

TURNING POINTS

The World Is Yours, the World Is Mine

By Shahzia Sikander

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History is often held hostage by the highest bidder — whoever gets to tell the story ends up defining what happened. What happened in 2014? What mattered in 2014? It depends whom you ask. Historical narratives recount political, economic or social events, but rarely tell stories of the everyday. The mundane nuances of life are often ignored precisely because they are so personal. But private stories are usually the ones that we connect with most; they capture our attention and remain in our memory. Modes of storytelling like painting and rap allow us to engage with those personal stories, becoming the vehicles through which history passes.

A major story of 2014 has been the Ebola outbreak, which has spread from West Africa to Europe and the United States. The Ebola narrative has also become the story of how we don't want to be connected in what is supposedly a hyperconnected and globalized world. We have tried to screen for symptoms and enforce quarantines. However, the interface between human and microbe is complex. Our bodies cannot thrive without some microbes — they are an essential part of our personal ecosystems. They are always present, often lying dormant, just as narratives lie dormant until someone culls them from history's rubble. I have chosen to respond to these events from 2014 in my work, "The World Is Yours, the World Is Mine," (2014).

The World Is Yours, the World Is Mine

Africa is the glowing gold-and-green heart of the painting, a central stage on which many of the world's issues play out. The amalgam of diverse societies and cultures, its swirling ink recalls topographical maps or satellite imagery of the land; swaths of red and blue seeping ink surround it, suggesting anatomical drawings and medical documentation. The mythological three-headed figure cradles, and at the same time claws at, the heart. The medical, anatomical and diagrammatic aspects of the painting are meant to signify the terrain of the body as a site or landscape comprised of multiple, disparate components that, in the end, are all related to one another — just as disparate elements can come together to shape a collective narrative that is told, retold, reshaped and distorted over time.

The central quasi-mythological figure has three heads, all of them New Yorkers. The figure on the left is Langston Hughes, the poet, novelist and leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s who told of the everyday lives of working-class African-Americans. In the center is death, a white skeleton figure with its organs spilling out of its chest. And on the right is the hip-hop artist Nas, known for his vivid observations and storytelling. Hughes and Nas have distinct relationships with lyric verse in their storytelling: Hughes through poetry and Nas through rap.



Shahzia Sikander
Sikander Studio

My painting explores multiple modes of storytelling from the vantage point of New York City, a place of integration and turmoil that is still coming to terms with its underrepresented narratives, including its African-American history. Many issues arise: not just questions of wealth and class, but of trade, global economics, crime, capitalism, race and personal identity.

My interest in juxtaposing hip-hop and Indo-Persian miniature painting, the primary medium through which I have told stories, is in taking these two disparate narrative forms and letting the dissonance find a detour. The process of juxtaposing is an exercise in reflection and discovery for me. It not only allows space for anticipation and reinterpretation, but can also spark new relationships.

I came across Nasir Jones' music in 1994 and felt an instinctive affinity for how he was using personal narrative to disrupt poetic languages and histories: In my own work I often take apart classical and historical forms and reinvent them to create new associations. The year 2014 marked the 20th anniversary of the release of Nas' debut album, "Illmatic," which delved into his past, creating a lyrical portrait of life in New York's public housing projects. The record heralded the resurgence of the city's declining hip-hop scene and helped pave the way for a new generation of rappers. Since then, hip-hop has become mainstream and Nas has attained the status of public intellectual, popular icon, urban griot and contemporary shaman.

Much in the way that hip-hop's place in popular culture was diminishing by the time Nas took it up in the early 1990s, Indo-Persian miniature painting fell from relevance in Pakistani culture. The practice shifted so dramatically after the fall of the Mughal Empire and the rise of colonial rule in South Asia during the 19th century that when I began engaging with the miniature in my work in the late 1980s and early '90s at the National College of Arts in Lahore, it was regarded as tourist kitsch and derided as a craft technique. For years, the form had been ignored by many Pakistani artists. I found it ripe with potential — to change its status and its narrative and to deconstruct its stereotypes. What others saw as enslavement to tradition, I recognized as a path to expanding the medium from within, embracing the complexities of craft and rigor in order to open up possibilities for dialogue.

Style is how we engage with popular media. In my case, I began developing a distinct visual vocabulary as I interacted with the medium of the miniature. My work over the past 20 years has both borrowed and departed from traditional modes of miniature painting. One of these elements, the hair of Gopis — the female consorts of the Hindu god Krishna — appears in this painting, circling around the central axis. Over the past 15 years, I have been experimenting by divorcing their signature hairstyles from the rest of their bodies as a means of identifying them. The Gopi hair, in its many transformed and recontextualized iterations, takes on the appearance of bats, particles or elements of a moving mass. In this painting, the Gopis swirl around Africa and move outward. In their clusters around the central glowing orb of Africa, the Gopis coalesce and overlap, suggesting a symbol that became ubiquitous in 2014: the biohazard sign.

My process is driven by my interest in exploring and rediscovering cultural and political boundaries, and using that space to create new frameworks for dialogue and visual narrative. Contemporaneity is about remaining relevant by challenging the status quo, not by clinging to past successes. This is at odds with the standards set up in the worlds of commercial art and music, which are more interested in branding and often hold an artist hostage to one idea or form. In my work, deconstruction is not limited to the miniature-painting format; it extends to the reimagining of historical content and entrenched symbols. It is important to open the discourse, to challenge and re-examine our histories.