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janine antoni
shahzia sikander
kara walker

projects

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
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Janine Antoni, Shahzia Sikander, and Kara Walker conclude Projects 70, the exhibition series of banners created especially for The Museum of Modern Art. The first cycle, based on different calligraphic traditions, featured Shirin Neshat, Simon Patterson, and Xu Bing. The second brought together craft-oriented artists Jim Hodges, Beatriz Milhazes, and Faith Ringgold. Antoni, Sikander, and Walker are young artists but seasoned infiltrators who have carved their ways into set traditions. In their hands, the banners that customarily announce the Museum’s presence brandish subversive messages and promote provocative agendas.

Janine Antoni
A woman has been here. On 53rd Street Janine Antoni’s intervention has left its mark. Her work often shows the evidence of an action and points to habits, rituals, accessories, and behavior associated with women. With her long hair soaked in “Loving Care” hair dye, for instance, she mopped the floor of the exhibition spaces where she performed—the metaphorical arena of male action painting. In Gnaw, currently on view in Open Ends, she chewed the edges of perfect Minimalist cubes, one made of lard, the other of chocolate, and recycled the discarded materials into lipsticks and heart shaped chocolate boxes, respectively. Through her repeated actions she compulsively nibbled away any reference to cold industrial appearance and removed all anonymity by orienting the attention to the maker: a female agent. Eroded with repeated bites, the cube is reduced to the residue of glutinous appetite and the Minimalist order transformed into an eating disorder.

Shahzia Sikander
If Antoni rewrites history with gender on her mind, Shahzia Sikander reviews it from the post-colonial viewpoint. Her banner brings together images plucked from art history: the central protagonist in Bronzino’s High Mannerist painting Allegory of Venus serves as a pedestal for a twelfth-century Indian sculpture of a celestial dancing figure. The relationship is convoluted. The light-skinned Venus and the darker Devata flirtatiously twist and turn and sinuously intertwine in an intimate configuration. In their mannerist posture they deviate from the simplicity of the classical norm. Outcasts of the canon, eccentrics, or simply different, they embrace not
in a dangerous liaison, but rather as accomplice witnesses of a one-sided history.

Emphatically, “Maligned Monsters” appears on the banner. While this inscription winks at “MoMA” in its red letters, it specifically refers to the title of a book by Partha Mitter, who discusses the ethnocentric reactions of Western scholars to Indian art. In their opinion, the tendency of this art toward excess and ornament equates it with decadence and makes it incompatible with classical Greek art characterized by “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”—Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s doctrine-turned-Victorian-dogma. Following that argument, Sikander extends its logic to include Mannerism, the anti-classical impulse within the Western tradition. In a complex union, Sikander links one supposed digression with another and highlights the condition of being different through these much maligned monsters of time.

Not unlike her native country, Pakistan, Sikander’s entire body of work is founded on the notion of difference, but one that is sensitive to all shades. She scans all gradations not to exclude but to merge, mix, and layer. These intentions are evident in her choice of miniatures as a medium: a category of painting that is anachronistic in Pakistan and an alien outsider to modernism. In Perilous Order (1997), for instance, multiple references coexist. They range from the Islamic (Mughal miniatures) and the Hindu (Basohli painting) to the Western (Minimalist grid). They crisscross and converge with the uniquely personal, the image of a self-nourishing, uprooted female figure. Like her, Sikander refuses to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, to be stereotyped. With great agility she moves from miniatures to mural paintings, from precision and figuration to abstraction, from tradition to invention, from the norm to its transgression. Forever deracinated, she hovers neither here nor there, but freely in-between, all over, and beyond it all. Sikander inscribes this ever-evolving hybrid condition on her banner. Embodiments and inhabitants of two mediums—painting and sculpture—and two mythologies—Greco-Roman and Indian—her figures meet to celebrate otherness wherever it may be and in whatever guise it may come.

Kara Walker

Another face of history, this time seen through the black-and-white filter of race, informs Kara Walker’s banner. Her source is a nineteenth-century engraving of a black woman slave who is seen attempting suicide by leaping into the void from the second story window of a tavern. As Walker explains, the woman did not succeed in killing herself. The original image was captioned: “—but I did not want to go...” and was intended to rally concern for the plight of slaves in America. Walker has “always loved the image for its surprising grace. The drawing itself is clunky. The perspective is off. There is no expression in either gesture or tone which hints to the drama of the scene. Without the facts,” she says, “it is very hard to tell just what is supposed to be happening. I love the flat ambiguity of the image. I imagine the woman to be hovering between reality and perception, between a passive act and an aggressive one. I have riffed off this image several times and this time it’s less about that formal ambiguity and more about an accident of freedom.” With biting humor Walker adds, “The joke is she breaks the chain of bondage, then her arm breaks in the process of falling into an undetermined space. Whoops. The Other joke is that the black woman is rendered white, defined by a black ground.”

A world drained of color except for that of race—two dimensional, part fiction, part history—Kara Walker’s narratives are set as much in what she calls her “inner plantation” as in the antebellum South. In this dark, unfairely tale, her cast of characters replicates old stereotypes, which makes her work controversial. Walker animates her protagonists with unbridled instincts. The accessories of genteel, bourgeois society—a hoop skirt here, a top hat there, the tradition of the cut-out silhouette—highlight all the more the uncivility of manners. Shadowy actors, they gallop on white grounds and speak for humanity in all its permutations: master or slave, young and old, male or female, all caught in a senseless delirium. This is a world where victim and abuser exchange clothes and color, and carefree violence is the rule. (Several other works by Walker are currently on view in The Path of Resistance, one of the Open Ends exhibitions.)

Walker’s scenarios are like Hieronymus Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights recast in the image of America’s corrupted dream. Her version, however, is not a sermon. It is the testimony of a shameless, uncensored imagination. Her work stems from the lingering aftertaste of race conflicts, suppressed but still lurking. There is no happy ending to this history, at least not yet. In the banner, anger turns inward. Unshackled at last, the slave woman seeks release in her self-destruction. A negative of herself, frozen like a silent scream, slowly she floats not unlike a feather, an angel, or a ghost. Yet she is mutilated like a broken doll and will come crashing down. In her death lies her freedom.

In this final installment of banners, three women have laid siege to the facade of an historical institution. Antoni invokes it directly as a mother. Sikander seductively but obliquely teases its attention toward cultural diversity. With Walker, the building itself is implicated as the site of an impending tragedy. All have raised their banners with history on their minds. Armed with a razor, a pencil, and a pair of scissors they have unwoven earlier versions, redrawn and rehabilitated defamed archetypes, and reopened old wounds and new chapters. They have nuded history in their directions.

—Fereshteh Daftari

footnotes
3 E-mail from Kara Walker to the author, October 6, 2000.

biographies
Janine Antoni
Born 1964 in Freeport, Bahamas. Lives in New York
1997 “On Life, Beauty, Translation and Other Difficulties,” The 5th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul
1999 Imbed, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York

Shahzia Sikander
1997 Deitch Projects, New York
1998 The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago. Exh. cat., with text by Faisal Devji; interview with Homi Bhabha
1999 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Exh. bro., with text by Valerie Fletcher

Kara Walker
Born 1969 in Stockton, California. Lives in Providence, Rhode Island
1997 The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago. Exh. cat., with text by Kara Walker
1999 Brent Sikkema, New York

acknowledgments
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The banners are in the collections of the artists. Brochure © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York