

Shahzia Sikander
collective behavior

Large Print Labels

(Sculpture outside exhibition)

Shahzia Sikander

(Pakistani and American, b. 1969)

NOW

2023

patinated bronze

Pizzuti Collection

This sculpture reflects Sikander's engagement with abstracted isolated forms that, through repetition and reinvention, have become closely identified with the artist's practice over the last 30 years. The autonomous female form with tentacles instead of feet, the lotus base, and the hair presented as ram's horns often recur in Sikander's practice across various mediums: sculpture, works on paper, digital animations, mosaic, and glass. Here these forms combine with new elements, such as the collar motif most often associated with American Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Through such reinvention, Sikander explores new ways of seeing and thinking about complex histories and current political ideologies that target feminine strength.

“Representing women as active agents in traditionally patriarchal spaces, especially spaces related to delivering justice and adjudicating power, seems necessary in contemporary civic life.”

This sculpture is part of the exhibition *Shahzia Sikander: Collective Behavior* on display in Galleries 231 and 232 from 14 February to 4 May, 2025.

Shahzia Sikander

collective behavior

For more than three decades, Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan) has been reframing South Asian visual histories through a contemporary perspective. Working in a variety of mediums—painting, drawing, print, digital animation, mosaic, sculpture, and glass—she reimagines the past for our present moment. She considers diasporic experiences, histories of colonialism, and Western relations with the Global South and the wider Islamic world, often through the lens of gender and body politics. At times, Sikander reflects on her own experience as an immigrant and diasporic artist working in the United States.

Rather than proceeding chronologically, the exhibition follows primary ideas and inquiries throughout her practice, rooted as they are in a recurring vocabulary of forms, figures, and ideas. The exhibition explores her role as an American artist, a Pakistani artist, a Muslim artist, a feminist artist, and, perhaps most significantly, as a global

citizen engaging with a disrupted historical narrative. Throughout the galleries, you'll find numerous quotes from Sikander reflecting on her artistic practice, her own experience, and the world we inhabit.

Collective Behavior premiered as part of Venice's Biennale Arte and was co-organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Complementary iterations of the exhibition are now presented at both Ohio museums. CAM's exhibition is the largest, most comprehensive showing of Sikander's work to date.

Shahzia Sikander: A Brief Biography

Shahzia Sikander's artistic training began in Lahore, Pakistan, where she studied historic manuscript painting at the National College of Arts (NCA). Following her acclaimed undergraduate thesis project, *The Scroll* (1989–90), she became the first woman to teach in the NCA's prestigious miniature painting department.

In 1993, Sikander moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to pursue graduate studies at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). After completing her MFA, Sikander relocated to Houston to participate in the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston's Glassell School of Art from 1995 to 1997. She then moved to New York City, her primary base to date. Sikander has been the subject of numerous museum exhibitions, most recently *Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities* (organized by the RISD Museum). Awards include the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship 'Genius' Award (2006) and the Pollock Prize for Creativity, Pollock-Krasner Foundation (2023). Alongside her art practice, Sikander has taught continuously, including recent appointments at Brown University and Columbia University's graduate programs.

Point of Departure

This career-spanning exhibition is the largest and most comprehensive presentation of Shahzia Sikander's practice. Works in this section demonstrate her ongoing engagement with South Asian, Persian, and Central Asian historic manuscript illustrations. Often referred to as "miniature painting," a term borrowed from the Western art historical canon to refer to small jewel-like works of art, the term is now questioned and often cast aside by painting scholars as a colonial reflection on a significant historical and cultural record. Since she was a student of the renowned painter Bashir Ahmed at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, Sikander has been a leader in the contemporary revival of manuscript painting. Her practice integrates historic inspiration while challenging longstanding conventions and reinventing the medium's technical, aesthetic, and thematic framework.

Elsewhere, Sikander disrupts the histories of manuscript painting through playful uses of language and by breaking away from the page entirely through digital animation and mosaics. Her

insightful works, created first in Lahore and later in the United States, have continued to reconfigure the boundaries of the “contemporary miniature.” While Sikander’s art learns from the past, it imagines new possibilities for the future.

Abba

1987–88

pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Shahzia Sikander dedicates this project to her father, Sikander Rashid Ahmed (1936–2021), in memory of his unconditional love. He remains her source of resilience and insight to this day.

