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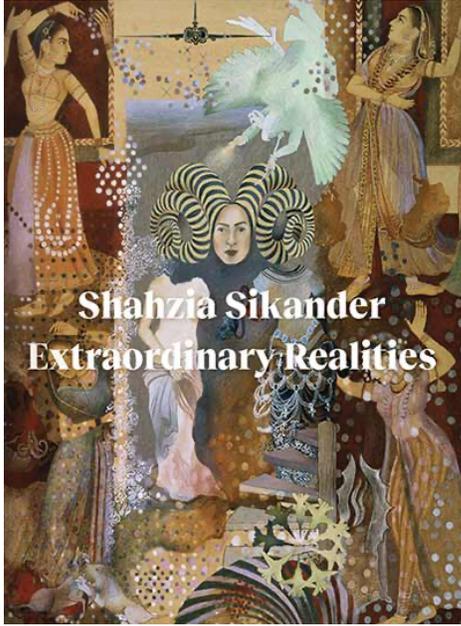
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 THE KARACHI COLLECTIVE
Critical Dialogue on Art, Design and Culture



*I struggle to find the right distance,
The in-between space
Neither too close nor too far away will she be safe
A dwelling will be located for her
By her
And if they still dress her up as them
She will announce them impersonators
For she has been newly born*
-Shahzia Sikander, "Extracting Her From My Memory", 1994 or 1995 ¹

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Front cover: *Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities* (Credits: Hirmer Publishers) 'Pleasure Pillar' (detail), 2001 Vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolour and tea on wasli paper, 43.2 x 30.5 cm Collection of Amita and Purnendu Chatterjee

The latest monograph on Shahzia Sikander (b.1969) is an expansive and critical study on the Pakistani-American contemporary artist which builds upon research from her previous publications in exciting ways. Edited by Sadia Abbas and Jan Howard, the Hirmer Verlag publication *Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities* concentrates on works produced by Sikander from 1987 till 2003. ² Filled with numerous artworks and a poem by the artist, readers will engage with absorbing essays and interviews that venture into the roots (and continuation) of Sikander's artistic practice.

At the time when Sikander's first major work *The Scroll* (1991) received national acclaim, she was beginning her journey as a contemporary artist. Her meditation over physical conventions of the Mughal and Safavid artistic traditions that indulged in a robust historical practice were starting to merge with issues of gender in contemporary society alongside social history, influential works of artists including David Hockney, K.G. Subramanyan and writings of notable intellectuals such as Fahmida Riaz and Manto. Today, Sikander is recognized as a pioneer of neo-miniature and contemporary miniature with major exhibitions all over the globe.

In Lahore's National College of Arts (NCA), Sikander vigorously trained in the miniature painting department that was set up in 1982. A few years later, she completed her graduate studies and augmented a unique visual vocabulary that brings traditional manuscript painting vis-a-vis contemporary art at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). The interview between Sikander's art teachers that include *Ustad* Bashir Ahmad from NCA, Dennis Congdon from RISD, Sadia Abbas, and Sikander herself locates the role of the artist's educational alma maters and Sikander's subsequent chosen path within the visual arts. This

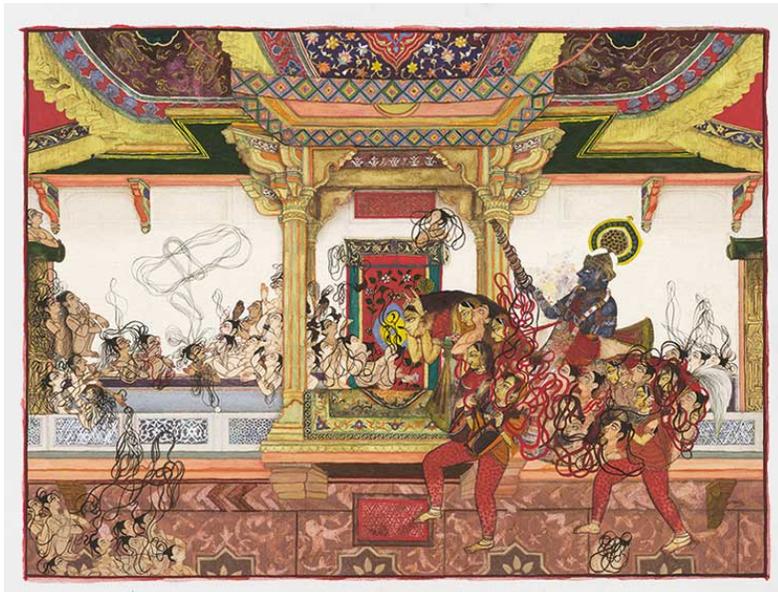
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interview will be of interest to all researchers who are particularly involved in demystifying connections between evolution, practice, and pedagogy of visual art and history in Pakistani art schools.



