

## ART REVIEW

# Paintings and Photos With Tales to Tell, Often About the Oddities of Growing Up

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Narrative doesn't get much more complex than in the hands of Shahzia Sikander, an artist from Pakistan whose large, fluid murals and exquisitely wrought Indian-style miniatures dance across the walls at Deitch Projects on Grand Street.

As an art student in Lahore, Ms. Sikander trained in the rigorous tradition of Persian and Indian miniature painting, and, since moving to the United States for graduate work in 1993, has added elements of Western art and culture, as well as popular and folk art traditions indigenous to India. Within the miniature tradition, she draws especially on the Kangra style, known for its lyric naturalism, architectural settings and unusual emphasis on Devi, a primal goddess of many personalities, as well as for relatively strong, nuanced portrayals of women in general.

But Ms. Sikander also uses lowlier sources like Mithila village painting, done exclusively by women on mud walls and floors. Perhaps this is the

inspiration for the loosely painted silhouettes that are the polar opposite of the miniaturist's exacting art. These gorgeously colored figures drift through the dreamlike murals; make occasional, nearly microscopic appearances in the miniatures, and dominate a series of unframed watercolors on tea-stained paper that are pinned to the wall in a big, glowing cluster.

Western motifs include references to Rapunzel, Little Red Riding Hood and athletic sneakers; a graceful depiction of Botticelli's Venus (hidden at the center of the pastoral "Venus's Wonderland"), a Greek-inspired griffin (sometimes veiled) and portraits of friends.

At 28, Ms. Sikander already switches media, styles and scales with remarkable ease. Only her mid-size paintings on canvas, which seems to be a relatively new surface for her, are weak and awkward, especially the layered and cramped imagery of "Hood's Red Rider, No. 1." Her most original works are the loosely painted wall murals and watercolors. While they can bring to mind the work of Francesco Clemente, Joseph Beuys and Rosemarie Trockel, they have symbolism all their own, and their dreamy softness is a terrific foil for the miniatures, whose intensity implies a wide-awake consciousness.

Central to Ms. Sikander's symbolism are various red female figures, who counter the traditionally blue body of Shiva, while connoting anger, power and blood. These include schematized, almost Egyptian bodies in profile, which radiate from rings like keys; a headless red multi-armed goddess brandishing an arsenal of weapons; a woman wearing a white

chador that is coming unraveled, and a little girl in a red-striped unitard, who bends and squats, as if doing yoga. Together they enact rituals of growth, independence and memory, creating haunting images, at once declarative and mysterious.

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Self-portraiture and the miniature are explored in shows by five young women.

story of mythic status, with a complexity equal to Ms. Sikander's. "Wonder," her debut exhibition at Casey Kaplan, builds upon Lewis Carroll's classic tale about Alice and her journeys through Wonderland and the Looking Glass, which was first told, extemporaneously, to 4-year-old Alice Liddell.

Ms. Gaskell has recast Carroll's nonsensical tale, which is in many ways about the turbulent emotions and inchoate longings of growing up, in a series of crisp color photographs — alternately innocently seductive and dark — that fuse Lewis Carroll, writer, and Lewis Carroll, photographer of blossoming young girls. Taking the story into her own hands, Ms. Gaskell wryly counters Balthus's passive young females and a host of

works by Surrealist photographers.

Here, Alice wears the hair ribbon, blue dress, starchy pinafore (yellow, not white), and black Mary Janes that she was given by John Tenniel, the book's original illustrator. But she is more brunette than blond, more an adolescent than a young girl, and, like Tweedledee and Tweedledum, she sometimes comes in twos: the artist worked with real-life twins, externalizing Alice's inner voice, adding hints of sibling rivalry to the proceedings and providing a companion for her long, strange trip.

