



Shahzia Sikander Unbound

Vivek Gupta

Contributions by Milly Duckworth,
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Preface

“It doesn’t even matter how many centuries old it is—it’s breathing and it’s alive.” So Shahzia Sikander says of the eighteenth-century *Gulshan-i ‘Ishq* manuscript, an inspiration for her animated work *Disruption as Rapture* (2016), now screened as part of the *Unbound* exhibition. In the tradition of her other animations, *Disruption* galvanises this insight in visual form—the breathing, animate qualities of the archive, literally animated—the implied movements of figures and forms made manifest. However, this impulse characterises not only her animated works, but also her wider project: Sikander’s graphic work and sculpture also effect the same process of animation, and of articulating a living past in material form.

I am particularly delighted to be able to show her work, which makes such a contribution to archival and political engagement in the visual arts.

Jessica Berenbeim
Fellow and Curator
Jesus College

Disruption as Rapture, 2016

HD video animation, music by Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi, technical collaborator - Patrick O’Rourke
10 min. 7 sec. on view in the Frankopan Hall, Jesus College, at select times.

Acknowledgements

Any exhibition takes a village of support. It has been a dream to work with the generous and extraordinarily humble artist Shahzia Sikander. I will treasure this collaboration.

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To my student assistant curators, Milly Duckworth, Giacomo Prideaux, and Zoe Turoff, it has been a privilege learning from you.

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Vivek Gupta

Postdoctoral Associate in Islamic Art
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Shahzia Sikander Unbound

Can decolonisation involve forms of intimacy? Must it entail toppling monuments of the past? Shahzia Sikander envisions a Hindu celestial dancer entangled with a Renaissance Venus. Archetypes of the divine feminine embrace.

Shahzia Sikander: Unbound focuses on themes of manuscript techniques and archives, abstracting the feminine, and decolonisation through the early and more recent works of contemporary artist Sikander.

Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) received her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the National College of Arts Lahore, Pakistan, in 1991, where she specialized in “miniature” painting and was the first major artist to train with Bashir Ahmed. She went on to become the first woman to teach in the Department of Miniature Painting alongside Ahmed in 1992, being a pioneer for an entire generation of artists. Although a few universities grant degrees in “miniature painting” and artists self-identify as “miniaturists” or “neo-miniaturists,” art historians and artists like Sikander are now moving away from this term because of its colonial connotations.

“Miniature” dislocates painting practices that occurred in a variety of media from their original contexts. The term was first used for medieval European manuscript illumination because of the presence of the lead compound minium (Pb_3O_4). “Miniature” has suited the needs of art dealers and “collectors who cut up masterpieces” in the words of art historian Christiane Gruber.

For Sikander, painting is her process. Her early paintings made in the ‘80s and ‘90s anticipated her forays into animation, mosaic, and now sculpture. Medieval and early modern artists of South and Central Asia similarly moved between media. This is how visual vocabularies evolved.

By abstracting the feminine, Sikander takes Muslim women out of the bounds of the stereotypes in which they are often placed. And yet, Sikander does not forsake her art historical lineages. She excavates archives to learn from tradition. In *Unbound* she debuts the *Khilvat* series, which is her response to an album of seventeenth-century erotic Indian paintings housed at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Sikander decolonises the “miniature.” She unbinds it from archives of the past to envision new futures.

VG



Manuscript Painting as Process

Sikander's visual language uses the idioms from medieval and early modern Islamic and South Asian manuscript painting as a way of remembering, reframing, and ultimately redefining histories that have been othered by dominant historical narratives. Varying in scale and medium, Sikander's work emphasises its physical, often labour-intensive formats. In her words, "Painting to me is like a poem. Language, geography, and identity are charged notions of inclusion and exclusion, always in flux."

Using a technique referred to as *pardakht* (Persian, Urdu: to bring to perfection), Sikander builds up colour through multiple layers of short brushstrokes. Sikander applies minimal pigment to avoid disrupting the delicate surface of the paper, enabling a rich depth of colour. *Siyah qalam* (black pen), or the process of painting in black, watered-down paint enables a lyricism of form between opaqueness and translucency.

Reflecting on what keeps a form alive through time, Sikander's practice emphasises the intelligence of the hand embracing the formal complexities that emerge in the act of painting. Working from memory, opposing mere citations, Sikander dismantles "miniature" painting techniques into its constituent parts. Using the language and techniques of manuscript painting to convey a forward-looking artistic vision, Sikander is guided, but never confined, by tradition.

GP



Motif as Translation II, 2013

Ink and gouache on paper

Collection of Sanda Lwin and Farhad Karim, London

Step into the open pages of a large-scale album, or *muraqqa'*. Popularised by the Timurid dynasty during the fifteenth century, a *muraqqa'* collects paintings, calligraphy, prints, and other highly-valued works, to be remembered, commemorated, or celebrated. In *Motif as Transition II*, we confront a palimpsest of both contemporary and past iconographies.

