

# SEANKELLY

Brown, Jeffrey, and Anne Azzi Davenport. Artist Shahzia Sikander's work explores a plethora of extraordinary realities. *CANVAS*. PBS NewsHour, September 24, 2021.



## **Judy Woodruff:**

Now an artist straddling worlds and using her art to examine how we see the past and present, East and West.

Jeffrey Brown has the story from New York for our arts and culture series, *Canvas*.

## **Jeffrey Brown:**

Dancing women from a South Asian painting tradition, a headless Western-style Venus, and what's a fighter jet doing there?

Ask the woman with the ornate ram's horns, the artist herself,

Shahzia Sikander.

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**Shahzia Sikander, Artist:**

I see myself as somebody who's interested, like a detective, to look at the — how to connect the dots, how to find where the material is, and to also examine my own relationship with it, but also how some of the stories. What are the archetypal stories within the medium itself?

**Jeffrey Brown:**

Sikander, born in Pakistan and living in the U.S. since 1993, is known for examining and breaking down familiar archetypes and stereotypes of art history, and questioning the assigned roles of women and simplistic notions of an East-West divide.

She began in art school in Lahore, studying the refined tradition of Persian and Indian manuscript, or miniature, painting, dating to the 16th century, and then began to play with it and make it her own, adding the image of a friend, for example.

**Shahzia Sikander:**

This took me almost two years.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

Oh, really?

**Shahzia Sikander:**

Yes.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

In her most renowned early work, called *The Scroll*, she captured her own life within this history. That's her, a ghostlike presence throughout the scene, which can be read left to right.

**Shahzia Sikander:**

At the end you also see her. She's painting herself, but you never really get to see her face. So there's always this level of mystery.

**Jeffrey Brown:**

In fact, the entire exhibition, titled *Extraordinary Realities* and starting at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, is a kind of portrait of the young artist, mostly paintings from Sikander's first two decades of work in the 1990s and early 2000s, a chance for us and her, now 52, to look back, but also see continuing connections.

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## **Shahzia Sikander:**

I was interested in examining some of those projections. Like, what is tradition? How do we define tradition? How is tradition performed? And those ideas captured my imagination as a young artist that who dictated when and what in time is old, and what is avant garde?

And the more I examined it, the more I felt like there was room to reexamine, to reimagine.

## **Jeffrey Brown:**

She began to layer image upon image, sometimes adding fantastical creatures and abstraction over refined details. She packed different kinds of information into small paintings, often using humor and wit angels, American flags for wings, in a reference to U.S. military interventions in the Muslim world.

In 1999, she did a painting titled The Faces of Islam for "The New York Times Magazine."

What is the role of art that you see for addressing or responding to those kind of stereotypes?

## **Shahzia Sikander:**

The work was always resisting that type of fetishization, especially about the Muslim woman as needing to be saved, especially in how it gets played up in Hollywood, in media, in TV, in this.

And it has a deeper history of the representation of the veil in European colonial imperial history. And it counters it with other types of narratives, where the joyousness of the feminine, the inherent female agency, autonomy, ability to be creative, where its inner beauty, its inner strength is very present.

## **Jeffrey Brown:**

That shows itself especially in Sikander's first sculpture, two women intertwined, a classical Venus and Hindu devata, both, she says, in a position of power.

In recent years, Sikander has worked in new forms and larger formats, including massive billboard projections in Times Square and a 66-foot glass and ceramic scroll for Princeton University.

## **Shahzia Sikander:**

So, I made this here. I basically took elements from some of the paintings.

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## **Jeffrey Brown:**

She created a new installation for this exhibition, long strips of paper that bring her small painting and imagery to three-dimensional life and draw in the viewer.

Regularly defined herself as South Asian, Pakistani, Muslim, and more, she's been determined to break out of the boxes.

## **Shahzia Sikander:**

The more categories, the merrier. If the work can speak to Asian American-ness, fine, Muslim American-ness, fine, female artist, fine, artist, great.

All those categories and boxes are fine, as long as one is not restricted to operate within one or two. And I think, when we talk about that, we are talking about the agency of imagination, and that's the best part of being an artist, is that you can really soar.

## **Jeffrey Brown:**

Shahzia Sikander's exhibition, Extraordinary Realities, moves next to the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in providence, and then to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York.

## **Judy Woodruff:**

Some soaring art there.