

# art on paper



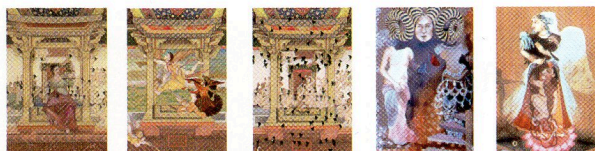
Seventh  
Anniversary  
Issue

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# Between Past and Present



Using a wide range of mediums, from watercolor and tea washes on paper to computer software, **Shahzia Sikander** blends the traditions of Mughal-style miniature painting and digital experimentation.

By Edward Gomez

Ever since she emerged on the international art scene more than a decade ago, Pakistani-born artist Shahzia Sikander has attracted admirers of contemporary works on paper through her highly experimental investigations of drawing. Sikander has long taken as her central point of reference miniature painting of the kind that flourished in sixteenth-century India during the Mughal Empire. She has worked in a diverse range of modern forms and media, too, including painting, installation art, murals, and performance art. Among her materials: acrylic paint, dry pigments, watercolor, and tea washes. She moves indefatigably between current and past projects continuously finding new ways to explore her work's themes, technical aspects, and forms.

The miniatures that are an indelible part of her homeland's artistic tradition "were something I grew up thinking of as extremely kitsch," she says. At art school in Lahore, before she came to the United States to study for her M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design, Sikander began attempting to master this very complex art form. She discovered that Mughal miniatures, for all their well-defined stylistic conventions and the painstaking craftsmanship they demand of artists, could be

something exciting to grapple with. She was more intrigued than intimidated, she says, by the aesthetic confinement that came with working in such a strictly disciplined, labor-intensive genre.

Recently, Sikander has adapted her image-making to computer-based technology. Her new working method, evident in *SpiNN I* (2003)—one of the works that were on view earlier this year at New York's Brent Sikkema Gallery in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, along with related watercolor-and-dry pigment paintings on Wasli paper—involves the use of a motion-graphics program to animate key elements of the work. She began by scanning several of her typically detailed paintings and drawings into the computer to create a sequence of overlapping transparent images that fade in and out to build up a single image. The meditative, trancelike digital "painting" features bejeweled regal figures that move and gently gesticulate over a period of about six minutes within the pictorial space of a computer monitor's color screen. The process of picture-making made visible was, in part, the subject of the work. Its title alludes to powerful mass-media corporations, Sikander says, and to the ways in which core information about a subject is often hidden behind layers of percep-

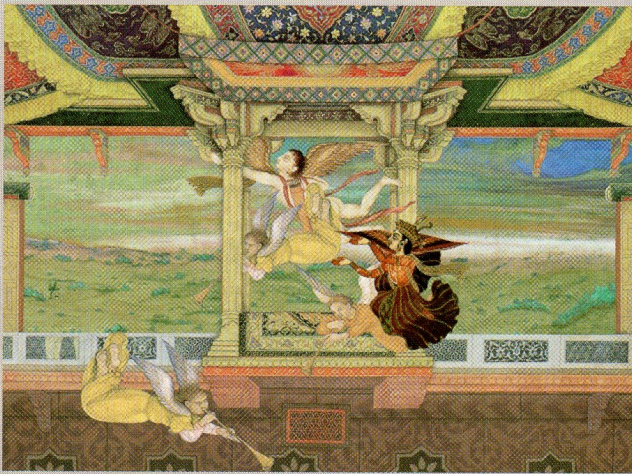


Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, watercolor and dry pigment on wasli paper (8 x 11 in.), 2003. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

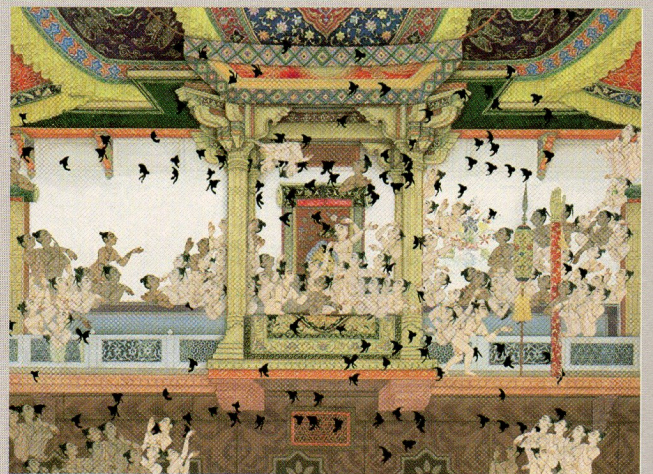
Sikander moves indefatigably between current and past projects continuously finding new ways to explore her work's themes, technical aspects, and forms.



Shahzia Sikander,  
*SpiNN*, still from DVD,  
2003. Courtesy Brent  
Sikkema, New York.