Sikander has appropriated the *gopi* woman's hair, leaving abstracted red silhouettes of her hair to swarm the pictorial surface. *Gopis* were the milkmaidens of Krishna and stock figures in Indian painting. Sikander simultaneously challenges the authority of the past as the red fence that also appears in sixteenth-century Safavid painting serves as a metaphor for cultural and temporal separation. The vertical spills of black ink create a cage-like form that becomes a subtle barrier between the viewer and the work.

Motif as Transition II presents the past as amorphous and amenable to intervention. What is tradition? Who determines what is traditional? How can tradition be reinterpreted? Sikander's visual lexicon creates an open-ended knowledge system that collapses the singularity of established Eurocentric art historical narratives.





Facing the Shadow, 2019

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Squaring the Shadow, 2019

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

The Shadow's Struggle 1, 2020

Collection of Nabil and Sheila Kassam, San Francisco

The Shadow's Struggle 2, 2020

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Ink and gouache on paper

(left to right, top to bottom)

In the *Shadow* series, amorphous warriors battle against their silhouetted counterparts. Ink and paint melt into one another, rendering boundaries between Islamicate floral motifs and star-spangled banners non-existent. These juxtapositions exemplify Sikander's layering approach in constructing various layers of meaning to interrogate how, and for whom, histories are constructed. Sikander shifts traditional manuscript processes into the realm of critical inquiry.

ZT

Empire follows Art: States of Agitation 1, 2018

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Empire follows Art: States of Agitation 6, 2020

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Empire follows Art: States of Agitation 7, 2020

Private Collection, New York

Empire follows Art: States of Agitation, 12, 2020

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Pilar Corrias Gallery, New York

Ink and gouache on paper

(Shown right: Empire follows Art: States of Agitation 7)

In her *Empire Follows Art* series, Sikander examines contemporary notions of identity. Strange, composite beasts with flaming wings haunt the contemporary individual; in the artist's own words, "each drawing in the Empire series depicts a state of struggle, of being caught variously between monetizing worlds, vocabularies, competing cultures and histories." For Sikander, this visual struggle signifies the complications and limitations of hyphenated labels: Pakistani-American, Muslim-American—the hyphen becomes both a barrier and a bridge between myriad identities, implying multiple vantage points. Sikander questions: what is it like to be on one side of this divide?

ZT





Series of Transformation 5

Graphite and gouache on paper

Collection of Shahzia Sikander

Not only manuscript painting, but the art of calligraphy also informs Sikander's process. Her point of departure for this calligraphic sphere was the etymological relationships between Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew. In both Arabic and Hebrew, the roots for "to kill or slaughter" (Q-T-L) and "to die" (M-W-T) are related. Despite the intimacy between these two languages, the juxtaposition of these scripts evokes political asymmetries. Rifles piercing through this sphere signify the violence in encounter and translation. Sikander draws her stylus quickly across the page to create long swooping lines. Oblique and vertical strokes clash. The texture of the graphite begins to evoke cages and barbed wire atop border walls.

VG



Abstracting the Feminine

“Third world feminism,” a term that came out of postcolonial theory to refer to women in non-Western societies, “felt offensive and limiting” to Sikander in its multiple blind spots and implied hierarchies. Instead, through her iconographies, national boundaries are breached, borders dislocated, and structures questioned.

Archetypal female bodies from multiple temporal and geographic terrains are juxtaposed to create encounters. By engaging with a variety of languages and perspectives, Sikander’s work is precise and yet enables open-ended engagement.

Suspended, dismembered, and dislocated. An inherently violent image of fragmented female bodies becomes emancipatory in its insistence on mobility and refusal to be fixed. In abstracting the feminine, Sikander’s visual language of transnational feminism challenges the viewer to imagine alternative futures in which the feminine is a transformative force.

