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Sheets, Hilarie M. "Inspired by Miniature Paintings, Shahzia Sikander Goes Big." *The New York Times*. October 23, 2020.

The New York Times

Inspired by Miniature Paintings, Shahzia Sikander Goes Big

It's been nearly a decade since her last solo show in New York. But this fall the artist is featured in two exhibits, including one of her own.



Figure 1 Shahzia Sikander with video animations from her work "Reckoning" projected onto her. Raised in Pakistan, Sikander has lived in the United States since 1993. "I've always seen myself as participating in and broadening that scope of what American art can be — seeing America from within and also seeing it from the outside." Credit...Farah Al Qasimi for *The New York Times*

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This article is part of our latest Fine Arts & Exhibits special report, which focuses on how art endures and inspires, even in the darkest of times.

Shahzia Sikander, who was raised in Pakistan and moved to the United States in 1993, has long used the language of traditional Indian and Persian miniature painting as a departure point to make contemporary work exploring colonialism, migration, gender and hyphenated identities.

Her art, which moves fluidly across boundaries of geography, culture and time, is enjoying particular attention this fall, viewed against a backdrop of polarization in this country and around the world.

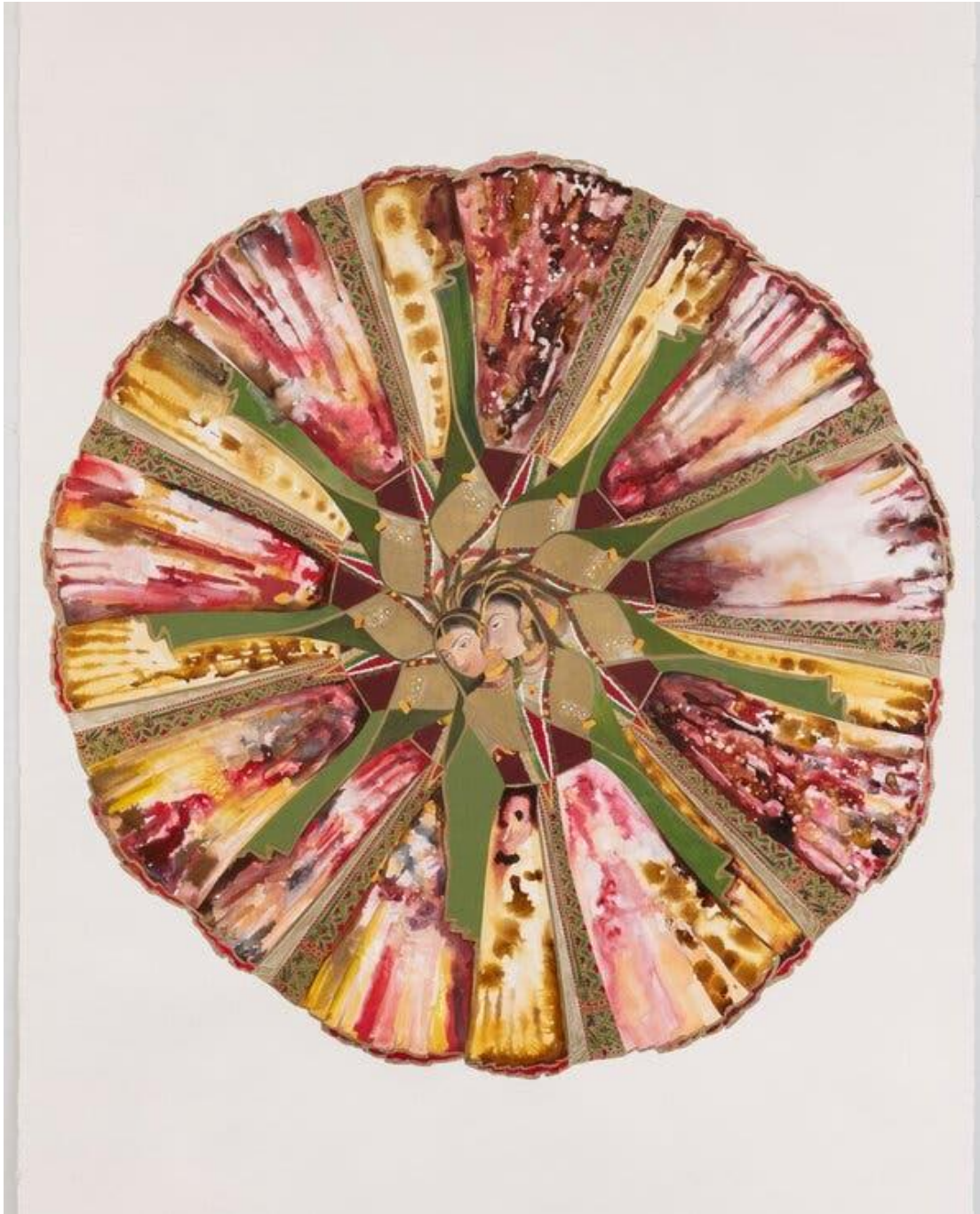
“I’ve always seen myself as participating in and broadening that scope of what American art can be — seeing America from within and also seeing it from the outside,” said Ms. Sikander, who is 51. She noted that in a country where the conversations are often black and white, she has navigated a zone in between.

In “Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues,” a solo show opening at the Sean Kelly Gallery on Nov. 5, Ms. Sikander brings her nuanced global and feminist perspective to both intimate and large-scale drawings in ink and gouache, glass mosaics, video animations and her first sculpture.

While the political issues in these works can be fraught, said Janine Cirincione, a partner at the gallery, “Shahzia renders them so beautifully and allows poetics to deliver those messages.”

