

Overview



1. *Armorial Bearings*

Shahzia Sikander No Parking Anytime

Art is a poetic record of our culture, and perhaps the bewildering range of art in play right now has something to do with the bewildering and often devastating interaction of cultures that is so strongly in our news events and our minds right now. The few artists who are somehow in a position to grasp this unsettled time poetically are probably the ones who will finally define our age. I think there is a good possibility that Shahzia Sikander may be among them. I hope that she is, because her approach is essentially optimistic.

Sikander was born in Pakistan in 1969. She studied Mughal miniature painting under a traditional master at the National College of Arts in Lahore, and later attended the Rhode Island School of Art and Design. She has lived in the United States

for almost a decade. "I think of myself as an American," she says. "But I also feel that I have a privileged place from which to express things through art."

"Islam as terrorism or as repression of women is not my experience," she says. "All the women in my family did something with their lives." She approaches life with care and with confidence. Her art, though detailed, has something to do with immediacy. It is also beautiful.

The beauty of her life before she came to the United States is sweetly shown in a long painting she did on paper in 1991-2. It is approximately a foot high and five and a half feet long, and is titled simply *The Scroll*. At the beginning a young woman in white walks up a few steps into a house that unfolds



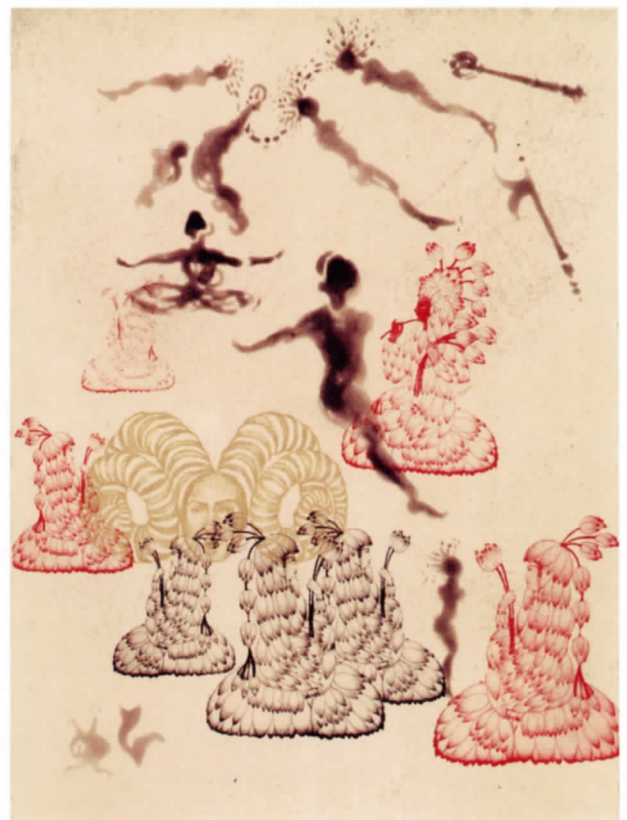
2. *Entangled*



3. *Heist*



4. *Metro*



5. *Reflect*

along the length of the scroll in the style and perspective of traditional miniature painting. A bedroom looks out on a small garden; there is a dining room, a family room, a tiled kitchen. The furnishings are comfortable and modern. Children and animals are playing. On the terrace off the living room the white-clad girl sits in a hooded rattan swing while her father lounges in a chair nearby. She is seen in her bedroom, looking in a mirror. At the end, she is painting in an outdoor courtyard. She stands at an easel a little outside the frame, and paints a portrait of a white-clad girl.

The innocence of the theme belies the work's complexity. "Formally I was engaging in a dialogue with the Safavid period of the Persian School of painting (16th and 17th century), which often depicts interior spaces, has specific usage of patterns, particular perspectives, dense surfaces, etc.," she explains. Her training was "methodical and ritualistic" and was about "surface, palette, form, composition, and stylization. Self-expression came later."

From her earliest paintings, stylistically Sikander has mixed Mughal (Islamic) and Rajput (Hindu) traditional forms. To those of us with untrained eyes she seems simply to draw on the Indian miniature tradition, but to someone used to looking at miniatures the paintings show shifting boundaries. The bloody Partition in 1947 that created Pakistan as a Muslim state separate from India still colors the attitudes of people on both sides of the divide. "Pakistan's identity is forever linked to its difficult relationship with its neighbor," Sikander says. "How do you acknowledge your past or your traditions when they are really part of a plural, a melting pot that has been stirred over the ages? How do you decide which part of one's own history is acceptable and which is not? When you're focusing on miniature painting and you come across a Mewar painting from Rajasthan, do you ignore it because it is from a Hindu court?"