MD

The Privacy of Prince Murad, son of Shah Jahan, ascribed to Govardhan

India, ca. 1678

Fitzwilliam Museum, PD.205-1948.7

The Privacy of Raja Ram Chand, ascribed to Bhura

India, ca. 1678

Fitzwilliam Museum, PD.205-1948.16

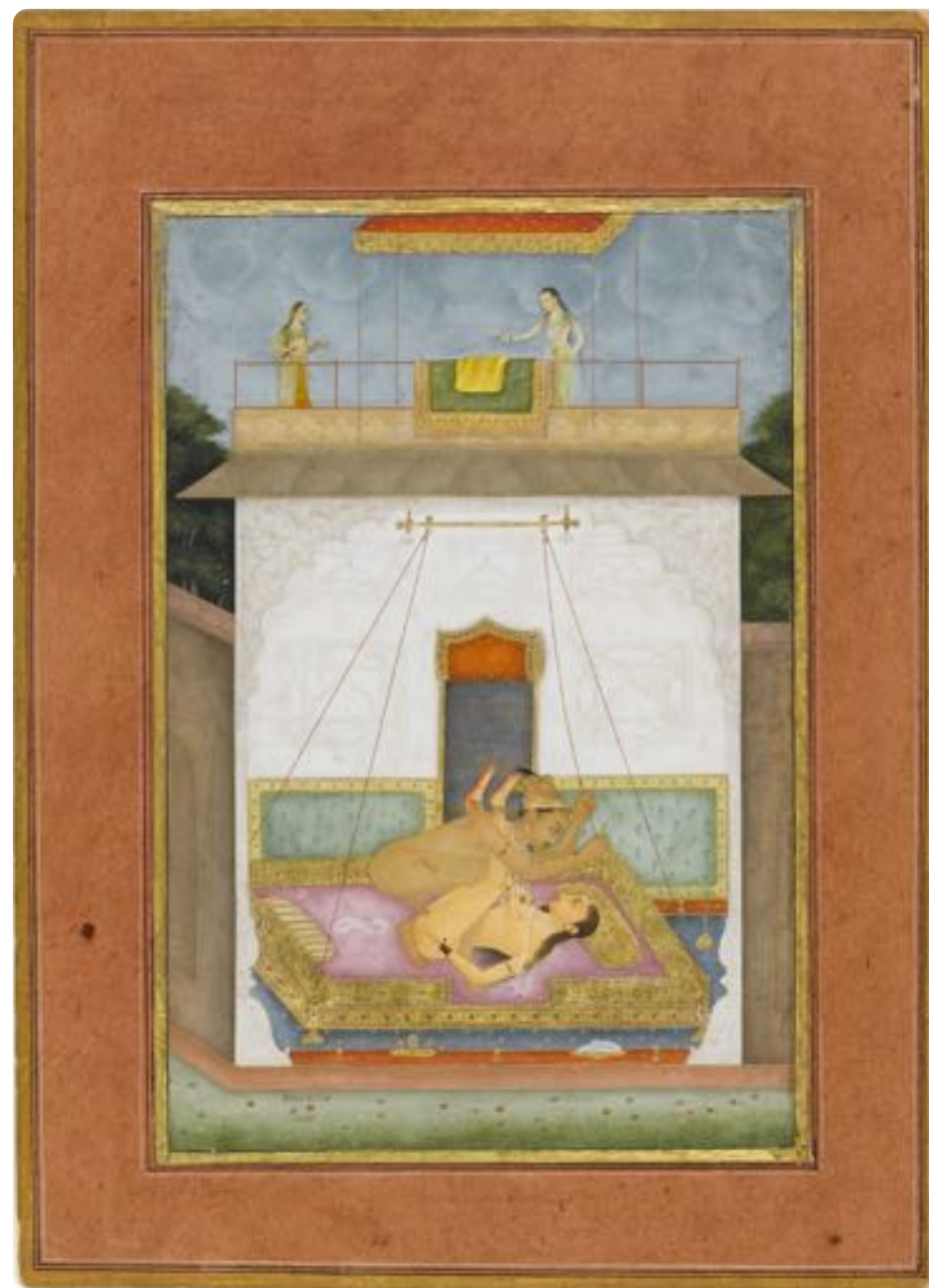
The Proper Posture for the female type; Hastini, male type; Ashva, ascribed to Govardhan

