

# SHAHZIA SIKANDER

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY

MARCH 8 - APRIL 19, 1998

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

## TRANSLATED PLEASURES

FAISAL DEVJI



Writing occupies a very privileged place in Islam. It signifies the conceptual authority of religion and state. Writing, rather than the image, is the bearer of concepts legal and liturgical. Image and imagination are subordinate to a writing which threatens to colonize the whole of existence, a notorious case in point being the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, in particular the Taliban in Afghanistan. In September of 1996, after successfully ousting the Soviet-backed Rabbani regime, and capturing Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan near the border of Pakistan, the Taliban consulted their scriptures and instituted puritanical measures against women and representations of the human figure. With respect to the latter, they declared figurative representations idolatrous, converting movie theaters into mosques, banning the sale and distribution of videos, and using televisions for target practice. With respect to the former, they veiled the city's women to protect men from seduction. But these hidden bodies soon began to provide an illicit pleasure by way of their uncovered ankles, which were duly clothed in socks. Finally, the flash of white socks beneath dark veils itself became an assault upon male virtue, prompting the Taliban to legislate an end to their color. Everything was to match, as the law prevailed over a body rendered visually mute. Under these circumstances, one can only speculate upon the fate of the figurative imagination in the modern Muslim state. Are the terms of a modern Muslim state those of an endless return to practices frozen in precolonial glory? Or is the expression "Muslim Modernity" a rhetorical strategy that attempts to benignly dissolve fundamental discrepancies between East and West?

Apart from the mixture of styles and iconography, the most striking aspect of Shahzia Sikander's work is its commitment to a resolutely pictorial tradition. Given that she is a visual artist, this seems like a rather simplistic assertion. But nostalgia notwithstanding, the miniature, the oldest and richest figurative painting tradition in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent, in many respects was and still is considered a thing of the past, especially since many visual artists from her native Pakistan have instead adopted contemporary styles of Western visual art. But her work is not a revival or continuation of the precolonial miniature since her references have had to rely upon ethnographic narratives like those of Stuart Cary Welch, the art historian. Nor is it subversive, since her mixture of Christian, Persian, Hindu, and Muslim codes is not homogenous. At times, she has produced works which quite faithfully reference specific schools of the miniature tradition—for instance, the rather stunning pair of drawings featured on the covers of this publication (*In Your Head and Not on My Feet*, and *Where Lies the Perfect Fit*), one featuring a Persian courtesan, the other a dancer, both renderings reminiscent of the classical Mughal style. Yet, at others, she has quietly and astutely introduced such modernist practices as collage and painterly abstraction into the space of the miniature. But if it is neither a subversion nor a continuation of a tradition, how does one characterize the work? Having already been a stand-in for the exotic, the miniature is surely too familiar to serve in this role a second time, particularly during a moment of so-called postcolonialism. But to whom is the miniature too familiar? Viewers in the West? Viewers in the East? Or both? Needless to say, the rhetoric of postcolonial studies has made *exotic* a rather unfashionable word. It does, however, remain a useful category of inquiry, not for the sake of understanding that which signifies the "other" in a fit of willful ignorance, but as a way of understanding that which is immune to translation, that which is received intact and is allowed to exist without an equivalent. But it is not the exotic which is in question; rather, it is the fate of the exotic as it becomes conscious of itself, as it remains forever foreign to both itself and its surrounding, i.e., the auto-exotic, an exotic that having made itself other once can no longer assume its naturalized place at home. Its audience being everyone, its audience is no one.

This is certainly the case with the *Extraordinary Reality* series (plates 10–14) in which Sikander appropriates the Indian tourist miniature, mass produced by artisans who paint Mughal scenes on the yellowing pages of Urdu or Persian books, leaving a bit of script at the edges for the sake of authenticity. These, in fact, have very comic connotations, as when the text to some scene of courtly dalliance refers to the Pythagorean theorem or to a cure for impotence. Good for a laugh, but Sikander does not flirt with an exotic of the frivolous variety. Hers has its price. In this particular series of work she repaints some of these often technically accomplished images and pastes onto them photographic cutouts of herself. One work, featuring a scene of convivial male peasants, has its center replaced by a collaged photograph of Sikander on the lotus of a Hindu goddess with a Madonna in the background. This work is a very complex dialogue between photograph and painting; between Christian, Hindu, and Muslim; between the traditional and the modern, original and fake, artist and artisan.