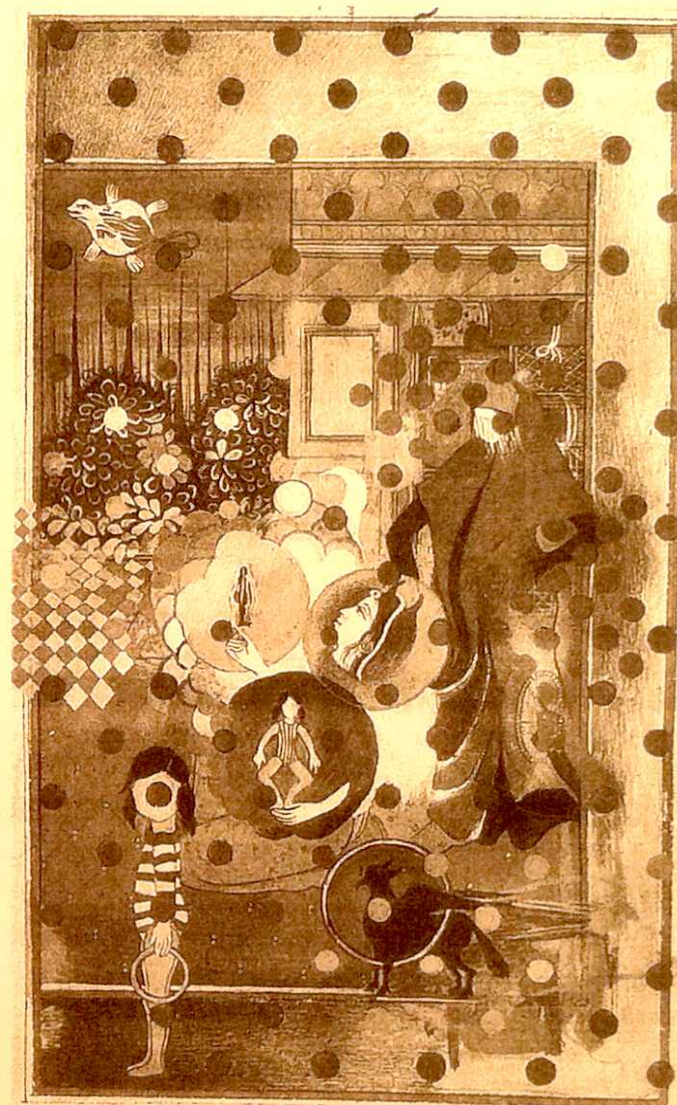
Like Alice, these expertly composed images change size, going from quite large to very small as they range around the gallery in no particular order. Laminated behind plastic, the images are shiny and unencumbered by frames, physical facts that underscore their aura of crispness and innocence.

They are engaging for their sense of silent, slow motion (like an early movie), their brilliant color (most of the action occurs on a sunny green lawn) and the mood of fine-tuned sensitivity. A big close-up of Alice's face, which shows her opening her mouth and creasing her upper lip with a strand of hair, has a sudden, sexual jolt.

Characters are cryptically evoked. A set of dentures brings to mind the Cheshire cat; Alice's hands, wearing her white stockings like mittens, stand in for the White Rabbit. Elsewhere Ms. Gaskell stages specific events — Alice is shown drowning in her own tears, for example — and also takes words formally. An image of Alice jumping so high that she is cropped at the shoulders evokes the Queen of Hearts' furious shriek. "Off with her head!"

In general, the frequent cropping and unusual camera angles of the images convey the relentless chaos of Carroll's underworld. That Alice's head or face is often out of the picture can make her seem independent and distant. But it can also bring us in close, until we see her body from her point of view, as when she tumbles, legs askew, down a set of stone steps that probably symbolize the rabbit hole.

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Deitch Projects

"Red Riding Hood" (1997), by Shahzia Sikander, is at Deitch Projects.

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The undersize girl-women in the paintings of Margherita Manzelli, who lives in Milan, are said to look vaguely like the artist; the clothes she depicts are usually hers, and the wall of patterned bathroom tile that appears in one painting is from her childhood. But Ms. Manzelli's characters have a sweetly demonic quality that doesn't seem quite human

account for the painting's unsettling effect. This effect continues in a second large painting, of a bare-chested, barefooted girl in a flowered skirt. She stares out at us from a dark, ambiguous space, possibly a beach at night, a displaced, latter-day Infanta with clenched little hands.

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Casey Kaplan

A photograph from Anna Gaskell's "Wonder," a show based on Lewis Carroll's tale of Alice, at Casey Kaplan.

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Back on Grand Street, CRG is showcasing the work of three painters, including two Europeans who have never shown in New York. Like Ms. Sikander, Sandra Scolnik, the one New Yorker, has a penchant for small, meticulous images; like Ms. Gaskell, she concentrates on a single character: in this case, herself, whom she frequently paints as twins or sisters. She also portrays herself as a boy, with 30 extra pounds, or set into oppressively neat living rooms, where she sometimes fades into the furnishings.

While these interiors suggest the work of Robin Tewes, the sense of strained, superficial normalcy can bring to mind Diane Arbus. Expressions are tense or suspicious; gender is ambiguous, heads don't quite fit

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As with Ms. Scolnik, Ms. Manzelli pursues a finely detailed realism but is more concerned with discomfiting inner truths than outward appearances. Her goal seems to be to portray the young as a mixed bag of good and evil, beautiful yet subtly deformed. In the painting with the bathroom tile, a teen-ager wearing a sweater and underpants sits on a blue slipper chair, with her feet tucked under her and her arms folded behind her back. She looks outward with exaggerated attention.

Is she mimicking the armless chair she sits on, considering what it might be like to be a quadriplegic, or about to unfold and ask a provocative question? Is Ms. Manzelli painting a response to Francis Bacon's tortured sitters? Any explanation seems plausible, but doesn't entirely

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"Sickbed," an earlier double self-portrait that shows the naked, seated artist reading to a reclining version of herself, is livelier, primarily for its bright orange coverlet and lavender wall. Ms. Lamers needs to take her ideas further, as do the other four artists discussed here, to one degree or another.

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