Disruption as Rapture

2016

HD video animation with 7.1 surround sound
10 mins., 7 sec.

music score and sound design by
Du Yun featuring Ali Sethi; animation
by Patrick O'Rourke

Commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum
of Art; Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/
Los Angeles

Through the reinvention of medium, Sikander explores new ways of seeing and thinking about South Asia's artistic, religious, and imperial histories. The artist created *Disruption as Rapture* in response to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's intact manuscript, the *Gulshan-i Ishq* (Rose Garden of Love), made in the eighteenth century at an Islamic court in South-Central India. The manuscript's text and elaborate illustrations narrate a Hindu love story reimagined as a Sufi tale. In her digital animation, Sikander explores the work's use of love as a metaphor for the soul's search for, and connection with, the divine. Portrayals of two lovers, seen in union, separation, and strife, are

set within elaborate garden settings. The work integrates a range of visual and sonic histories, including manuscript painting, motion graphics, South Asian poetry, Western opera, orchestral music, Indian ragas, and Gregorian chants. Since the early 2000s, digital animation has been a pivotal and pervasive medium for Sikander.

Elusive Realities

1989–2000

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor,
tea, and collage on wasli paper

The Speyer Family Collection, New York

Elusive Realities transforms the format of a historic manuscript page through unexpected additions, firmly rooting it in the present. The central figure resembles a *nayika*, a female heroine often portrayed as a forlorn lover in north Indian painting, here overlaid by an upended portrait of the dancer Sharmila Desai. The floating railing of a palace courtyard encloses both. The page's border contains subtle floral elements and other motifs referencing Sikander's lived experience. Through this compilation of imagery, Sikander explores her own hyphenated histories and urges us to reflect upon the multiple ways we construct and deconstruct iconography, identity, and belonging.

Sikander often collaborates with other artists in her practice and uses these intentional alliances as a tool in her art formation. She sees collaboration as an extension of the socially engaged community with which she surrounds herself—a way for her life to enter her art, and vice versa.

Left

Eye-I-Ing Those Armorial Bearings, III

1989–1997

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, tea,
and gold leaf on wasli paper

Hessel Museum of Art

Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of
Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College,
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

R1999.48

Right

Eye-I-Ing Those Armorial Bearings, IV

1994–1997

vegetable color, dry pigment,
watercolor, and tea on wasli paper

Courtesy of James Casabere

While in Houston (1995–97), Sikander was involved with Project Row Houses (PRH), a grass-roots organization at the center of Black Houston's artistic community. In this racially divided city, PRH was a space to openly debate philosophy, literature, and politics. As a Pakistani artist in the

U.S., Sikander felt an affinity with PRH through their similar engagement with storytelling, lineage, and histories of race and representation. She was interested in the space between culturally strengthened silos: Pakistan and India, and White and Black America.

These drawings reflect Sikander's attempt to create an Armorial Shield for PRH as she considered the representation (and lack thereof) of Blackness in Medieval Christian iconography. They reflect the artist's iterative, cumulative artistic process but are not unfinished. The artist Rick Lowe, a frequent collaborator in the 1990s, is in the drawing on the left, which also features a series of dispersed forms. On the right, the forms coalesce into a cohesive composition.

Collection of Exhibition Pamphlets and Books in Sikander's Collection

Collection of the Artist

Shahzia Sikander's art-making practice is heavily research-based. She mines historical sources, poetry, and contemporary critique for inspiration and reflection. The books here are examples from the many authors and publications that inform Sikander's work and speak especially to her perspectives on feminism, South, Central, and West Asian histories, colonialism, environmentalism, and language. Ranging from the writings of Langston Hughes and bell hooks to the histories of Islamic queens and discussions of the environmental crisis, Sikander constantly expands upon the ideas of authors, poets, essayists, and scholars to add additional layers of meaning to her work.

Sikander's longstanding exploration of literature, histories, and language is evident through her formative exhibitions in the United States during the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as in her later curatorial engagements, including at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in 2009. From her personal collection, these pamphlets emphasize the evolution of Sikander's work over three decades.