Thinking about Sikander's pictures which are at times quite direct in their references and at others an untranslatable mixture of codes, begs the question as to whether we can speak of the translation of images the way we would speak of the translation of words. This question, however, cannot be answered. It fails to take into account the unresolvable tension which already exists between the two, a tension of particular significance in the Islamic world. Under these circumstances, Sikander's work is a tacit acknowledgment of the failure of translation on numerous accounts, including the failure of cultural and chronological translations with the miniature tradition unwilling to relinquish its status as exotic while modernity is unwilling, unable or not allowed to completely efface that tradition. *Perilous Order* (plate 7), the portrait of a gentleman surrounded by nymphs is a perfect example. This painting may be seen as a composition of several layers: first the gentleman in traditional style, with even a stain on his portrait to make it look authentic; next the nymphs who look upon him, but are in point of style much older than the portrait; then rows of dots forming a kind of grid, which instead of being underneath the first layer, are superimposed over the entire painting, blocking out much of its detail. This layering puts into question the disparity between two histories of aesthetic development. So the miniature's first layer, with its technical virtuosity and painstaking detail, forces into the open supposedly dated judgments regarding painterly accomplishment, the kind of judgment today reserved more for the artisan than the artist. But the third layer of regular dots moves us to the realm of abstraction, and therefore to the artist who has escaped artisanal virtuosity by opting for formal and conceptual effects instead. This is even more pronounced in *Ready to Leave* (plate 25), a painting of a woman adorning herself, with her face negated by a proportionately large, decidedly flat, modernist dot.

If Sikander brings labor to aesthetic judgment, she does so not by lapsing into an artisanal mode of production, but by allowing its virtuosity to question the place of the conceptual, which is also to say the place of writing, for aesthetics. And this not by becoming anti-conceptual, but precisely by offering us a reading of the exotic. How then can one approach Sikander's exquisite failures, since to translate them into words would be an act tantamount to reducing them to illustrations? But Sikander's miniatures are intimate objects whose details are read; not in the sense that text is read but in a manner which indicates that the cognitive, the conceptual, is not simply the province of the word alone. It also belongs to the image. Conversely, the formal pleasure derived by the mind's eye is not the province of images alone. It also belongs to the word. Just as one is able to ask at what point images border on becoming words, one could ask at what point words become images. And if one is unable or unwilling to translate Sikander's images into words, then perhaps it is best to look directly to the word. With respect to Sikander's work, the best place to begin is the *ghazal*, the writerly equivalent of the miniature.

The ghazal is a form of poetry that originated in Iran in roughly the tenth century, arriving in India by the twelfth century. Ghazal means a conversation with the beloved who can be either mortal or divine. The ghazal consists of a series of couplets called *shers*. A ghazal can comprise anywhere between five and fifteen shers which may or may not be related. Shers can stand by themselves and are in fact considered poems in their own right. One sher may be a polemic and the next might be a devotional, making the ghazal something of a puzzle or a faceted jewel. The ghazal reached its peak in the nineteenth century with Ghalib (1797–1870), whom many consider the greatest poet in the Urdu language. Ghazals present a challenge to interpretation, formally, culturally, and chronologically. It is best to say that they do not translate, given the beautiful ambiguities of the Urdu language, the meter of the verse, and the tumultuous life and times of Ghalib. In terms of the formal beauty and content of their imagery, translations of several of Ghalib's shers provides an interesting parallel to Sikander's work. The following sher, for example, in a much more concise and obviously poetic manner, returns to issues of the veil and representation raised in the beginning of the essay.

*Khuda ke waste parda na kabe se utha ay waiq For God's sake don't lift the shrine's drape you preacher*  
*Kahin aysa na ho yan bhi wohi kaffir sanam nikle Lest that pagan idol appear here as well*

This particular couplet fashions a conceit for a Delhi long dead. The shrine it mentions is Islam's most sacred, cleared of pagan idols by the Prophet Mohammed. Now it sits empty in Mecca, draped in a black mantle of virtue. Ghalib describes the shrine as a Muslim woman whose veil is about to be lifted by a prurient cleric. Underneath is one of the very idols, a goddess perhaps, that the Prophet had evicted centuries earlier. But the word *nikle*, which I translate here as appear or reveal, also means leave, so that Ghalib warns the preacher not to lift the shrine's drape lest the pagan idol "leave here as well."

