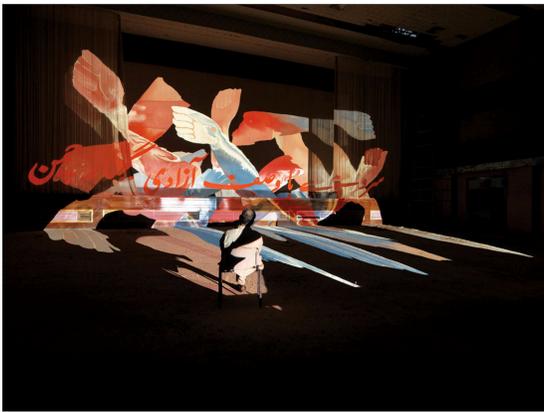


# SEAN KELLY

Desai, Vishakha N. "Intertwined Identities: Shahzia Sikander in Conversation With Vishakha N. Desai," *Art Asia Pacific*, October, 2013.

## ArtAsiaPacific

# INTERTWINED IDENTITIES: SHAHZIA SIKANDER IN CONVERSATION WITH VISHAKHA N. DESAI SHAHZIA SIKANDER



**UNSEEN 2**, 2011, HD digital projection, height: c. 30 m, at the Shangri La Center for Islamic Arts and Cultures, The Doris Duke Foundation, Honolulu, 2011. Courtesy the artist.

In June, the Pakistan-born, New York-based artist Shahzia Sikander and Vishakha N. Desai, president emerita of Asia Society and Asian art scholar, met at Sikander's studio in Midtown, New York, to mark her participation in Sharjah Biennial 11, the 5th Auckland Triennial and the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Their discussion focused on the transnational nature of Sikander's work, complexities around the questions of her identity, and her role in the rise of contemporary miniature painting in Pakistan and its reception around the world.

**Vishakha N. Desai:** *Shahzia, you've obviously taken part in many interviews with a wide variety of people all over the world, often focusing on your work and its broad trajectory. In this interview, I'd like to concentrate on the location, perception and reception of your work, both in the West and in Pakistan, and discuss understandings of you as an artist, and how people position you in the context of today's globalizing, transnational world.*

*Now, that's a mouthful! But the reason I think it's important is that I really want to get at this notion of a hybrid identity in the second decade of the 21st century, and therefore at how work gets received today, especially in the case of a major international artist such as yourself who comes from outside the mainstream Euro-American axis. With this in mind, we will discuss the process of your work, but we'll*

**talk more about how this work then gets located, perceived and received by people here in the United States and in Pakistan.**

**So let's begin with the Sharjah Biennial, as your latest project, *Parallax* (2013), was unveiled there and will go on to the Istanbul Biennial in September with some modifications. *Parallax* is an amazingly nuanced installation—an immense three-channeled video projection—but of course you began your career as a miniature artist. So please, could you tell us about the relationship of this new work and its scale to your original training, and describe your experience of working in Sharjah?**

**Shahzia Sikander:** Miniature painting for me has always been heroic in scope and not limited by its scale—it is a space to unleash one's imagination. *Parallax* is in fact a compact, varied, multilayered, expandable projection created from hundreds of small drawings. It came about as a result of my visits to Sharjah, and in particular from driving in and around the emirate, across its deserts and up and down its coasts. There is no better activity than driving to get a sense of a space in a car culture, and I picked up a great sense of the topography of the land. *Parallax* examines Sharjah's position beside the Strait of Hormuz, and its role as a stopover for the old Imperial Airways. This proximity to water, sand and oil, and of course the historical power tensions surrounding maritime trade, all became fodder for visual play between solid and liquid representations in the work. All of the liquid states in the animation are made up of millions of silhouettes of hair that have been culled from images of *gopis*—female worshippers of Krishna often portrayed in Indian miniatures. These transform into large swaths of static noise that hover between multiple representations, ranging from oceans, water and oil, to flocks of birds and patterns of human migration.