Her answer, of course, is No. "People in the arts within Pakistan have always tried to create some understanding of what is happening in India," she says. There is a dangerous standoff at the moment between Pakistan and India, a standoff that until recently seemed parallel to the even-more-dangerous situation between Palestine and Israel that is presently preoccupying us. An all-out Pakistan-India confrontation has been held at bay, however, and this is at least partly by the influence of people in the arts: people who think about the value of culture and are not willing to destroy themselves or to invite destruction for the sake of ancient animosities.

To Sikander, art is "a ticket to experience." She sees boundaries in life that will "always exist" and lists them as "economic, cultural, national, religious, political, geographical, historical

and psychological." What she wants to do, as an artist, is to "articulate their shifting nature."

In her hands this articulation is painstaking and time-consuming. In Pakistan, she says, she learned "respect for tradition and respect for patience." She draws with great concentration and exactness, working at first on translucent paper. "The sheer act of doing it gives me a certain sort of peace," she says. In mixing Hindu and Muslim imagery she has no qualms about subverting both, often humorously, and since she has been in the "neutral" political situation of the United States she has also begun to receive inspiration from what she calls "mundane and ordinary things." She feels it is important to "be in communication with the community one lives in."

As she develops images, she overlays the thin paper she is drawing on with other drawings also in progress, and in this way discovers satisfying combinations. Once she has settled on a particular set of images, she uses them again and again in different media. Besides her work with miniature painting, she also has done a number of large wall paintings and installations that involve drawings done with whole-body gestural movements. Her installations, in particular, use layers of large drawings and often are put up in just a few days. They are a foil for her detailed miniature paintings that require



Shahzia Sikander in the Crown Point studio, 2001.

months, sometimes years, to complete.

In terms of the time they take to make, her prints fit in-between the paintings and the installations. They are not drawn quickly like the drawings in her installations, but because she re-uses some images from earlier works, and because she is working with plates and printers and sometimes a computer, she can make reasonably rapid progress. When she came to Crown Point Press in mid-December, 2001, she brought with her some images that were on computer disks. Some of them were drawings that had been manipulated digitally to create what she described as “divine circles.” Others appeared not to be manipulated, but could be freely changed in size or intensity at any time. “Using digital technology for me is not very different from how I have worked in the past,” she says. “I have always culled information and images from a range of sources (art historical or personal) and played it out through layers. I am doing the same here, except I am further complicating the layering process through digitally altering my drawings.”

In our studio, Sikander began with the computer-generated images. She had used some of these for a banner commissioned by New York’s Museum of Modern Art and also as elements in some of the miniature paintings that she had exhibited at the

end of 2001 in New York at the Asia Society. Before beginning, she asked us to make some further changes to the images in the computer. Then we used photogravure to put the images onto copper plates.

After that, she sat down and drew on those plates and many additional ones, using our traditional processes: mostly soft and hard grounds with sugar lift and spit bite aquatints. The printers were proofing constantly, sometimes using *chine collée*. Little by little the images appeared.

They are poignant images, intensely visual. Their complexity and delicacy pulls you into them—it’s only later that you realize what is on the artist’s mind. “The events of September 11 gave me a drive, a jolt out of a very unreal situation,” Sikander told me. “All of a sudden we were not just ourselves, we were cloaked/masked by the representations of our so-called identities.” She titled the first print, bristling with the weapons of Genghis Khan, *Armorial Bearings*. The next, with two entwined archaic figures and two guns, their barrels tied in knots, is called *Entangled*. Then, suddenly, we are in the present day as photographs of actual women (not the artist) appear in the next two prints, *Heist* and *Metro*. In *Metro* there is an echo of *Armorial Bearings* and, with a shock, we notice that the Mandela is made up of airplanes.

Next we are in a sensual world (*Reflect*), a congested but beautiful world (*Traffic Jam*), and a place where a woman, lightly restrained by an endless railing, escapes into a Yoga posture (*Bound*). The railing continues on, a frail barrier before an ominous tower where the Angel of Death menaces (*Fright*). In the last print (*Flight*) the railing has become a ladder, and the spirit, free and distant, has strong wings on which to glide.

It is a complicated story of displacement and helplessness, but also of strength and beauty and self-possession. The portfolio presents, as Sikander says, “an open-ended narrative.” Sikander calls the title “NYC typical.” It implies that we are forbidden to stop, or to rest. We have no time.

But, the images, the art, say something different. They invite slow and thoughtful contemplation. The title says: Hurry—you must not stop. But the art says: Stop, think. One aspect of the work subverts the other. Two ideas are held simultaneously, and they are mysteriously equal in impact. A precise meaning, a lesson, is difficult to come by, but somehow we are left with hope. And the poetry is unmistakable.