Usurpia

2002

watercolor and dry pigment on wasli paper

Anu and Arjun Aggarwal

Usurpia is a significant work that reflects Sikander's engagement with South Asian and Persian manuscripts. Here, the artist transforms the format of a manuscript page through her playful reinvention, with unexpected additions and subtle omissions. Upending the expected balance of text contained within an illuminated border, Sikander paints a deep expanse of green pigment in place of text, empty but for the writhing form of a ram and the traces of calligraphic line. The border of the page teems with animal figures, rocky landscapes, and symbols of warfare, dominance, and power. Through this subtle reinvention of form where the margins (and marginalized) are centered, *Usurpia* conveys that history cannot always be contained.

"My work takes on multiple vantage points, while always remaining cognizant of categories, hierarchies, and center-margin dynamics. It explores the intimacy and violence that arises

between languages and cultures.” South Asian poetry, Western opera, orchestral music, Indian ragas, and Gregorian chants. Since the early 2000s, digital animation has been a pivotal and pervasive medium for Sikander.

Transcending Text from the series **Phenomenology of Transformation** 2006

ink and gouache on prepared paper
Lent by Nicole Mathysen-Gerst

Sikander's practice often explores the intersection of text and image by incorporating poetry and calligraphy into visual compositions. In *Transcending Text*, image evolves into script, and back again—a technique that Sikander refers to as "*writing that falls into something else.*" By such manipulation of forms, it is impossible to separate the two, creating a symbiotic sense of movement between writing and image.

Sikander often reflects on the philosophy behind how language functions. She interprets written language as visual and textual, artistic and imbued with meaning, never to be dismissed as merely decorative. Here, she evokes Chinese landscape painting through her broad, gestural lines. She imbues each brush stroke with multiple histories of the calligraphic form; the subtle nod to East Asian aesthetics morphs into Nastaliq Urdu text, animal imagery, amorphous forms, and mountain-ous landscapes.

Provenance the Invisible Hand
from the series **The Illustrated Page**
2009

opaque watercolor hand painting, gold leaf, and silkscreened pigment on paper (diptych) Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

This diptych evokes two pages of an open manuscript. Whereas the historic manuscript format referenced would have been handheld, Sikander plays with scale, disrupting the preciousness of a one-of-a-kind illustrated and illuminated manuscript through size and the medium of print.

Sikander created this work for inclusion in a 2009 show she curated at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City. The exhibition brought together Jacquard silks, *shikasta* (broken script) calligraphy, Japanese scrolls, prints by Francisco José de Goya, and historic British and Persian manuscripts. Seen together, these works helped to unlock the viewing process across geography, time, and political reference points. Similarly, *Provenance the Invisible Hand*

incorporates multiple historical and contemporary reference points in one cohesive artwork.

“Identifying, dismantling and transforming nineteenth and twentieth scholarship around tradition, Orientalism, and nostalgia through a discursive and feminist lens captured my imagination and became my hunger.”

Study for the Scroll

1988

collage on paper attached to board

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia

Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Sikander created the earliest work in this exhibition, *Study for the Scroll*, while a student at the National College of Arts, Lahore. Through collage, Sikander used magazines and other ephemeral paper to create a rich landscape of architectural forms and delicate figures in this oversized composition. While *The Scroll* is often seen as a departure from her training in miniature painting, Sikander's radical rethinking of scale, medium, and technique was always a prevalent part of her practice.

Conceptually, Sikander approaches collage in the same way she creates digital animations and mosaics. She isolates the elements of an image into individual units—digital pixels, or pieces of glass—and sees the possibility of infinite growth within each element. Sikander returned to collage in 2024 in a series of drawings created specifically for this project, which are on view in the next section of the exhibition.

The Scroll

1989–1990

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor,
and tea on wasli paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

As her thesis project at the National College of Arts, Lahore, *The Scroll* brought Sikander international recognition for its significant break from “traditional” painting. The work is more than five feet long, dimensions that greatly exceed the size and format of historic manuscript painting. Time and three-dimensional space enter the work; one must physically move to assimilate the work’s pieces and follow the narrative as it unfolds, almost cinematically. The work centers on the artist as an adolescent who came of age during Zia-ul-Haq’s military dictatorship (1978–88). With her back to us, this young girl wanders like a ghost through a domestic setting, one inspired by historic Safavid paintings and contemporary Pakistani architecture. The work explores domesticity as a feminist space, highlights class and gender disparities, and is imbued with a sense of mystery. The haunting presence of the protagonist troubles and dis-quiets, as Sikander herself does in her approach to the histories she reconfigures.