India, ca. 1678

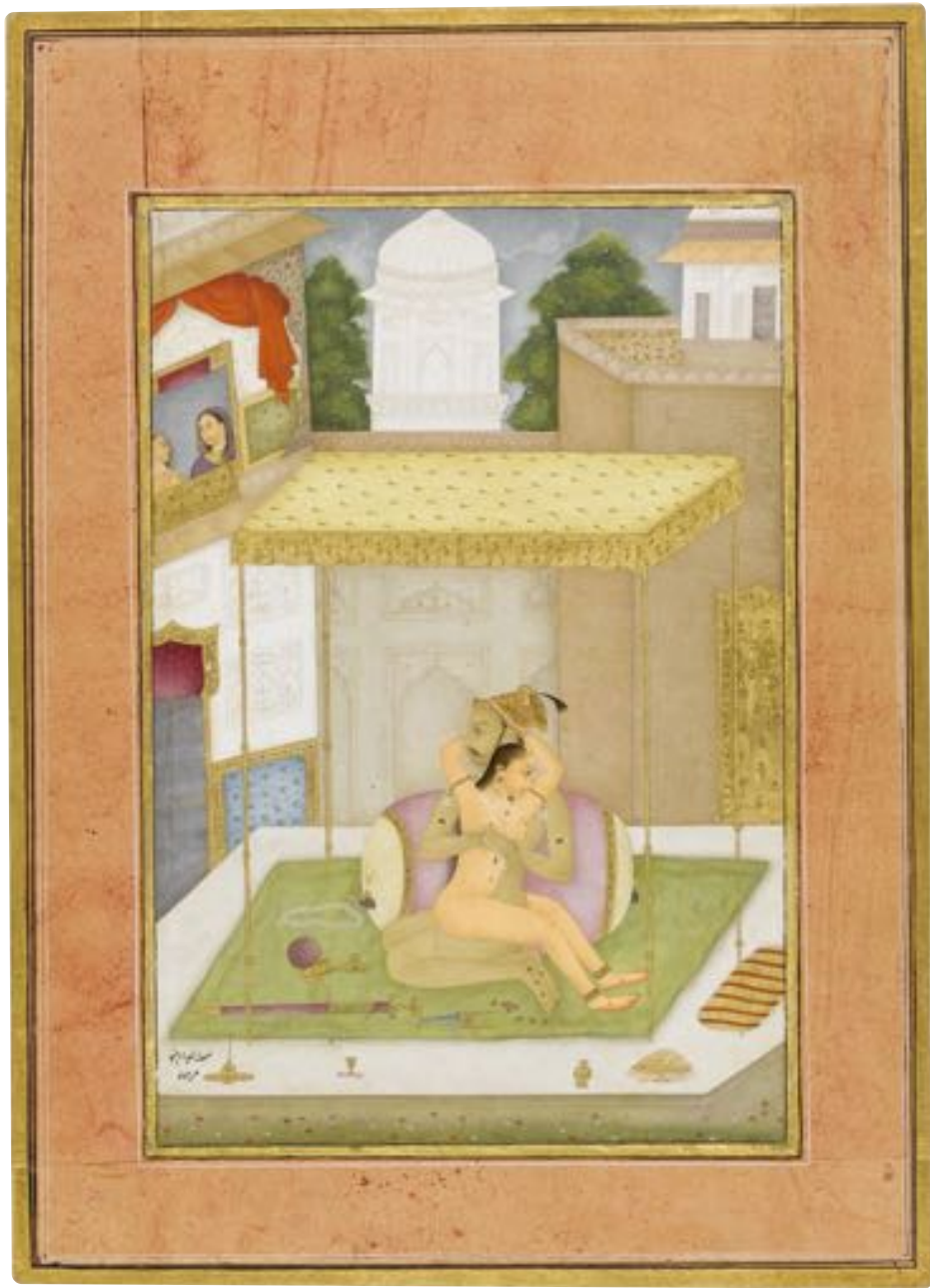
Fitzwilliam Museum, PD.205-1948.23

Each inscription in an album of erotic paintings made in India, circa 1678, in the Fitzwilliam Museum begins with the word *khilvat*. *Khilvat* in Persian and Urdu means solitude or privacy. A *khilvat-khanah* was a private apartment, often for women, or space for prayer. The formula for these inscriptions typically reads as follows, “in the privacy (*khilvat*) of a certain ruler, made by a certain artist.” It is improbable that most of the named artists in the album would have been alive when Maharaja Anup Singh of Bikaner (1669-98) commissioned it. The master Mughal painter Govardhan (active ca. 1596-1645), who is repeatedly mentioned as one of this album’s painters, would have likely been deceased by 1678. This makes these visions of *khilvat* imagined both in terms of their content, but also in their making.

VG



The Privacy of Prince Murad, son of Shah Jahan, ascribed to Govardhan



The Privacy of Raja Ram Chand, ascribed to Bhura



The Proper Posture for the female type; Hastini, male type; Ashva, ascribed to Govardhan

Khilvat I, 2021

Ink, gouache, and gold on paper

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London

Sikander initiated the *Khilvat* series in dialogue with the Fitzwilliam album to explore the meanings of privacy, visibility, and accessibility in the manuscripts to which she responds. As the series began during the pandemic, Sikander's own initial viewing of this album was akin to how she saw most colonial collections of Islamic and South Asian paintings as a student in Pakistan, from afar and mediated by reproduction.

Erotic albums like the Fitzwilliam's were, of course, not meant to be viewed by large audiences in the early modern period, but who was able to see them in the centuries following their making?

Khilvat I is a meditation on privacy and queerness. Two watercolour feminine figures intersect and overlap distorting where one ends and the other begins. Encircled in gold clouds—a motif ubiquitous in early modern India and Iran—the figures emanate light.

VG





Khilvat II, 2021

Ink, gouache, and gold on paper

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London

Sikander abstracts many of the bodily positions in the Fitzwilliam album of erotic Indian paintings in *Khilvat II*. Executed with masterful control over watercolour, Sikander sutures the two feminine figures together at their hearts, suggesting their unity. Set in a swirl of gold, geometric, and floral ornament, she creates a sphere on a flat surface, recalling many of her video animations such as *Singing Suns* (2016). We thus can peer into an erotic cosmos from the outside. We become the onlookers within the seventeenth-century paintings as well as the many gazers at these scenes thereafter. The sphere limns these figures' own *khilvat*, one which we are left contemplating.

