121Ethiopia. Interestingly, commenting on Eliasson's 'Eye see you' and funding that it has generated for communal relief programs in Africa, Sikander has also drawn attention to her own interest in social activism. Sikander cites Rick Lowe, the founder of Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas, as an influential example of the role that artists can play in the wider community. A colleague and friend of Sikander's, Lowe also appears in her miniature paintings of 1995-98 which she produced during and after an artistic residency in Houston at the Glassell School of Art. Sikander has involved herself in communal redevelopment projects in Pakistan and Afganistan; and has sought out ways to develop non-profit residencies and cross cultural projects to invigorate communities at a grass roots level.
- 8 Bachelard, *Op. Cit.*, p.157.
- 9 The soundtrack for 'SpiNN', as well as 'Nemesis', was produced by New York sound artist and composer David Abir. Patrick O'Rourke worked closely with Sikander on the technical realisation of all four animation works.
- 10 Email correspondence between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, 9 September 2007.
- 11 Daniel Liebert, *Rumi-Fragments, Ecstasies*, Source Books, Sante Fe, New Mexico, 1981, pp.11-12.
- 12 Sikander exhibited her 'Flip-Flop' watercolours with their attendant historical miniatures at the San Diego Museum of Art in 2004. This exhibition also featured the site-specific installation 'To Reveal or Not to Reveal', a wall painting overlain with suspended strips of semi-transparent paper, to three-dimensional effect.
- 13 Email correspondence between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, 13 September 2007.
- 14 Discussions between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, unpublished, 1-2 August 2007.
- 15 Email correspondence between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, 9 September 2007.
- 16 Both works were shown as part of the exhibition 'Dissonance to Detour' at the Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, 24 September-12 November 2005.
- 17 Email correspondence between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, 9 September 2007. 'Chamman' was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 2000.
- 18 Email correspondence between Shahzia Sikander and Rachel Kent, 9 September 2007.
- 19 Bachelard, *Op. Cit.*, p.184.