‘Miniature fascinates me on a conceptual level’
Shazia Sikander’s scale of success in Pakistan and abroad brings forth issues of ethnicity, identity and multi-cultural preferences. Here, she explains how she made a name for herself in the art world.
In less than a decade, Shazia Sikander has become one of the major artists. Her solo exhibitions have held at Whitney Museum New York, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C. and The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Kansas City. She has exhibited in various important group shows, including the forthcoming ‘Contemporary Drawing Show’ at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In addition, her work is part of major collections around the globe.

No Pakistani artist (or South Asian) has risen as high as Shazia Sikander. The immense scale of her success also brings forth many issues relating to ethnicity, identity and multi-cultural preferences in the current art world. During her recent visit to Lahore, the artist talked about her art at the National College of Arts, which was not only an inspiring experience for the students at her alma mater but also initiated a debate on the role and responsibility of artists living abroad and how they encounter, bear and overcome the responses of others.

The News on Sunday: What do you think of the present day Pakistani art?
Shazia Sikander: It appears that Pakistani art is no more on the periphery. The best thing is that the young artists are not concerned about shows abroad. In fact, now the outsiders are interested in what is happening here.

But at the same time Pakistani art is not duly represented. If it is written about, it either carries the ghetto mentality or is described by the ‘outsiders’ in a superficial fashion — as in the case of Marcella Nesom. I feel it is an unfortunate situation because the original dialogue gets lost by bad representation, and even if it reemerges — let’s say after five years - it won’t make any impact.

TNS: Don’t you think the ‘outsiders’ are searching for ethnic and exotic art here?
Shazia Sikander: The audience abroad does not care any more about the labels such as exotic, ethnicity and regionalism. They are aware of the decline of postmodernity. They are prepared to understand art of other places along with history and narrative from the land of origin. However, this change has taken some time and a lot of effort.

People kept writing about my work with fixed ideas when I was doing miniature. They used to see and describe what they wanted in the work of an artist from this region. But later that tone altered because of multiple reasons.

TNS: What brought about this change in the reading and describing of your work?
Shazia Sikander: The habit of putting artists in a separate slot is changing because a large number of creative personalities, active in today’s art, are from different origins. Same is with several critics and curators connected to important international venues and publications — for example, Shamim Momin, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

TNS: How did you manage to earn a big name in the American art circles?
Shazia Sikander: It all began with the show at the Whitney Museum in 1997. I got a positive review. In fact it appeared in the same issue of a magazine which had another review on my solo exhibition held at Drawing Center. That was a good introduction. The shows at Whitney are normally trashed by critics, but they said that it was exciting to see something new — in the form of my work.

That was success. I moved to New York where I interacted with other artists. In December 1997, I had a show in New York which also generated good reviews.

After that everybody waited to see what Shazia Sikander did next. I did not sign up with Mary Boone or Gagosian Gallery because I was aware of the art market phenomenon: of how they make and unmake you, and being an outsider they can dump you any moment. I was unhappy about it so I moved to Texas. I did not show for two years. My gallery was after me, but I felt that if I were not fully sure about it, I would not do it. What I exhibited in the three years after that was what I produced during my studies at RISD.

It took me five years to recover from that state. There was a constant pressure from my gallery, demanding my work for the line of buyers. On the contrary, I worked in large scale in the non-commercial spaces. The result of which is that the relationship with the gallery deteriorated but links with critics improved. So when I showed after a gap of five years I got good feedback. The reason for positive response is to do with my persistence as well as public’s exposure to the Indian and Pakistani art, which helped
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