VG

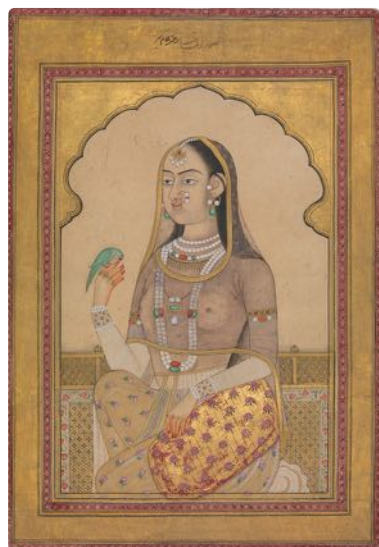
Zarina, 2018

Glass mosaic

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London

Sikander's *Zarina* draws from her earlier drawing, *Flip Flop* (2004), and references a character in Ayad Akhtar's play *The Who & The What* (2014). *The Who & The What* follows the lives of a Pakistani immigrant and his two daughters. Internal conflicts and frictions between characters arise as they grapple with the contradictions of religious beliefs, marriage, gender, and culture. In naming the mosaic *Zarina*, Sikander enters the psychology of an archetype, rechanneling it and bringing it to life.

Floating in space, these faceless feminine forms are uprooted and escape categorization. But why *Zarina*? The Persian adjective *zarin* translates to golden. *Zarin qalam* (golden pen) was the epithet of a Mughal calligrapher. Zarina Hashmi (1937-2020) was a South Asian-American artist. Such etymological and cultural parallels demarcate entangled histories and languages. In weaving together these disparate temporal and cultural associations, the two fused forms come to stand for a universal, formidable, and beguiling female figure.