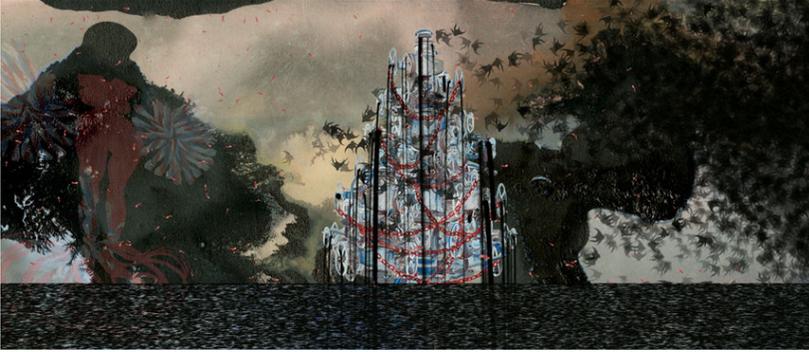
By isolating the *gopi* hair from its source, I emphasized its potential to cultivate new associations. Similarly, there is no fixed viewing point in the film. It is simultaneously aerial and internal. For me, even the Arabic recitation in the score doesn't need a translation, as the emotional range in the delivery is vast and inclusive. This is also a reference to the non-Arabic-speaking Muslim cultures such as Pakistan, where Arabic is primarily aural. I see *Parallax* as immersive and limitless in scale. Scaled up using certain projectors it could defy all sorts of architectural boundaries, and scaled down it could even be a sort of "Sharjahnama" illuminated manuscript.

**VND: Are you suggesting that even in miniature painting, you're not limited by the format?**

**SS:** Right. I was engaging with miniature painting as a conceptual activity from the very beginning. I spent my early years at Lahore's National College of Arts (NCA) in the mid- to late 1980s, where I learned about miniature painting and was also aware of Zahoor ul Akhlaq's practice. He was teaching in the painting department then, and his large-scaled acrylic works often employed the language of the miniature. However, my interest in miniature painting was to expand the medium from within, embracing its craft, technique, rigor, detail and small scale, as well as its historical contexts. I was invested in its beauty and illustrative lushness too.

**VND: It seems to me that, from the beginning, you have been interested in different contexts for the creation and reception of your work—right from the time you undertook your training at the NCA. So how was your installation in Sharjah received?**

**SS:** Context is important. How my work was received in the early 1990s, either in the US or Pakistan, is different from how it is understood now. Its reception continues to evolve, and the art world and its power dynamics have also shifted in the last decade. *Parallax* was received well in Sharjah primarily because of its poetics, both visual and sensorial. There is a large South Asian population there, and a majority of the organizers and workers for the Biennial were either from the United Arab Emirates and the larger peninsular region, or from India and Pakistan, so there were frequent shifts between languages. I was very interested in examining that linguistic crossover. I often use text in my work as a tool to explore ideas about translation—how a translation is related to the original, and at what point it becomes the original. I find myself pondering such ideas, especially in light of certain texts that shift between the poetic and the political. This was echoed in the video installation I created in Sharjah last year at the Khorfakkan Cinema entitled *The Cypress, Despite Its Freedom, Remains Captive to the Garden* (2012), which was a play on a survivor held captive to his dream. The protagonist is an actual laborer who came from Pakistan in 1976 to work on the construction of the cinema. Having risen through the ranks to become the manager of the space, he had literally lived there for 36 years. The abandoned cinema, dying a slow death, was his home, his life, his love—his existence was so intricately intertwined with the space that its imminent death became, in my eyes, a metaphor for his life's labor.



**PARALLAX**, 2013, three-channel HD animation with surround sound, installed at the Sharjah Biennial, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Ian Forster, Art21.

**VND:** *As with these installations at Sharjah, your work is so often about layers, physical and metaphorical, incorporating images and texts that are frequently disembodied from one another, but create a visual whole. Can you talk a bit about this process of disassembling and reassembling both images and their meanings?*

**SS:** Well, I am interested in the nature of the relationships between text and image, and the processes behind their segregation, especially in the Indo-Persian miniature-painting tradition. The paintings were often torn out of their original book context by collectors and dealers. This has created a disjuncture and visual unfamiliarity with the Arabic or Persian script that originally accompanied the paintings. Often my use of Urdu writing draws upon the implications of such processes of dislocation and redaction. Redaction is a critical issue, especially in terms of how history is constantly being rewritten in both cultural and political spheres.

**VND:** *So in Sharjah there might be a completely different relationship to your work than in London or New York, and again to that in London or New York during the 1990s. Let's talk a little about New York in the 1990s—identity politics were raging and multiculturalism was everywhere. Sometimes it did mean that people were pigeonholed into a particular category, but it also meant that there was an openness to looking at work with many different lenses and perspectives—that people at least made an attempt to engage. How do you think about that moment for the reception of your work both here in the US and also in Pakistan at the same time?*

**SS:** I came to the US in 1992 to do an exhibition at the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, DC, and stayed on to do a master's degree in painting and printmaking at Rhode Island School of Design. My first serious exhibitions in New York were in 1997 at the Drawing Center and at that year's Whitney Biennial. But by then I had already started exhibiting at many other venues across the country. The period from 1989 to 1997 was for me one of extreme experimentation with miniature painting, laying down the foundations for many new directions that I could use to engage with the medium, extending its domain to include large-scale public murals, wall drawings and multimedia installations, as well as exploring collaborations with other artists.