The Scroll, 1989–1990, vegetable colour, dry pigment, watercolour on wasli paper, 13 1/8 inches x 16 7/8 inches, Collection and courtesy of the artist.

Essays in the book thoroughly examine Sikander’s interests in challenging the “set in stone” formal practice of manuscript painting in Pakistani art school curriculum (especially at the time when she was a student in the late 80s) by focusing on global historic occurrences, diasporic shifts, and personal social experiences of the artist. This type of lens is useful since the artist’s works of the past three decades have engaged with themes of hybrid cultural encounters, transnational exchange between South Asia and the West, and shifts in understanding complex identities spinning around gender, colonial and post-colonial history, and art history per se.



ISpiNN (III), 2003, 8 x 11 inches, vegetable colour, dry pigment, water colour on wasli paper, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin. Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein in honor of Annette DiMeo Carozzi, 2015, © 2021 Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York.

These subjects are discussed in the essay *Intimations of the Monster*, where Sadia Abbas discusses various paintings including “Red Riding Hood” (1997), and “Monsters Within” (2000-1). Abbas writes about the artist’s works that deconstruct misogynistic portrayals of women from contemporary society and history while juxtaposing them with elusive political metaphors that indicate toward religious

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profiling in the West, post 9/11 attacks in the United States. Similarly, visual motifs in Sikander's artworks are expanded in Kishwar Rizvi's essay *History, Narrative, and the Female Figure (as Disruption)*. Rizvi observes potential of the multidimensional use of the silhouette of the *gopi* hair updos³ in works including "Gopi Crisis" (2001) and "SpiNN" (2003), and the evolution of the anonymous and headless female body in many of Sikander's works that are integral in her visual idiom.

Other texts that assert the shaping of a diaspora and different metaphorical imagery in Sikander's drawings include *Promiscuous Intimacies: Embodiment, Desire and Diasporic Dislocation: The Art of Shahzia Sikander* by Gayatri Gopinath and *Unexpected Juxtapositions* by Jan Howard. Through the essays, readers will uncover fresh analysis and critical engagement with Sikander's earlier artworks in this generously illustrated publication. Monographs that critically connect with post-2003 works by Shahzia Sikander would be highly welcomed by art scholars in the future.

Art work in title image: © 2021 Shahzia Sikander

References

1. Shahzia Sikander, "Extracting Her From My Memory", originally written in 1994 or 1995, in *Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities*, edited by Sadia Abbas and Jan Howard, Hirmer Publishers: United States, 2021.
2. This monograph accompanies Shahzia Sikander's solo exhibition of the same name, organized by RISD Museum and at display at The Morgan Library and Museum in New York city from June 18 through September 26, 2021.
3. *Gopis* (singular: *gopi*) are milk maidens and companions of the Hindu god Krishna, borrowed from Hindu epic tales and poems in classical Indian manuscript folios where they are frequently numerous and identical in their visage and appearances. In her numerous contemporary artworks, Sikander has taken from this image in different yet overlapping contexts to allude toward the loss of female identity and exclusion of women in typical Mughal court portraits, mythical conventions in traditional manuscript illustrations, historical, and contemporary feminist narratives, among others.