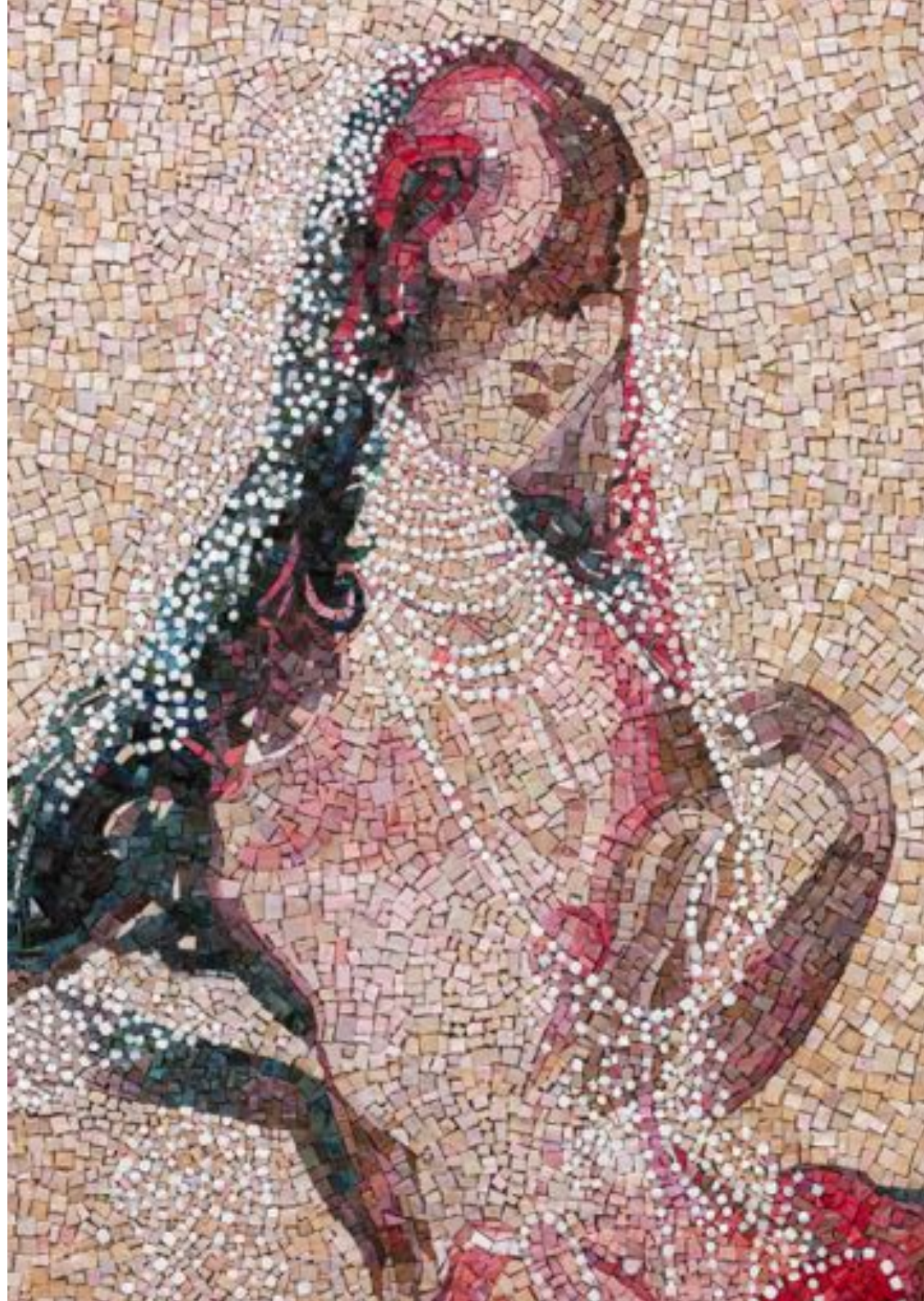
A Bejewelled Maiden with a Parakeet

Golkonda, Deccan, ca. 1670-1700

Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011.585

Images in medieval and early modern Persian and Indian manuscripts have a serial quality. That is, artists produce an image multiple times to perfect it and show their mastery over a given trope, character, or figure. For this mosaic, Sikander responded to a mid-seventeenth century Deccan painting of a woman holding a parakeet that was copied multiple times. We see one example of that image to the left.

MD





Above: **Intimacy, 2001**
Dry pigment, gouache, and tea on paper
Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin

Left: **Promiscuous Intimacies, 2020**
Installed at Jesus College

Fatima Mernissi, 2018

Ink and gouache on paper

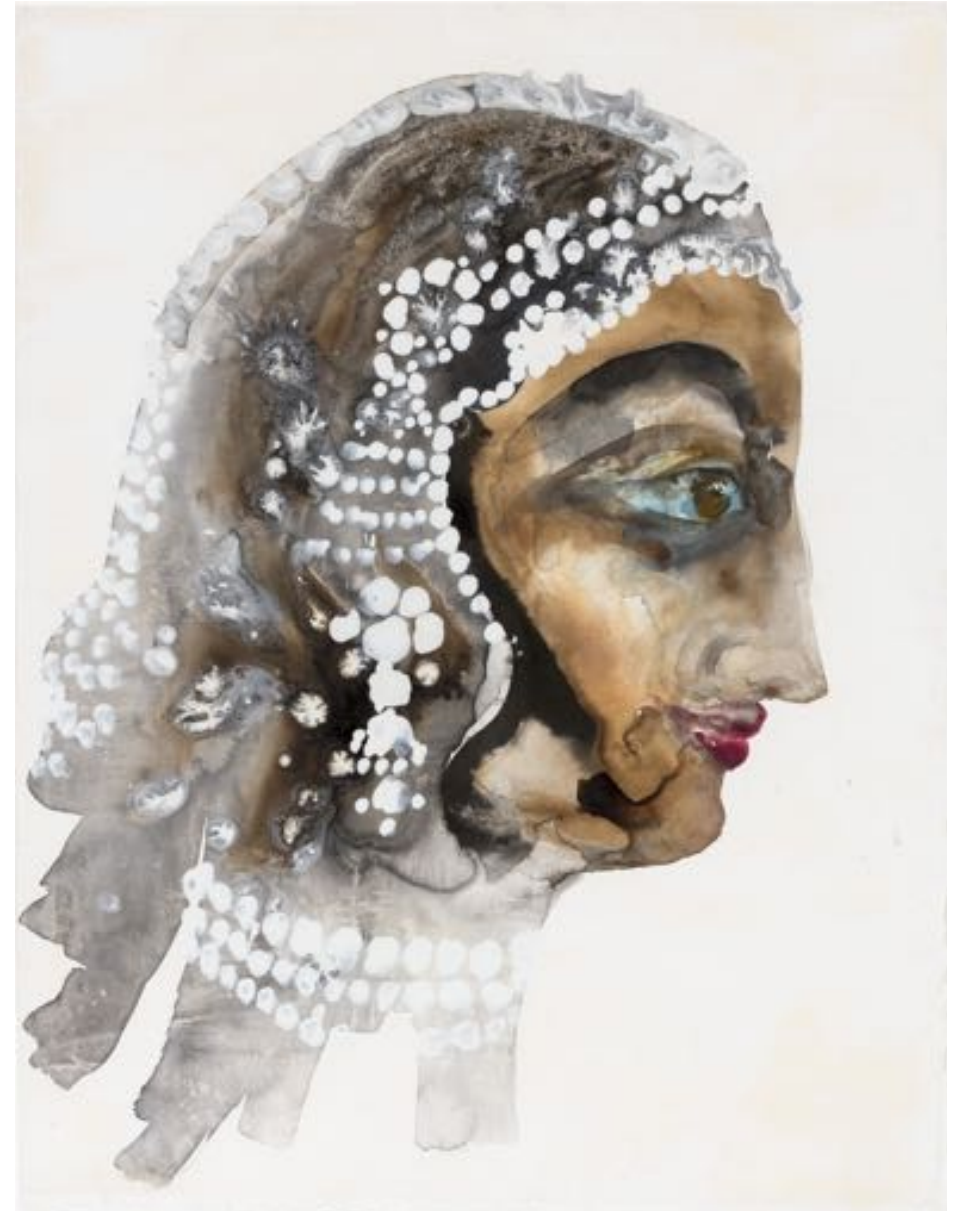
Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London

Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) and Sikander foreground intersectionality in their respective practices, acknowledging how the single lens of European feminism is detrimental to the empowerment of women around the globe.