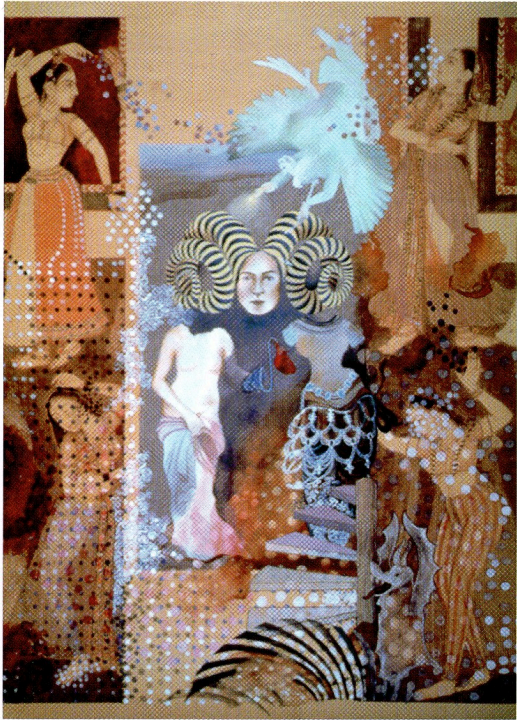


Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, still from DVD, 2003.

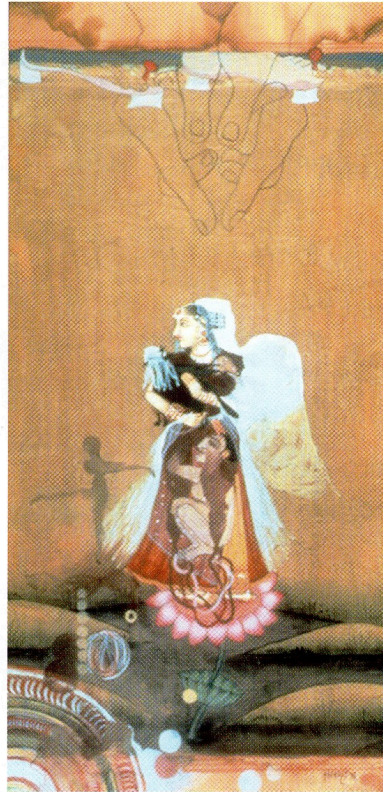


Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, still from DVD, 2003.

“Combining a non-traditional medium with a traditional genre allows me to build a relationship between present and past, and between issues of narrative and time, the purpose being to destabilize.”



Shahzia Sikander, *Pleasure Pillars*, watercolor, dry pigment, vegetable color, tea, and ink on hand-prepared wasli paper (12 x 10 in.), 2001. Collection of Amitta and Purnendu Chatterjee, courtesy Seattle Art Museum.



Shahzia Sikander  
*Uprooted Order I*,  
vegetable color, dry  
pigment, watercolor,  
and tea on hand-pre-  
pared wasli paper (10  
x 4 1/2 in.), 1996-1997  
Collection of A. G.  
Rosen, courtesy  
Seattle Art Museum.

tion that can suggest multiple meanings.

Sikander's animated painting boasts neither the fluid movement of old Warner Brothers cartoons nor the realistic 3-D modeling of today's computer-generated animation. But it does call attention to the artist's process of constructing a multilayered, moving image and, by extension, to how viewers perceptually construct the simultaneously integrated and dissolving image that they encounter as a result. "Combining a non-traditional medium with a traditional genre allows me to build a relationship between present and past, and between issues of narrative and time, the purpose being to destabilize," Sikander explains.

At Brent Sikkema, Sikander displayed her computer-screen image like a conventional picture: she hung it, framed, on a wall—that is, she set it into a wall, the screen flush with the wall's surface. On a wall directly opposite, she hung a framed painting that she had used as a point of departure for the animation. The two facing pictures functioned as mirror images of each other, structurally distinct yet aesthetically related works that complemented each other.

"The new digital work relates to an installation made with tissue paper—densely layered drawings on 18-foot-high sheets hung from the ceiling, inches apart—that I did for the 'Urgent Paris' exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris last year," says Sikander. In that large-scale work, she hung overlapping, layered-in-space images. She recalls that they "became

blurred, and viewers were aware of the physicality of the paper."

That installation, Sikander points out, allowed—or even required—viewers "to walk in and experience different drawings independently as well as in conjunction with each other." In comparison, her new digital works, including *SpiNN II, III, and IV* (not included in the Brent Sikkema exhibition) dramatically reduce scale and compress its physical characteristics, while retaining the performative aspect that Sikander likes to bring to her art. Unlike traditional Indian miniature paintings, which illustrated specific tales, Sikander's works are not explicitly narrative, despite their courtly figures and fantasy flourishes. "I find open-ended, timeless narratives more compelling," she says.

As Sikander continues to experiment with images that move, she has been thinking about projecting the digital animations on a large scale. Whatever direction her work takes next, she says, her art will always return to the hand. As she observes, "That aspect of me making the drawings is not going anywhere. It's very much at the core of what I do."

*Shahzia Sikander's works on paper were recently on view in "Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander" at the Seattle Art Museum through September 7th.*

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