**VND:** *I recall seeing your work in 1993 or 1994, when you had already started dislocating the various layers of technique and form in miniature painting by inverting the center and margin, and by stepping outside of the framing devices. Was this a means to disrupt the familiar and open it up to other narratives of gender and identity?*

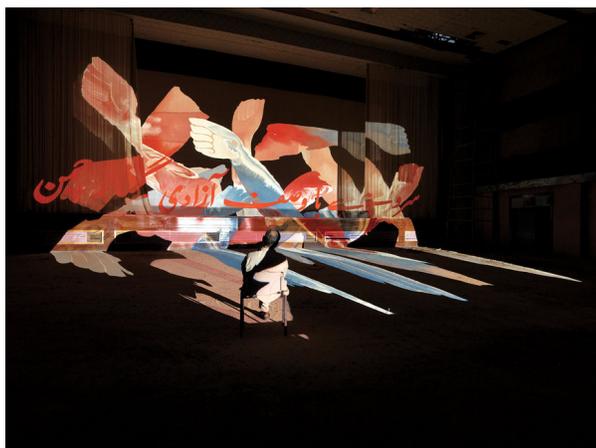
**SS:** At that time, I was reading Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, among others, and was fascinated with Eva Hesse's work and life, as well as Amrita Sher-Gil's. I was also looking at Bhupen Khakhar's paintings alongside those of David Hockney. My work started reflecting a heightened engagement with feminism and sexuality, as well as incorporating a postmodern identity. I was interested in cultural semiotics, including Hindu and Muslim iconographies, and in juxtaposing anticlassical impulses in Western art, such as Mannerism, with a variety of outsider aesthetics.

**VND:** *So how were these new directions in your work being perceived in Pakistan in the mid- to late 1990s?*

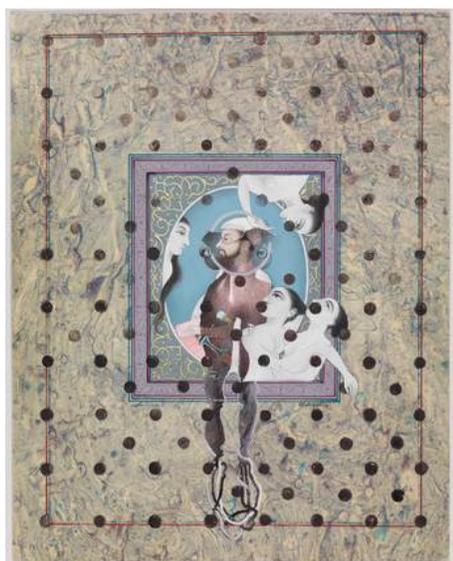
SS: My work was being studied voraciously at the NCA at the time, as I'd broken into the international art scene, and this signaled that miniature painting was a profitable activity to pursue—I was achieving rapid, museum-scaled visibility. Perhaps much of this sudden embrace of my work happened too fast—a familiar dilemma in an art world that is obsessed with youth. Earlier, while in Pakistan from 1989 to 1993, I had received incredible support from my mentors and peers at the NCA.

**VND:** *What originally made you develop this passion for miniature painting, and even decide to major in it? It sounds like your teacher, Bashir Ahmed, hardly had any students who followed this path.*

SS: At the time, there was no serious interest at the NCA in critically engaging with miniature painting, which is why it became a natural choice for me. I wanted to understand the social construct of a so-called traditional genre in a contemporary society. However, I was in an odd position, as it was the medium that was most burdened with notions of craft, of low versus high art, illustration versus fine art, skill versus critique, tradition versus the avant-garde and so on. Though it was no fun being subjected to these extremely problematic and polarizing discourses, there was more than enough complexity to dismantle. It was exciting to examine, imagine and explore the many possibilities of a traditional genre whose future had not yet been laid out in any clear terms. And that was the appeal—no one had yet deconstructed miniature painting in any extreme way. My training with Ahmed was rigorous, something like 12 to 14 hours a day, but I was eager to learn the craft, while never losing sight of its potential for experimentation.



**THE CYPRESS, DESPITE ITS FREEDOM, REMAINS CAPTIVE TO THE GARDEN**, 2012, HD digital projections, installed at Khorfakkan Cinema, Sharjah, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.