Pagan idol is a standard term in the lexicon of Persian and Urdu poetry, where it refers to the beloved, who can again be, simultaneously, male or female, mortal or divine. Among the numerous statements Ghalib may be making with this lexicon is that the preacher's Islam, which must conceal beauty because it seduces men, actually shelters the idol's power. As a sacred entity, the Muslim shrine cannot be revealed. Once it is revealed, it becomes its antithesis, an idol. If the beloved, particularly if it is a concept unimaginable in material form—e.g., God's unity—achieves representation and is evicted from the shrine, then she will only go elsewhere.

To cover is to capture. To reveal or represent is to release.

*Naqsh-e faryadi hay kis ki shokhi-ye tahrir ka? To whose insolent pen belongs this sign of complaint?*  
*Kaghazi hay perahan har paykar-e tasvir ka Each image's body is clothed in paper*

Whereas a collection of verse would normally begin with a standard invocation to God, conferring upon the writer a sacral authority, Ghalib begins this collection of Urdu lyrics with a couplet whose first hemistich describes his own writing as a sign of, or substitute for, a type of divine penmanship. In his second hemistich, Ghalib fancifully describes a Persian judiciary scene before the coming of Islam. It is a court in which plaintiffs appear as tabula rasa dressed in paper before a prince whose sign of judgment they invite. Ghalib's substitution of profane writing for sacred writing is no sooner made than it is questioned within the narrative by plaintiffs insolently challenging authority. The act of questioning the word erases the distinction between sacred and profane writing, suggesting that writing is always profane.

Ghalib's insolence allows us to make a number of generalizations about writing and painting. For instance, it is clear that writing here stands in for a divine or aesthetic creativity within which authority is simultaneously asserted and disputed. This means, of course, that such writing cannot

be a medium for translation, universal or conceptual. As a form of representation, writing betrays conceptual authority, possessing instead a life of its own. What is more, Ghalib's couplet refuses to distinguish between writing and painting in any clear way, for it denotes the former by words like *tahrir*, which also means drawing, and *tasyir*, which means image, so that the letters stating and questioning authority share a fate similar to the veiled pagan idol. Should they precipitate into imagery, they become seductive and ultimately false.

*Pardeha az ru-ye kar-e hamdigar khahad fatad*    *Should the veils fall from the countenance of their works*  
*Khalvat-e gabr-o musalman anjuman khahad shudan*    *The solitude of Infidel and of Muslim should a gathering become*

Today it is remarkably difficult not to interpret this couplet, from Ghalib's Persian lyrics, as claiming that the ill will between groups derives from prejudices, which a mutual familiarity should eliminate. This is the language of the nation-state, because it urges fellow feeling among people by deriding their disagreement as so much ignorance, which ought to be eliminated in the interest of a higher unity, represented by the state itself.

But Ghalib did not live in a nation-state, and his couplet therefore speaks to us in a language different from that of modern arbitration. Rather than bemoaning the existence of religious difference, then, Ghalib eroticizes it. This is evident both from his reference to veils and to the gathering that their removal should permit. The word for gathering here, *anjuman*, describes in poetry the perilous intimacy between lover and beloved, prince and subject, god and believer; an intimacy which is perilous because the erotic relationship it occasions not infrequently results, as is customary between lovers, in the rapture of the weaker party. Ghalib's translation of ill will into the language of love, in other words, makes such disagreement productive and pleasurable, without deriding its existence in the manner of the nation-state.

Albeit indirectly, Sikander grapples with the history of religious and national ill will in the subcontinent through her frequent juxtaposition of Hindu and Muslim imagery. Juxtaposition is the apt word because here, as in the collages the images do not necessarily relate to one another in an organic or even affectionate way. A Muslim woman's veil atop an armed Hindu goddess as in *Fleshy Weapons* (plate 3), for instance. Or again, in *Perilous Order*, the formal portrait of a Muslim gentleman surrounded by naked Hindu *apsaras*, nymphs who stare and wonder at him, one even with a finger in her mouth, in the classic gesture of *hayrat*, amazement, in the Persian miniature tradition. This figural juxtaposition is not given meaning in the usual way, by some instrumental narrative of the nation-state, which either combines Hindu and Muslim images into a homogenous national culture, or arranges them side by side as if to conjure a liberal pluralism.

Rather than naturalizing Hindu and Muslim figures in a neutral space whose universality is effectively that of an ideal state, Sikander juxtaposes them within a more or less Mughal framework such that each figure remains exotic for the other.