Riding the Written

1992

screenprint over handmade marbled paper
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

"Inhabiting the feminine and Asian American in the West often means living the paradox of being invisible while standing out. Language is both a connecting thread and an embodiment of this position. So, I like to push beyond writing in my use of script—to think of how Arabic, Urdu, and English calligraphy can transform visual relationships on the page."

This print references a Qur'anic passage (*Surah al-'Adiyat* (Chapter 100: The Chargers), verses 1–11) describing a scene of horses charging. Sikander's use of Arabic calligraphy is inspired by childhood memories of memorizing and reciting the Qur'an. The written word, the significance of what is written, who is reading it, and how it is interpreted holds significance in Islam. The artist encourages us to look beyond the text and think about the visual relationships to language, calligraphic traditions, and the multiplicity and dissemination of the written word through printing.

**Sinxay—Narrative as
Dissolution #2**
2008

ink and gouache on prepared paper
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Accessions Committee Fund purchase
2009.195

Language holds histories. Here, through the repetition and visual reinvention of the national poem of Laos, Sikander explores the political, cultural, colonial, and religious meanings embedded within language. Written in Pali and translated into French, then English, Sikander accesses colonial histories by disrupting poetic form.

Sikander created *Sinxay* after working collaboratively with Laotian student artists. Together, they explored visual techniques and made connections as artists burdened with the cultural baggage of "tradition." Sikander investigated the impact of this epic poem on contemporary life in Laos, and encouraged the students to take ownership of it, to create intimacy with it, and to condense its meaning into a single page. The

resulting image evolves from text into an abstracted center and back again. Fragments of calligraphic letters, shapes, and forms create a beautiful, uneven structure.

Turb-in-motion

2005

ink and gouache on prepared paper,
mounted on board

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Gift of Martina Schaap Yamin, 812.2017

Turb-in-motion explores Sikander's engagement with isolated forms drawn from South Asian, Persian, and Central Asian historic manuscript illustrations. While already holding political, cultural, and religious symbolism, the turban is repositioned here as Sikander explores new ways of seeing and thinking about these complicated histories. With excessively large plumes, Sikander's turban unlocks a hyperinflated image of masculinity—one where stateliness is reflected as pompousness, and the chaos and disorder of the image can be understood as buffoonery.

This painting captures the essence and experience of the animation *Pursuit Curve*, positioned nearby. Sikander considers the visual potential of each static element (such as the turbans, calligraphic lines, central figure, and abstracted forms) and thinks about how they could become dynamic through animation, where every second, every motion, is first realized on the page.

Pursuit Curve

2003

digital animation, color, sound

7 mins., 12 sec.

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Another edition is in the collection of the Buffalo

AKG Art Museum

Pursuit Curve is a term that references a pursuer's path as it chases its prey. Here, the "pursuit curve" is explored through power imbalances and fraught dichotomies of masculine–feminine and Britain–South Asia. A swarm of turbans, a masculine symbol of power, behaves like a hive of bees before each attaching to a South Asian male head. This flurry of movement, followed by the deep bellow of drums amidst the sounds of bombs, is juxtaposed with a flying mass of *gopis* hair that moves through the cover of shadow. The aftermath of the chase culminates in a pile of flesh-colored turbans—an ominous reminder of the violent conflicts between British colonial and South Asian powers. Sikander also brings a contemporary reading to the turban. Since 9/11, many men of Sikh descent who wear turbans were mistakenly targeted as Muslim in the United States.

The Feminine Space

Sikander addresses gender and body politics through a dynamic vocabulary of forms that has evolved throughout her career. Since 1993, she has repeatedly rendered a nebulous floating female figure with a closed circuit of tentacles in place of feet. Hovering above the ground, the figure is visibly unrooted and, within Sikander's cosmos, transcends the confines of geography, culture, religion, and time. The works in this section present different iterations of this figure and the ideas she embodies.