A sartorial choice marking one's modesty, the veil (*hijab*) is a transnational approach to identity in Mernissi's definition. In its physical appearance and metaphorical resonance, the veil marks boundaries and borders while obscuring something from sight, at once hiding and revealing. It is also a form of *khilvat* or privacy. Juggling complex cultural concepts, Sikander plays with the selective nature of history and the process of constructing identities.

Painted three years after Mernissi's death, this portrait is commemorative and archival. Evocative of paper marbling, the fluidity of ink dissolves forms and as Mernissi fades away she refuses a fixed, immutable identity. Tensions between visibility and invisibility arise. Who gets to speak? Who gets to be represented? Sikander retrieves, recognizes, and recodes expunged female narratives, inscribing them into a history of portraiture.

MD



No Parking Anytime, 2001

Armorial Bearings, Bound, Entangled, Flight, Fright, Heist, Metro, Reflects, Traffic (left to right, top to bottom)

Aquatint with sugar-lift spitbite, dry point, and chine collé on Somerset textured paper

In the '90s during her time at the Rhode Island School of Design and in the early 2000s, Sikander developed a visual lexicon of her own that she would continue to expand. In the artist's own words, "Becoming the other, the outsider, through the prevalent and polarizing dichotomies of East-West, Islamic-Western, Asian-White, oppressed-free, led to an outburst of iconography of fragmented and severed bodies, androgynous forms, armless and headless torsos, and self-rooted, floating half-human figures. They refused to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, or to be stereotyped."

In *Armorial Bearings* a cycle of armless feminine forms collides with arms wielding maces, swords, and axes. These are the weapons of a range of fierce Hindu Goddesses such as Durga or the dark Goddess Kali. Sikander draws out the nature of feminine power, destruction, and creation.

In *Heist* we see the dancer Sharmila Desai balancing on two hands over the figure of a scorpion that was ubiquitous in Islamic illustrated cosmographies. Above her we see a ethereal feminine figure, which Desai's pose imitates. Human, animal, and the abstracted feminine come together.

VG



What does it mean to decolonise?

“To decolonise means not to feel ugly.”

Alka Patel

“To decolonise means my seat at High Table.”

Anonymous

“To decolonise means to yield to the magic of uncertainty.”

Molly Emma Aitken

“To decolonise means to see and to sense differently, outside of the visual regimes we inherit from colonial modernity.”

Gayatri Gopinath

“To decolonise means taking Rutgers-Newark students to the Shahzia Sikander exhibition at the Morgan Library in New York City.”

Alex Dika Seggerman

“To decolonise means to have an exhibition on the art practice of Shahzia Sikander at Cambridge.”

Melia Belli Bose

“To decolonise means calling on your queer, women, trans, and nonbinary students first.”

Anonymous

“To decolonise means to allow those who have no documentary archives to speak for themselves.”

Charan Singh

“To decolonise means to dislocate the borders that inscribe us.”

Aparna Kumar

“To decolonise means to cultivate our ethical capacity to reimagine (rather than only criticise) the place of the past in the present and in the future.”

Annapurna Garimella

“Decolonisation? In the British context let’s start with the unfinished work of anti-colonialism and anti-racism. Such work begins with recognising how corporate-extractivist-militarist colonialism isn’t over.”

Dan Hicks

Maligned Monsters I, 2001
Graphite, ink, and gouache on paper



“Decolonising art history means challenging the closed discourse of modernism and its categories of inclusion and exclusion, erasing the asymmetrical relationship between the metropolitan centre and the peripheries, and questioning the attribution of derivativeness to non-western avant-garde art in general.”

Partha Mitter

“To decolonise means to reorient the ‘wonder’ of Islamic and South Asian art to a permanent space of becoming.”

Vivek Gupta

“To decolonise means to abandon absolute categories for a more than human justice.”

Denis Maksimov

“To decolonise means freeing ourselves first.”

Steven Nelson



Maligned Monsters I, 2000

Aquatint with sugar-lift spitbite, dry point, and chine collé on Somerset textured paper

Collection of Mr. Michael Steinberg

Archetypes of the divine feminine pose shoulder to shoulder, draped in garments from two ancient traditions. The Graeco-Roman Venus gathers her drapery, attempting to conceal her nudity, whilst the figure on the left wears an *antariya*, an ancient Indian garment. For Sikander, the decapitated female form “emphasises the removal of the feminine” from global historical narratives.