—Kathan Brown





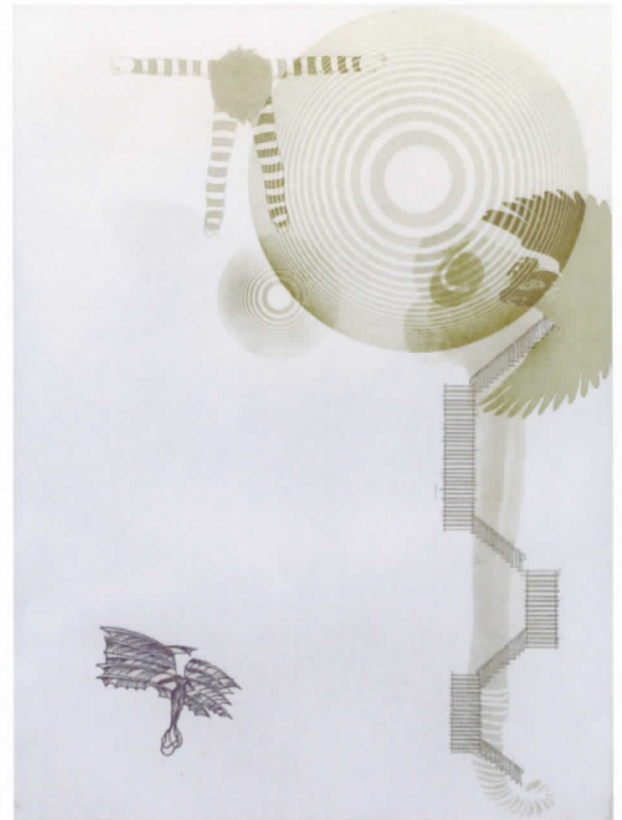
6. *Traffic Jam*



7. *Bound*



8. *Fright*



9. *Flight*

Shahzia Sikander

Born 1969, Lahore, Pakistan
Lives and works in New York City

Education

1995 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence
1992 B.F.A. National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2001 The Asia Society, New York City (with Nilima Sheikh)
2001 Art Pace, San Antonio, Texas
2000 Whitney Museum, Philip Morris Branch, New York City
1999 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D. C.
1999 The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Kansas City
1998 The Renaissance Society, The University of Chicago, Chicago
1997 Deitch Projects, New York City
1997 Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, California

Selected Group Exhibitions

2001 *ARS 01*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Kiasma, Helsinki, Finland
2001 *Elusive Paradise*, National Gallery Museum, Ottawa, Canada
2000 *Greater New York*, PS1, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, New York
1999 *The American Century*, Whitney Museum, New York City
1999 *The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
1999 *Art-Worlds in Dialogue*, Ludwig Museum, Koln, Germany

NOTE: Quotations in the text from the artist are taken from three sources:
1.) E-mails from the artist to the author. 2.) *Art:21—Art in the 21st Century*, Part 1, a videotape, produced for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2001. 3.) an interview with the artist by Vishakha N. Desai in the exhibition catalog, *Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander*, the Asia Society, New York, 2001.

In the Crown Point Gallery:

April 23 - June 1, 2002

Invention/Tradition: Etchings and Unique Works by Shahzia Sikander, Enrique Chagoya, Francesco Clemente, Brad Davis, Katsura Funakoshi, Bryan Hunt, Elaine de Kooning, Robert Kushner, and Tom Marioni. Also on view is *Purple*, a new portfolio of seven etchings by Richard Tuttle.

In Chicago:

Visit Crown Point Press at ArtChicago 2002, May 10 - 13 at Navy Pier, Booth A216. New prints by Shahzia Sikander and Richard Tuttle as well as other recent editions will be on view. Come and join us in celebrating the fair's tenth anniversary!

In New York:

Crown Point's new editions by Shahzia Sikander and Richard Tuttle are available at Pace Editions, 32 E. 57th St., New York.

No Parking Anytime, by Shahzia Sikander, 2001, was printed by Rachel Fuller, assisted by Dena Schuckit and Case Hudson. Paper size: 18-1/4 x 14-1/2"; image size varies. Nine color photogravures with (in various images) soft and hard ground etching; aquatint; and spit bite, soap ground and water bite aquatints. Prints 1 - 5 are printed on *gampi* paper *chine collé* mounted on Somerset soft white satin paper. Images 6 - 9 are printed directly on Somerset soft white satin paper. The edition is 25 with ten artist's proofs. The first twenty sets and the proofs are presented in portfolio boxes. Published by Crown Point Press.

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