Just as this figure has floated throughout Sikander's work for over 30 years, other motifs recur to manifest a powerful female presence. Gopis, female devotees of the Hindu god Krishna and the visual manifestation of a soul's desire to unite with the divine, appear often in South Asian painting. Sikander extracts a physical detail, their hair, and replicates it repeatedly, constructing a potent, swarming, and energetic mass. These and other forms reappear throughout the exhibition, demonstrating how Sikander's visual language layers music, movement, and cultural critique to create a collective energy.

Havah

2023

gouache, graphite, and gold leaf on wasli paper
Private Collection

The autonomous female form punctuating Sikander's practice is fluid and ever-changing. In *Afloat*, displayed nearby, the figure is grounded. Here, she has tentacles instead of feet and a lotus base on which to rest. For Sikander, the self-rooted form is reflective of her own, as well as the collective, female experience. *"This self-rootedness is a reference to women, especially immigrant women storytellers, who have, over time, carried their roots wherever they went, with resilience, autonomy, and timelessness of spirit. It is the transmission of memory that links us to each other."*

The lotus base also connects to a religious and cultural diasporic experience. In Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain sculptural traditions, gods and goddesses often rest on lotus thrones. The lotus connects with universal creation and birth, protection, and clarity in these religious practices.

Afloat

2001

screenprint, printed on both sides

Cincinnati Art Museum

Museum Purchase: Carl and Alice Bimel

Endowment for Asian Art

2022.17

The female figure in *Afloat* is noticeably different from others positioned nearby. She is rooted to the ground, as is the tree-like form next to her. For Sikander, this rootedness of the body creates tension with the creative journey of the mind. She encourages people to cultivate self-rootedness or self-reliance, an idea she also conveys through the floating, tendrilled, feminine figure seen more often. She sees both figures as expansive, meditative, and a holistic way of being.

"The visual protagonists in my work resist simplistic categorization, deconstruct racial representation and stereotyping, and refute the colonial and male gaze."

Arose 2020

glass mosaic with patinated brass frame
Courtesy of Joel S. Pizzuti

The stylized, often-subsidary women depicted in historic Mughal painting inspired the feminine figure in *Arose*. Here, the form is transformed, multiplied, and arranged into a circular flower motif made with glass mosaic. Through this manipulation, the artist releases the figure from her sources in history, granting her mobility. The figure spins, her skirt spiraling in an infinite pinwheel, which we see from above. As she expands the figure's body, Sikander also doubles the figure's face, showing her from two perspectives. Through multiplicity and a sense of movement, she has infused the figure with power and agency.

"The female body in my work is an integral and multifaceted protagonist. It is a breathing, living, ever-expanding entity. It's a concept, marker, muse, and duende. It's a signature foil to the extractive forces at play, around us, in geosociopolitical discourse."

Gopi Crisis

2001

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gravure, inkjet, tea, and chine collé on paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

The female characters portrayed here derive from *gopis* (female cowherds) as depicted in historic South Asian narrative painting. *Gopis* are female devotees of the Hindu god Krishna and the visual manifestation of a soul's desire to unite with the divine. Depicted from the waist up, they seem to be bathing, as they are often shown in historic paintings. Large shadowy creatures—vaguely human, somewhat phallic—protect and contain them, while flying black forms disperse from the center of the image. On close inspection, these forms are the hair of the *gopis*, detached and given life as a new symbol of feminine strength.

Sikander often plays with such isolated forms drawn from historic painting. This is the first instance of

the *gopis'* hair; Sikander has since integrated the form into her visual vocabulary, returning to it often. The now abstracted form questions hierarchies of power within male-dominated societies and the space for spirituality in cultural production.

Pathology of Suspension

2008

wool and silk tapestry with raised
silk embroidery

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Sikander's only tapestry to date, *Pathology of Suspension* was commissioned for an exhibition shown in London, Miami, and New York City between 2008 and 2010. Fifteen contemporary artists, including Kara Walker, Grayson Perry, and Beatriz Milhazes, were invited to work creatively in a new-to-them medium and design a tapestry. In her wool and silk hanging, Sikander revisited an image from *The Illustrated Page* series, where she recontextualized an open illustrated manuscript in an oversized scale. The missing border along the right denotes that we are only experiencing part of a larger whole. Within the border and in the center of the "page," the hair of the *gopis* (female devotees of the Hindu god Krishna) are isolated and extracted from historic paintings and presented as a swarming mass of feminine energy. Through repetition and multiplicity, the isolated form gains power and strength.