**PERILOUS ORDER**, 1989-97, transparent and opaque watercolor on hand-prepared wasli paper, 26 × 20 cm. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy the artist and Whitney Museum.



**REINVENTING THE DISLOCATION**, 1989–1997, transparent and opaque watercolor on hand-prepared wasli paper, 33 × 23 cm. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy the artist and Whitney Museum.

**VND:** *As I recall, you got a big award while at the NCA?*

**SS:** Yes, I think I got all the awards available, the first time that had happened in the history of the college. I received the Haji Sharif Award for excellence in miniature painting, a distinction for my thesis project and most notably the Shakir Ali Award for imagination and vision.

**VND:** *I've often thought that your decision to pursue miniature painting when you did was one of the more avant-garde moves you could have made, especially in the context of the highly Westernized teaching methods in South Asia at the time. It seems to me you were a bit of an outsider in examining the miniature-painting tradition while also following it assiduously. You were at the forefront of contemporary miniature painting in Pakistan, but it sounds as if you were still quite alone in this pursuit. This brings me to my next question. I understand that there have been debates in Pakistan recently that you should not be considered a Pakistani artist—you are not being discussed in the context of contemporary miniature painting because you have come of age here in the US. How do you feel about this vis-à-vis your training, your engagement with traditional painting and your own contemporaneity?*

**SS:** I would say that I emerged as an artist at the very beginning of the movement. As soon as I graduated I was asked to teach alongside Ahmed, the first time a student of his had ever taught with him. This attracted a new, larger body of students, who otherwise would have been less likely to major in miniature painting. And many of them are now exhibiting all over the world.

**VND:** *The definition of contemporary miniature painting becomes very reductive if it is simply defined in terms of its location. Is one of the reasons you may not be included in its history now that you have become an international star and are not part of the Pakistani cultural scene?*

**SS:** It's much more than that—it is politics in full operation. Besides, it's no longer about being internationally famous or not. Everyone is now in the same boat, more or less, all exhibiting in one or another international art fair or biennial at some point. And many contemporary miniature painters from Pakistan are also living outside of the country. For me not to be included in recent books on contemporary miniature painting is about exclusion in a political sense.

I think it is indicative of such trendy political thinking as “the local” and “the global.” The local/global tension has always been part of the larger dialogue. I think it is more pronounced now because we live in a much more globalized capitalist system. Seen from that perspective, the recent influx of contemporary miniature painting can be seen as a response to the extreme capitalism of today’s international market. Those tendencies were less pronounced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In that respect, my engagement with miniature painting happened at a time that was less marred by this globalizing market—I had the opportunity to flesh out my approach to the subject.

**VND:** *So in some ways one might argue that, in the history of Pakistani contemporary miniature painting, you are both a transitional figure but also at the forefront, because you started early, learning from Ahmed, and then were involved in the conscious critiquing of form so prevalent in postmodern discourse over the last decade. So, in the early phase of your career, you were transformative but also transitional, because you were at the cusp. But let me ask you, here you are now living in New York, and you’ve made your career in the West. In the 1990s you were typically called a Pakistani artist living in New York. Now it seems you are called a Pakistan-born artist—you’re an international artist. Does it matter to you how you are defined?*

**SS:** You are right to say that my early work was transitional because I created the bridge from the traditional to the contemporary. You could also describe it as transformational in that many others followed suit. The work I created from 1987 to 1991 in Lahore was important primarily because it resisted the dominant requirement of that time—to produce a contemporary depiction of a traditional ritual. My work challenged the established premises by the insertion of the personal, the untranslatable, the ambiguities of youth, the flux of identity, the narrative as a moving image and the picture plane as an infinite space.

But I think that the local is a contaminated construct. I find it very problematic—it needs to be critiqued because it is self-serving. For example, let’s say that curators are traveling to a particular site—there has been an increasing trend over the last decade or so for them to go and “discover” something. That notion is very problematic. If you turn it around and examine the activity of curators, there is a certain complacency in that idea of discovery, as well as an almost colonial way of perceiving the “other.”

