

# The New York Times

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## *Art in Review; Shahzia Sikander*

By **Roberta Smith**

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'51 Ways of Looking' Brent Sikkema 530 West 22nd Street, Chelsea Through April 16

Shahzia Sikander's bloodless show demonstrates that too much dexterity can limit an artist as easily as too little. Her art is becoming a didactic demonstration of exquisite craft; it has a certain integrity and restraint, but it is losing emotional urgency.

In the past, Ms. Sikander's revisions of classic Indian painting, which she studied in depth, have usually had a sense of spirited iconoclasm and turbulence, even violence; their technique was perfect, but their clash of motifs, attitudes, colors and narratives had a disturbing, contemporary tenor.

Ms. Sikander's latest efforts are relatively demure. The small graphite drawings of "51 Ways of Looking" combine motifs from traditional Indian painting and traditional Western modernism and make both feel academic. One drawing depicts a large black rectangle evoking Western abstraction from Kazimir Malevich to Brice Marden. In the next, the rectangle has a wide border of flowers; in the third, the flowers start to infiltrate the rectangle. And so it goes, smoothly, fluidly, with breathtaking delicacy, but one plus one almost invariably equals two.

In an especially simplistic ploy, free-floating turbans and tight coiffures -- the latter characteristic of gopi, the worshipful lovers of Shiva -- signify male and female, coalescing into patterns and breaking apart. The mutating headgear continues with little consequence in a group of large ink and gouache works, in which Ms. Sikander experiments with rougher techniques, and also in a short digital animation.

The liveliest work here is a series of small paintings on paper, also in ink and gouache, related to the animation. These riff on the tender, stylized landscapes of Indian painting with elements of abstraction and an uncharacteristically free brushwork. They suggest an artist on the verge of shaking things up. **ROBERTA SMITH**

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