A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation

1993

gouache and gesso on board

Cincinnati Art Museum

Alice Bimel Endowment for Asian Art

2019.195

This floating figure with connected tentacles in place of feet is the artist's manifestation of feminine power and presence. By creating and repeating this autonomous female figure, Sikander seeks to isolate the feminine from different cultures and religions, and to transcend the entrenched boundaries of femininity, culture, and temporal connections.

Painted as an MFA student at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), this is the first instance of Sikander's iconic female form. Since then, the artist has experimented with size, scale, and media; it appears in works on paper, site-specific wall painting, digital animations, glass works, and stone mosaics.

"Producing an outburst of androgynous forms, fragmented human bodies, headless torsos, and buoyant, self-rooted feminine figures that refused to belong, to be fixed or stereotyped were a

response to my inability to locate Brown South Asian representations in art history books or in the predominantly white feminist spaces of the early 1990s."

Case

A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation

1993–1995

ink on paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

These gestural ink drawings, created during Sikander's MFA at RISD, document early articulations of her now-established lexicon of repeated forms. Through these drawings, we see the artist's working process. *"Drawing is the connecting tissue in my practice, a thinking tool that I use to align my art with poetry."*

The forms represent objects like *lotas* (water carriers) or small details from other utilitarian objects that grow arms, legs, and heads, releasing them from their historical and cultural confines. Sikander harnesses, humanizes, and repeats these forms, integrating and interrelating them in different ways.

Case

A Shikasta Exercise

1750–1800

Iran

Qajar Period (1789–1925)

ink on silver-flecked paper

Cincinnati Art Museum

Gift of JoLynn M. and Byron W. Gustin

2016.359

The long lines, delicate curves, and free forms of this *shikasta* (broken script) page provide a new way to experience language. Calligraphers create these pages by physically turning the composition as they write. The results, seen here, are a flowing, loose script that requires us, like the calligrapher, to change orientations as we follow each line.

Similarly, Sikander manipulates language, script, and visual forms to alter their physical presence and meaning. By incorporating abstracted figures, letters, and words from Urdu, Arabic, and English, Sikander conveys how language can offer a bridge across real and imagined cultural boundaries.

Riding the Ridden

1997–2000

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor,
and tea on wasli paper

Niva Grill Angel

Sikander approaches painting as an infinite number of iconographic forms that can be combined and recombined to create meaning. For the artist, the essence of a painting can be read as individual units, each holding equal weight and importance. In this work, Sikander pushes back at the dominance of figurative painting by obscuring the identity of the central figures. She invites us to contemplate the armature of the composition instead. When she obscures the main scene, the detailed natural setting, architectural forms, and repeated border motifs are more immediately apparent.

In *Riding the Ridden*, Sikander has also introduced an erotic element. The visual obstruction of the main figures creates ambiguity—are there two figures or four? Are they real or shadows? Male or female? She conjures elements of mystery, wonder, and the sublime without creating a polarized gendered space.

Perilous Order

1989–1997

transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, and charcoal on marbled board

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee
97.83.2

Sikander plays with language in her titles to offer a clue, provoke, or to riddle. In *Perilous Order*, the artist considers how relying on natural or cultural order is unsafe. She explores these ideas through formal and stylistic attributes, as well as through gender and sexuality. Originally created when she lived in Pakistan, the central figure is based on a close friend; the gold earring identifies him as a gay man. The oval portrait format resonates with historic forms and speaks to male sovereignty, yet the addition of female forms—portrayed individually yet understood as a collective—interrupts the composition. Sikander added the polka dots years after she considered the painting complete. The dots first look like a grid but are all individually placed, slightly askew. As a whole, there is a tension between the different elements in *Perilous Order*, and yet everything fits, despite the inherent chaos.

A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation, II 2000–2001

acrylic on board

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

This unfinished work was originally part of a commissioned mural at Skadden Arps Law firm in New York. The image re-envisioned the ubiquitous, Western art historical depiction of women and law seen through a non-Western lens. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, those commissioning the mural viewed the sword-wielding figure as violent. Electing to walk away from the project, Sikander found it notable that a representation of a non-white female with a sword was seen as inherently aggressive.