Dismembered and dislocated, here female deities are presented as inhuman and monstrous. Assuming its title from Partha Mitter’s 1977 study *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, this work parodies the myths and misconceptions of Hindu divinities constructed by the earliest European explorers.

Language is alluded to in the Persian calligraphic forms. The fantasy language works to unbind the monstrous and defiled figures from the written narratives that have historically confined them. Despite the sense of violence inherent to these decapitated forms, in their encounter something hopeful arises. The joining of feminine forms decenters colonial histories allowing others to speak.

MD and ZT

Maligned Monsters II, 2000

Aquatint with sugar-lift spitbite, dry point, and chine collé on Somerset textured paper

Collection of Mr. Michael Steinberg

A divine Hindu dancer, derived from an eleventh-century sculpture from Uttar Pradesh, gazes down at a Venus from Agnolo Bronzino's painting *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1545). Venus toys with her companion's necklace. Standing in juxtaposition as signs for India and Europe, they are united through their intimate encounter. Here, feminine forms move away from traditional hierarchies. Dichotomies are disrupted and boundaries are blurred.

A nebulous, green form floats amidst the couple: anonymous and buoyant, she recurs frequently in Sikander's work, a reminder of the erasure of the female voice throughout historical accounts. A circle of female bodies in profile, used elsewhere in Sikander's practice as a halo, here represents the sun: a life-giving force, suggestive of divine feminine creativity—countering this history of erasure. Sikander has remade this halo as recently as 2021 in her painting *Infinite Woman*. Abstractions liberate the feminine, becoming self-nourished and self-referent, giving birth to a feminine power.

Sikander later brought this composition to life in her first sculpture, *Promiscuous Intimacies* (2020). What new details and interactions transform when we encounter this composition in the round?

MD and ZT





Promiscuous Intimacies, 2020

Patinated Bronze

Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Locked in an embrace, an Indian dancing figure (*devata*) modelled from an eleventh-century sculpture, gazes down upon an image of Venus from Agnolo Bronzino's painting *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1545). Meandering forms echo one another in a *figura serpentina*, illuminating similarities between these two archetypes of femininity, yet their difference remains.

Taking the composition of *Maligned Monsters II* (2000) into the round, the intertwined figures are liberated from the oppressive gaze that typically characterises their representation. Sikander creates "promiscuous intimacies of multiple times, spaces, art historical traditions, desires, and subjectivities," in the words of queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath.

Deviating from the hetero and homo-normative histories from which these archetypal figures emerged, Sikander expands their conceptual limits to encompass the contemporary. Sexuality becomes a method of subversion. The affection of their encounter creates a microcosm of communal plurality and queer normativity. Venus searches for the *devata's* gaze.

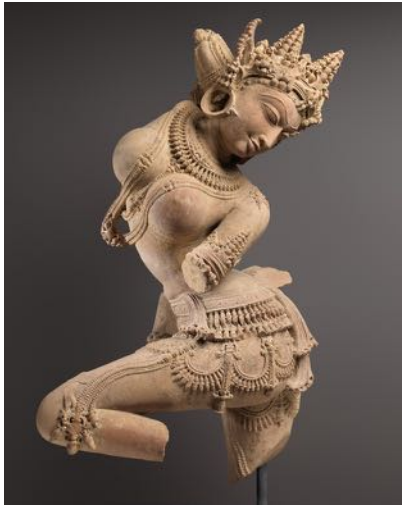
Promiscuous Intimacies is an anti-monument. It disrupts linear notions of time and a fixedness in space. Sikander's experience working on New York City's Mayoral Advisory Commission on Monuments and Markers (2017) urged her to question the

role of public monuments, their complex histories, and the points of contention that arise regarding representation. The use of bronze facilitates a dialogue among multiple traditions of nude sculpture; the bronze casting technique finds precedent in South Asian contexts, such as the Indus Valley Civilization, as well as the European classical tradition. Sikander also plays on the erroneous nineteenth-century belief that classical marble sculpture was originally valued for its whiteness and purity, although in fact sculptures were originally painted. The surface of the bronze is instead patinated, rejecting this perceived colourlessness and challenging the idea of cultural purity.

The artist thus acts as an art historian. Returning to the question, "can decolonization involve forms of intimacy?" Sikander offers an alternative mode of addressing colonial pasts. Sikander's work helps to envision a more intimate future through unification rather than fragmentation. It amalgamates ideas and practices from a range of artistic traditions to reexamine representations of race and gender.

Insisting on the centrality of alternative modes of desire and affiliation, *Promiscuous Intimacies* imagines a different present and future. Sikander demonstrates how stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower. Decolonial love is open to an infinite reality.

VG, MD, GP, ZT



Celestial Dancer (*devata*)
Central India, mid-eleventh century
Sandstone
Metropolitan Museum of Art 2015.500.4.14

An Allegory with Venus and Cupid
Agnolo Bronzino
Florence, ca. 1545
Oil on wood
© The National Gallery, London, NG651

(left to right)

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