And it might be precisely this exoticism of mutual intrusion that holds up a state universality for which Hindus and Muslims are mere particularities who can never encounter one another apart from its writ. In this way Sikander's miniatures might well provide the kind of erotic intimacy that Ghalib evokes in his own poetic miniature.

*Baqadr-e shawq nahin zarf-e tangna-ye ghaḡal*    *The lyric's narrow elegance is not made to measure desire*  
*Kuchh awr chahiye wusat mere bayan ke liye*    *Rather more room is required for my discourse*

Ghalib's literary remains, in both Urdu and Persian, consist mostly of ghazals, the likes of which he here criticizes, which is to say they consist of couplets strung together more by end-rhyme than by subject matter. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this literary miniature, which had to be deciphered like a puzzle, was making room for new poetic forms that were more

descriptive and didactic, new forms whose tendency to inform and rouse a public linked them to the language of a nation-state yet to come. Not that the lyric suffered any loss of popularity; it simply became self-conscious as a form. Might not Ghalib's complaint about the lyric's narrowness refer to the arrival of this new society awaiting its state, an arrival addressed by the poet's own role in the development of Urdu as a national medium?

The painted, like the rhymed, miniature has become self-conscious amidst new genres. Indeed the very word for the form, whether in Urdu or in Persian, is *miniatur*, and comes from Europe. The old word, *tasvir*, is applicable to any sort of painting. Sikander, however, unlike Ghalib, is perfectly at home in the confines of her practice. She finds the frame liberating, for it was never a space to measure but instead to concentrate desire. Obviously the Taliban's efforts to write-off or on, as the case may be, women's bodies ends up dispersing and miniaturizing them, a gesture whose corollary would be the use of the female form on billboards in the West. Both instances represent an exoticism come fetishism, a point which is never written into public meaning in Sikander's work. But again, that would require an act of translation which is not forthcoming. Sikander is in fact stating the opposite: that the failure of translation, the failure to find a universal language, fuels desire and along with it the need to make yet another exquisite work.

#### REFERENCES

- Ghalib, Mirza Asadullah Khan. (1990), *Divan-e Ghalib*, Maktabah-e Alfaz, Aligarh.  
Ghalib, Mirza Asadullah Khan. (1969), *Ghazaliyat-e Farsi*, Punjab University, Lahore.

*Faisal Devji is Lecturer at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.*



5. HOOD'S RED RIDER #2, 1997



HB *I first saw your work in the 1996 Whitney Biennial and again in "Out of India" at the Queens Museum. Wandering around the show, one of the issues that has struck me about your work, because it deals with the miniature tradition, and other contemporary work coming out of the third world, particularly India, is that the distinction between tradition and the avant-garde is profoundly problematized, confused in your work. Those terms don't work in opposition to one another. I was reminded of a comment by Francis Bacon, that he never wanted to invent a new technique. He thought people who invented new techniques were in fact limiting their scope. Bacon wanted to reinvent an earlier technique, something that had been handed down. I wonder if we should begin by thinking about that, since that is something that happens in your work—the reinventing of a technique, the reevaluation of tradition to the extent that tradition is no longer opposed to modernity.*

ss Although I didn't set out with the aim to subvert, let alone reinvent, a tradition, those boundaries became blurred simply through my engagement with miniature painting, through the act of making them. I was aware that I was indulging an anachronistic practice, labor intensive, limited in the scope of its impact. But I was interested in an art form whose present was of the past. Making miniatures was clearly a valid activity. In fact, it was taken for granted. It is not a popular aesthetic nor is it a traditional form clamoring for revival. I was interested in the form's cultural and historical dimensions, not simply as they relate to visual pleasure but at a more fundamental level. I was curious as to why miniature painting exists. That is where I started. But it was only after I started, not before, that the questions posed by a form that exists in the present yet is not "contemporary" began. So the decision to engage with miniature painting was independent of the intent to blur boundaries between tradition and the avant-garde. That happened after the work existed.