**VND:** *In a way, that sort of thinking suggests that, “until I discover you, you don’t exist.” That’s the mentality behind it. I remember in the early 1990s, when we were beginning to work on contemporary Asian art at Asia Society, lots of curators would call me and say, “I’d like to go to Thailand, can you get me the names of two artists?” or “I want to include an artist from Asia, could you just give me a few ideas?” In the end I said, “Would you do that with German artists, without studying the place, the location, the context?” I was placed in a position where I had to say, “I’m not doing it—you go there, you study it and then we’ll talk.” Also, such thinking raises the question of who is an “authentic” artist of a place—who can represent a nation? So, the question I have for you is this: when someone says—as was said at the Literary Festival in Lahore this year—that Shahzia is not a Pakistani artist, how does it feel personally? And how does that matter in relation to the history of miniature painting and whether you are included in it or not?*

**SS:** First of all, it depends on who said it, as this will shed light on the local politics. I think there is a strategy where, by repeating something, you try to establish it as a reality. You know—when you repeat something often enough it becomes reality? So this sort of rhetoric leads to a politics of exclusion. It makes it easier to rewrite history—a particularly common phenomenon in countries such as Pakistan, which has huge and unresolved issues about its identity as well as deeply entrenched hierarchies of power.

**VND:** *It’s ironic that the arts are one of the few things in the world that have the capacity to transcend place and allow connections to be made, while also being of a certain locale, thus shedding light on both the particular and the prevalent. In part it is that very tension between the potential for connecting across cultures and the potential for being of a place that creates the dynamic of how the arts are seen in the world today. The arts have the capacity to move back and forth, and that’s why it feels to me that it is not useful to create an exclusionary practice in which you say, “This is right and that is wrong”—the arts defy that approach. Especially in a country such as Pakistan, which has a history of restrictions and military rule, the arts always have the capacity to push out against these conditions in some way, and that is why such exclusion feels unfortunate. But, having said that, I will play devil’s advocate and*

**ask, what difference does it make to you? Here you are, an internationally recognized artist, happily married, with a great son, you are flying around, being seen in Sharjah, Berlin, London . . .**

**SS:** Of course it makes a difference!

**VND:** *OK, so why? Why does it make a difference?*

**SS:** It makes a huge difference because my life did not start after I left Pakistan. If the period from 1986 to 1993, when I was active artistically in Pakistan, is redacted, as seen in recent publications on contemporary art and contemporary miniature painting from Pakistan, it reshapes the narrative of my career two decades later. I feel that excluding me from the history of contemporary miniature painting is an attempt to reshape perceptions of authenticity both by local figures and by “outsiders” who want to “discover.” But to be excluded from your past by anybody, regardless of who it is—someone from the East or the West, local or global, it doesn’t matter—any type of exclusion, of anybody, becomes personal. It becomes charged and offensive, and it becomes all of those things that we fight for. And as artists those are the things that we take sides on, don’t we, in terms of the larger histories of our cultures?

**VND:** *Is that why you left?*

**SS:** If I reflect now on why I left, there are many reasons—it’s not as simple as saying I left never to return. I go back to Pakistan regularly. I am very connected to family and friends there. I have also made work there in the last decade. It was not about leaving for the US, and New York wasn’t even the destination. And I never really saw myself as part of the diaspora. It has always been the case that there is choice—you choose to be where you choose to be, and it’s fluid in that sense. Interestingly enough, most miniature paintings are held in storage across various Western museums, and it was essential for me to study some in the flesh. Also, the objectivity that comes when you have distance—the objectivity toward your own history, toward your own practice—it forces you to be in a less predictable, less comfortable place. It’s hard not to have the comfort, the familiarity, the peers, but I found that by choosing to put myself in more difficult places, this was a way to be less complacent, to discover and to learn something.

**VND:** *So it’s not true that you don’t engage with Pakistan?*

**SS:** Engage with Pakistan, or engage with the community? What community are we talking about? There is a wide community of artists and art practitioners that I am engaged with internationally. The idea of community is very fluid. I think, in that sense, the colonial gesture of the outsider trying to find the next new thing is also being replicated in local politics. The local often determines its representation via its own prevalent hierarchies. That local power structure is really what I was critiquing when I first started engaging with miniature painting. At that time at the NCA, miniature painting was completely overlooked. It was not hip enough to major in it. I sided with the underdog, Bashir Ahmed, not only to go against the grain but also to challenge my own uninformed assumptions about him and his practice. Ironically, contemporary miniature painting is now overtly commercialized.

**VND:** *Well, that’s the very nature of globalization, isn’t it? You can no longer say that the local is strictly local, or that the transnational exists without the local. And what do we mean by global? For me, the word global is about the interdependence and interconnectivity of the world, so it is about fluidity. What you are suggesting is that the reality of fluidity is lost if an exclusionary practice is adopted, whether this is in politics or in the art world, and that is what we have to guard against. Shahzia, I look forward to seeing where your work goes next, and good luck in Istanbul!*



**PARALLAX**, 2013, three-channel HD animation with surround sound, installed at the Sharjah Biennial, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Ian Forster, Art21.