“Arose” (2019-20) is a 6-by-4-foot drawing composed of two repeating female forms — highly stylized figures depicted in profile and with long skirts, typical of how women were rendered in the classical miniature painting tradition that Ms. Sikander first engaged with as an art student.

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Ms. Sikander's drawing "Arose" is composed of two repeating, highly stylized female forms. Credit...Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly

Liberated from that frame here, the characters — either lovers or mirror versions of one another — spiral in a pinwheel, channeling “the enormous possibility of the feminine spirit,” Ms. Sikander said. Their lushly painted skirts read kaleidoscopically as a giant poppy blossom, a recurring motif in the show alluding to the opium industry in Afghanistan and the long-term U.S. intervention and conflict there.

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The ravishing circular composition “also looks like a bombed-out out site to me,” said the artist, who likes to play with multiple meanings simultaneously and create tension between beauty and destruction. She has made a larger version of the image in mosaic, a medium she first tackled with a 66-foot-high permanent commission completed in 2017 at Princeton University.

Ms. Sikander realized classical miniature painting was ripe for deconstruction as a student at the National College of Arts in her native Lahore in 1988. A visiting lecturer from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London showed slides of hundreds of the seductive gemlike works, painted over the centuries under Persian and Mughal rulers and now largely residing in the storage rooms of Western museums as a result of colonial histories of looting.

“When I read more about how that work was acquired, my mind started to invent stories,” said Ms. Sikander, who spent four years in school mastering the technique and precision required to build the luminous surfaces of miniature painting layer by layer. “This art form is almost buzzing at the edges.”

Inserting personal imagery within the guise of miniature painting, Ms. Sikander’s thesis project mapped out the architectural complex of her family home in a long horizontal piece called “The Scroll” (1989-90).



Ms. Sikander's 1989-1990 work "The Scroll" showed the architectural complex of her family home with repeated images of a young woman in white passing ghostlike through each room. Credit...Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York

Using the genre convention of stacked, flattened-out spaces, the artist repeated an image of a young woman in white, painted from behind and passing ghostlike through each room filled with activity, until she’s finally at an easel painting herself in an act of self-definition.

“The Scroll,” which received national acclaim in Pakistan and launched a neo-miniature movement within her college, is one of two works by Ms. Sikander going on view at the Asia Society Triennial in New York opening Oct. 27. The piece will also be included next year in a survey mapping her early career at the museum at the Rhode Island School of Design, where the artist went to graduate school after moving to the United States.

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At RISD, Ms. Sikander was in an intensive drawing program, experimenting with quick gestures in ink that led to a loosening of her vocabulary, according to Jan Howard, the museum's curator of prints, drawings and photographs, who organized the exhibition. "All these female forms — sometimes monstrous, sometimes playful, sometimes not completely human, sometimes headless — begin to emerge and some of them continue to this day," Ms. Howard said.

The show, "Extraordinary Realities," will also travel to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, where Ms. Sikander completed the CORE program at the Glassell School of Art, and the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, echoing the artist's own path in the United States.

After settling in New York in the late 1990s, Ms. Sikander received a rush of attention with simultaneous showings at the 1997 Whitney Biennial and the Drawing Center, followed by solo exhibitions at institutions around the country.

"It was a really interesting time in the U.S. for me, before Sept. 11, when things were looking outward more," said Ms. Sikander, who came to feel limited after 2001 by her work being seen and discussed too often through the prism of her Pakistani and Muslim biography.

Wanting to step outside a New York-centric art world, Ms. Sikander — who received a MacArthur "genius" award in 2006 — focused largely on international residencies, biennials and exhibitions over the years, at institutions including Asia Society Hong Kong and MAXXI in Rome (both 2015).

The upcoming Asia Society Triennial aims to showcase a number of midcareer artists, including Ms. Sikander, with mature bodies of work that have, according to the exhibition's co-curator Michelle Yun, fallen off the radar in New York.

"Shahzia's been working steadily to the beat of her own drum and has a critical role in the art world that needs to be recognized," Ms. Yun said.

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Ms. Sikander's first-ever sculpture, "Promiscuous Intimacies," brings together figures from European and Indian cultures. Credit...Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York; Chris Roque of UAP

Now the artist's new gallery, Sean Kelly, is spotlighting the connections in her work across media, including three animations that set her painted motifs into hypnotic motion at vast scale.

The newest, "Reckoning" (2020), depicts two warriors in an epic struggle and a planet fighting back for its life, with imagery that is primal and big-bang beautiful. "I wanted it to be as if you were stepping into a miniature painting and just to let it sing," said Ms. Sikander, who has collaborated on all her animations over the last decade with the [Pulitzer-winning composer Du Yun](#).

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Ms Sikander was inspired to make her first sculpture after serving in 2017 on the [Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers](#) in New York City and being privy to strong opinions on contested monuments in public spaces. “So much of how we view our culture is through masculine histories,” she said. Of her new painted bronze titled “Promiscuous Intimacies,” she continued, “I wanted it to be like an anti-monument.”

She modeled her two female protagonists on the goddess in [Bronzino’s famous Italian Mannerist painting “An Allegory with Venus and Cupid”](#) and on an [Indian Devata figure in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum](#), placing this celestial dancer on the shoulder of the seated Venus and engaging them in a flirtatious relationship. “It’s unclear who’s in a position of power,” said Ms. Sikander, who wanted to undermine a binary reading of East versus West in the figures and emphasize their mutual desires. She worked with two dancers as she modeled the sculpture in clay to make sure their playful postures were physically possible.

Both archetypes of female beauty in art history, Ms. Sikander’s figures claim agency by looking at each other, the artist said. “They’re taking the gaze back.”