HB *I like the idea that you didn't really want to reinvent tradition, although, at a certain level, I think that is what has happened. But more important, I think this notion of not setting out to reinvent tradition addresses the fact that the way we talk about the old and the new—using such terms as traditional, avant-garde, modernity, contemporary—is a significant part of colonialism. What I find interesting in your work, as well as in "Out of India" is that you get a whole range of visual, cultural material, a range of contradictions and juxtapositions—some traditional, some modern, some reinvented, others unabashedly harkening back to earlier forms. As an artist from South Asia you must find as great a freedom in the past as you do in the present.*

ss Certainly. There are numerous schools of miniature painting, and there have always been multiple visual discourses existing simultaneously. Although it is not a "contemporary" aesthetic, miniature painting is anything but fixed. The fact that courses in miniature painting were a departmental offering at art school indicated that it was still a place of experimentation. My training was, however, more of an apprenticeship. Everything had an extra layer. There was baggage. It was rooted. Initially I was intimidated. Miniature painting seemed restrictive. But obviously it has not been restrictive. There is something in that part of the world that sustains miniature painting—allowing it to exist simultaneously with other practices. But on the other hand, it is seen as self-referential, lacking a context outside its tradition.

HB *Usually, when people look at works which come from other cultural contexts or historical contexts, or look at works by diasporic artists, migrant artists, there is an attempt to see cultural difference at some mimetic level of the work. What I find interesting is that maybe cultural difference is not so much a question of the viewer's eye but is more rooted, as should be the case, in questions of the artist's training—what art school means there as opposed to art school here, apprenticeship for example.*

ss I should clarify something I said earlier. My training wasn't an apprenticeship in the strictest sense. What made it an apprenticeship was the student-to-teacher ratio. At the time there was myself and another woman enrolled in the course. So there was enormous accessibility, not to mention the fact that my instructor lived in the studio. He



*I was taken with the fact that you said there were two sources from which you learned about miniatures: first, from a lecturer from the Victoria and Albert Museum, when he came to Pakistan on a British consul lecture circuit (This was very similar to my own experience in Bombay—The Great White Hope comes and tells you things about your culture that you didn't know.), and, second, the Great Non-White Hope, your teacher. Talk to me about these influences.*

“Yes. I want to copy. It doesn't matter.” There was, however, never a doubt that I could get beyond that. The instructor was defensive and wanted to test how serious we were, and, at the same time, I didn't want him to feel patronized, so I did what was asked of me. I have an anecdote that touches upon the point you were making about perceptions in the differences in schooling. When I arrived here in Chicago, I told someone that in school we had to catch squirrels whose fur was to be used for brushes (which is true). They told the story to someone else who stopped me the other day and said, “I heard you had to catch squirrels. How barbaric.” I didn't know if they even knew why we had to catch squirrels. But my point isn't about catching squirrels but to what extent I should edit the information about my experiences because it gets constructed differently. I either reinforce stereotypes of South Asia as an exotic and primitive third world land, or I further the expectation that I am a cultural informer, responsible for providing viewers with all the information. That is something I can't do. I haven't been to Pakistan in five years, since I've lived here. There are others practicing miniature painting for different reasons and in different styles, so what I am doing doesn't speak to the culture at large.

HB *Can I just return to the story about catching squirrels? When you first told me the story about catching squirrels, I thought you needed models.*

ss [laughs] Just to let you know, I no longer make my own brushes. Actually, it was never about making brushes. It was a test of our integrity and a way for the instructor to assert authority, not over me but through me as a way of generating tension within the department. I wanted to be in synch with my instructor, to make him happy. I subjected myself to what was clearly a patriarchal system for the sake of learning the rules as they still exist. But again, miniature painting was a place of experimentation. It was not as though he was teaching what was done during the Mogul period. He was also in a gray area. What appears to be the orthodox transmission of knowledge was in fact an already warped set of rules. But here the distinction between orthodoxy (staying within the form) and experimentation (something from outside the form) gets confused.

HB *What happened when you went to the Rhode Island School of Design? I am sure there were similar games of power and influence being played there.*

*How did these find their way into your practice?  
How was your transition?*

ss I remember the first day. One of the faculty asked why I was there. “Are you trying to make East meet West?” Needless to say, I was offended. I was there because of my own curiosity. I have always traveled. I have lived in Africa. I certainly wasn't there because I wanted to learn another practice and take it back home, if that is what he meant. I was there because I wanted to grow. I came with a traditional practice, but I wanted to learn others, not that I expected someone was going to teach me how a specific technique was going to enhance what I had already learned. In graduate school you are free to do whatever. But in retrospect, graduate school is about building a network. Getting feedback from colleagues and visiting artists was an important part of that growth. But in practical terms, it meant that I was scattered. I remember taking photo 101 with the undergrads because I had never done it. This scattered approach did not help me in critiques, where everyone kept

asking, "What is your work about?" They found it too culturally specific and reflective of what art was back at home, forgetting the fact that I did that because that is where I am from. Yes, I brought my practice with me, but I was always dismayed at how everything that one did was bound to their place of origin. The feedback never went beyond who I am. That is understandable but very frustrating.

*HB I'm writing an essay on Anish Kapoor for the Hayward Gallery in London. Looking back on ten years of writing about his work, you find this all the time. If he uses a blue pigment, first there is a reference to Yves Klein; a paragraph later there is somehow a Lord Krishna reference; another paragraph later and you're having an experience with the Elephanta Kings of Bombay. The references continually move in that direction, as if the work does not signify as a sign itself. The work of diasporic artists must be authenticated through some sort of biographical/cultural reference. I do not think your work is about East meets West. Clearly, you are not about to take on the project of E.M. Forester, particularly where he failed. I think miniature painting has a lot to do with different traditions of framing. It is a recurring design motif, very formal—different spatial orders of framing, architectural framing, framing in terms of the court, the garden, the battle scene. If you think, for example, of the works of Howard Hodgkins, he began emphasizing framing in his own works—he has always been a great collector of miniatures—after he went to India. But it isn't so much the frame that interests you as much as the picture plane. The difference between looking in and looking at. What I detect in your work is that you set up two picture planes, two surfaces moving in a temporal bubble, held together with a tension you don't often get in miniature painting. You paint very, very carefully with a touch, a precision, a preciousness that is in keeping with the tradition. And then you overpaint, introducing a dot motif that shatters any coherent figure-ground relations to the extent that they cover up or negate those delicate areas. Sometimes you have a Durga figure or a Kali figure, a destructive character from the Hindu pantheon. And then again, uncannily shadowing it and doubling it will be a veiled form. Under the rubric of a polyglot iconography, the discrepancy between flatness and illusion, figure and ground is not aimed at addressing East meets West. More interesting, you bring together the difference between the East and the East, the nearest of difference, the intimacy of difference that can exist within any culture. Yet difference is not homogenized.*

be played out in miniature painting, which remains outside that discourse. In part, I want to keep it outside. In other words, I want to insert that discourse into the miniature rather than the other way around. At the same time, I still want to be considered a painter, although some consider what I do works on paper because it is not the Eurocentric activity of putting pigment on canvas. I had problems dealing with that phenomenon. Miniature painting takes so much time and it is small, so it doesn't register as painting in the heroic sense. But in terms of how certain imagery develops, my miniatures do share an affinity with gestural abstraction in that many of the organic forms evolve through gesture and a relationship to materials. For instance, the red, floating female form with the loops at the bottom. It evolved over those yellow tissue drawings. It was very much about how the pigment sits on the paper, and in that respect the form began as a set of very painterly marks. When I did these drawings in graduate school, I was asked if I had seen Eva Hesse's work, Nancy Spero's work. Obviously, these were references outside the tradition of miniature painting. Sure, I looked at their work. But I was trying to generate forms not for the sake of making art historical references but simply at the level of experimentation

ss That goes back to the issue of different visual materials existing simultaneously. When one is drawing from multiple references, some from within a tradition, others from lived experience, it becomes a question of balancing the cultural and the personal. How to be between, how to mix recognizable cultural references and idiosyncratic references. How to come up with a vocabulary that, while referencing and maintaining an integrity to tradition, also betrays my own experience and at the same time reveals the act of appropriation, alteration, and addition. For example, I am from a Muslim background, but I have a fascination with Hindu mythology, which of course wasn't accessible. Boundaries still exist. Whereas the Islamic miniature reflected a minimal, reserved poetry all its own, Hindu mythology has a certain weight. It is very elaborate. In terms of representation, anything and everything is possible—the sensual, the sexual, the explicit, even the abstract. The Ragmala School, for example, gives representation to theories regarding the feminine and masculine dimensions of music. I am very interested in giving expression to experiences in this manner. I was also trying to tap into the discourse about representation versus abstraction—which is primarily Western—and how that tension can

with materials and process. I then subjected those forms to the experience of making miniatures, subjecting them to detail, definition—accessorizing, ornamentalizing, decorating them. I started adding things to the floating figure. Where there were feet, I substituted root forms. I was obsessed with interconnections and the idea of being self-contained, not rooted in any one context. Obviously this was a large part of my experience at RISD. There were so few Pakistani-Indian artists in the mainstream. (Not that I expected there to be a great number.) But finding sources I could identify with was difficult, sources whose work could be used as constructive criticism instead of hearing, “So and so did this before you. What are you doing?” I still found the miniature a place of freedom, so I persisted instead of abandoning it in favor of a new medium. There were so many contradictions. Lacking context outside the miniature tradition, outside of autobiographical references, references to home, was a problem, but I wanted to make it work for me, not against me. I often refer to my experience here as a pleasing dislocation. I came here by choice, and I appreciate the opportunity to appropriate languages and experiences, be it Hindu mythology or the figurative/abstraction debate. They are equally exotic, and the miniature can easily accommodate both.

HB *That is something I'm struggling with in my writing. How to accommodate cultural influences, information, and experiences at the point of doing it, of actually writing.*

ss Another example would be the griffin. It is a figure from classical Greek mythology. Under Alexander the Great, the Hellenic world extended to the Punjab, making the griffin a remnant from an earlier period of colonization. But it has become a standard figure in Punjabi. It is called the *Chillava*. It is somebody who is coming and going so fast you can't pin down who they are. I tried to pin it down with a headdress, a veil. The *Chillava* has multiple identities, and it reflects the sort of rhetoric or categories that I am confronted with. Are you Muslim, Pakistani, artist, painter, Asian, Asian-American, or what? But it is not my agenda to say that I belong to any of these categories. To borrow one of your key words, I am interested in hybridity. This is all new to me, particularly being labeled a minority, even though my experience is obviously substantially different from that of my African-American friends. But the search for affinities has been great since I am still developing as an artist.

HB *To return briefly to something you mentioned about developing a vocabulary. Richard Serra characterized drawing—and drawing for him is process, cutting, scooping, balancing, etc.—not as the illustration of an idea but as thought that emerges performatively. It is not that he has an idea and then executes it. Drawing comes out as you're thinking about thinking about the work. You mentioned the floating character in the work. I also think that the way you play with the two planes makes the work float. But at some level, the work is not only about displacement but also about rerooting, an attempt to be free of being prescribed by any of your references.*

ss Free of being prescribed while using a very prescribed and structured form. I like that tension. Miniature painting comes with a set of rules. It's not at a conceptual level that those rules are played out. It's in the act. It's the materiality, the seductiveness of the surface, the investment, the submission, the hours that are put in to create translucence. In the end, they are very meditative and meaningful gestures, like ritual. In this sense, miniature painting is more about subverting modernity than subverting tradition.

HB *If I follow your line of thought, is it really a subversion of modernity? Because there are iconic modernist moments here and there. I think the beauty is that you allow it all to float and to set up its own tension. With respect to modernity and the miniature tradition, it seems you subvert both and neither. How do the wall works figure in this? Could you discuss scale and gender in your work?*

ss By shifting scale from the miniature to the mural, I had hoped to make more confrontational work. But neither this transition nor the work as a whole is an overt commentary on issues of gender. (It is not a question of small equals precious equals feminine and, vice versa, large equals strength equals masculine. Engendering the work in this manner is too simplistic.) In a broader sense, I am more interested in the hierarchy surrounding the investment of labor, and process speaks to this perhaps more than scale. When I make tissue

drawings, for instance, time is of the essence. I try to keep them spontaneous, gestural. There is a rigor behind them, but they are much more open, democratic. They are not fussy or fetishistic. For example, my mother was visiting and she was horrified when she saw these drawings. "Is this your new work? I can do that." I much prefer that response than "Oh my God, you did that by hand?" The tissue drawings are not about the exclusivity associated with skill. They are the opposite, and my mother, ironically, had the proper response. I said, "Why don't you make some?" and she did. It was almost taboo. With these drawings, there is no beginning or end. It is a mark-making process, a journal or diary. There is a level that is premeditated. But it is never a decision to go make work with the goal of unearthing an original set of experiences. There are in fact moments when a slower, more controlled pace sets in. It becomes a series of steps. Step one leads to step ten—structure, the buildup of materials, investment, hours of finishing. And in the end, you could lose the piece. There are moments when I look at my work and I wonder, what made me do it so obsessively? It could have been what it is now ten stages ago. That is part of the conditioning. One of the criteria for evaluation in the apprenticeship was beauty of execution. But I was never interested in living up to past standards of excellence in miniature painting. There was a certain level of proficiency I was interested in. But after that, I told myself, OK, I've done that. What you said about two time frames or planes is absolutely correct. I put in all this time, and then I subtract it through a violation of that space. I do gestures that I have no control over. And it's the simultaneous existence of two forms of exploration within a single space that charges the work. You might find yourself asking "Where did all the details go? Where did the face go?" because a dot sits on it.

HB *I see what you mean when you talk about the democratic process of the work. In a way it's a regulated democracy, a premeditated democracy in which you, as the artist, hold the cards. I greatly appreciate your emphasis on the practice itself, especially the idea that the tissue drawings are a form of thinking as drawing. But when you think of the work's relationship to the audience, not in terms of process but content, what do you think your work requires for its understanding, some knowledge? There are many threads of experience that inform your practice. What do you think an audience is getting? You've suggested that many people are intimidated by the iconography; they say, "This is from India. What is this about?" immediately exoticizing the work. But suppose we don't want an exoticism. We don't want an orientalism. We don't want all these referential questions put into your work—have you seen Hesse? etc. What kind of intercultural knowledge is required? Where must I stand to be able to pick up the great premeditated subtleties manifest in the work? What must I know? Must I be a cosmopolitan? A nationalist? An antinationalist? What must I be as a citizen spectator?*

HB *Not having to be up front and out there. Obfuscating as opposed to revealing. That very much relates to the process you were talking about earlier, then about material and now about resistance. The various ways of using the veil to gain control is at the heart of Franz Fanon's essay on the veil in Algeria.*

the fact that I had read it became a dilemma. It exposed what I had feared all along. Without a context, many people thought my work was simply about technique and that "postcolonial discourse" would serve as a conceptual crutch. A flattering crutch, but no thank you. I was shocked to learn of people's inability to see "the

ss [laughs] Those are valid questions I cannot begin to answer. I often get the sense that viewers are expecting something, an elaborate code that will reveal a cultural or political platform. But I'm not a spokesperson. Even for me such things as the veil, which I use a lot in my work, remains exotic. It is a charged and provocative stereotype. The first time I put it in a work, everyone reacted strongly. Why? It is not a question of what kind of meaning the image is transmitting but what kind of meaning the viewer is projecting. I actually wore a veil for a brief period of time for the purpose of recording people's reactions. I would go to the grocery store and to the bar, and people would get confused and intimidated. Obviously, for me, it was just the opposite. Nobody could see my body language or facial expression. That gave me more control, security, and articulation.

ss But to return to your initial question regarding your role as a citizen spectator, I think my work is about observation. More about raising questions than providing answers. I remember coming upon your book *Location of Culture*. It was something of a revelation. In grad school,

conceptual” in other forms, ones outside the rather recent, narrow parameters established by practices of the 1960s. I find miniature painting a very conceptual activity.

HB *I do too.*

ss In that sense every little mark is important. Not to say they all have specific meaning attached to them. But I’m more open to meaning being constructed not simply within the piece but also through a larger set of relationships that surround the work. I think a lot about fluidity, about icons when they exist in different combinations. How does a vocabulary evolve? How do you process things around you? If the work is about anything, it’s about lived experience and how to claim that experience. Although I have been painting for twelve years, that has become a conscious concern only in the last four or five.

HB *Which represents your time in the United States?*

ss Yes. Now what is interesting is the feedback I get from home. “We don’t want to talk about you. You’re an expatriate. You’re a sellout.”

HB *Because you sold a few paintings?*

ss [*laughs*] I think it is the fact that I live here. But it doesn’t matter where I practice. I do, however, appreciate the interaction I have had with various artists over the past couple of years. I have worked on some wonderful collaborations, notably Project Row Houses in Houston. These have been very rewarding. The kind of community involvement helps me overcome some of the conflict I have with the placement of my work in museums and private collections. The artist as the lone genius in the studio bothers me at times. The search for validation can be difficult. Obviously, I feel quite comfortable with miniature painting. It comes naturally, which is not to say I’ll be doing them for the rest of my life.

MARCH 1998

*Homi Bhabha is a cultural critic and the Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities at The University of Chicago*

ISBN 0-941548-42-2

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

© 1999 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

*Translated Pleasures* © 1999 by Faisal Devji

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher and authors.

BACK COVER: *In Your Head and Not on My Feet*

FRONT COVER: *Where Lies the Perfect Fit*

design: Katy Homans

printing: Druckerei Heinrich Winterscheidt GmbH, Düsseldorf, Germany

PRINTED AND BOUND IN GERMANY