Sikander often reflects on the shift in perception for non-white artists working in the U.S. In the late 1990s, New York City-based artists participated in an integrated, globally focused, and inclusive art scene. After 9/11, however, artists were more likely to be defined by their race or be associated with the national spaces of their birth or family ties. These geographic silos continue today, where Sikander is often referred to as a Pakistani artist without wider context.

Singing Suns

2016

HD video animation

3 mins., 24 sec.

music score and sound design by Du Yun

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Nemesis: A Performance Collaboration with Shahzia Sikander and Sharmila Desai

Performed at the Aldrich Contemporary Art
Museum, Connecticut

2004

HD video

12 mins., 18 sec.

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

SpiNN

2003

digital animation with sound

6 mins., 38 sec.

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Another edition is in the collection of Blanton
Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin

Each of these three works, shown on rotation, activates Sikander's use of the *gopis'* hair, a recurring motif that, when isolated and extracted, exemplifies feminine presence and power. In *Singing Suns*, the artist reinterprets the motif as blazing spheres that shift and pulse with the overlay of different instruments and tonal histories. *Nemesis* is a dance performance by Sharmila Desai that incorporates yoga, dance, and martial arts to activate drawings of the form. In *SpiNN*, Sikander explores the form within a painted setting that resembles the Mughal *darbar* hall, a formal meeting space and seat of imperial power. As the animation progresses, *gopis* infiltrate the hall to disrupt patriarchy and sovereignty. Their hair separates from their bodies, flying throughout the court. Angels and women, who briefly assume the throne, then fill the hall. The demons in the last scene may represent how women in power are treated with greater scrutiny and hostility.

Housed

1995

gouache and charcoal on clay-coated paper board
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

The gestural movement of Sikander's brush creates an abstracted form that is part architectural, part figural. The upper portion, a face covering for a shuttlecock burka, is most clearly articulated. *"For me, art is about knowledge construction: how we reckon with our otherness in a shifting world, how we approximate, reproduce, and reenact our history. Housed is a haunted image that responds to the Orientalist obsession with the veil in the Western imagination. Is it armor, mask, or shelter? The cage-like form has a door, and a pink heart inside. This tapped into my anxiety of being boxed into a stereotype of a culture or religion."*

Who's Veiled Anyway?

1997

transparent and opaque watercolor, tea,
graphite pencil, and charcoal on board
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee
97.83.1

For Sikander, reinvention creates new meaning as the sources she draws from disintegrate, disperse, and reengage. Here, through a complex layering of imagery, Sikander offers unclothed figures as part of the horse's composition, tendrilled disembodied forms, and a Chinese-influenced landscape, all to investigate political and cultural histories. She also offers a layered commentary on gender and religion through the inclusion of the veil.

"The notion of the veil, despite its cliché, persists in defining the Muslim female in the West. This protagonist appears to be a veiled female, yet on close inspection one can see that the stock character is a male polo player common to South and Central Asian manuscript illustrations. Painting over the male figure with chalky white lines was

my way to make androgyny the subject. One could read it as a comment on patriarchal, colonial, and imperial histories. It was also a means of tracing my own relationship with the largely male-dominated lineage of manuscript painting."

Infinite Woman

2019–2021

watercolor, ink, gouache, and gold leaf on paper
Shah Garg Collection

This large-scale drawing uses both minute detail and monumentality to convey the immeasurable capability of women. At first, the central image resembles a parched earth or satellite image. On closer inspection, however, the sphere is delicately formed by isolated *gopis*' hair and gold leaf, centering feminine presence once again. *"Do women move the earth? Do they control the earth? Does their labor move the earth? I see universal movement inherent in women, through their fertility, fecundity, their essence of being. Women share stories, memories pass through them over generations. They are infiniteness."*

Through the repetition of the standing female form shown in profile, a collective swarm of the *gopis*' hair, and the imagery of a globe, Sikander demonstrates that feminine power exists beyond categorization, political-social structures, or restrictions. Yet these feminine forms are sharp—they resemble spikes. Such power and presence is uncomfortable and painful to hold.

**Cholee Kay Peechay Kiya? Chunree Kay
Neechay Kiya? (What is under the Blouse?
What is under the Dress?)**

1997

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and
tea on wasli paper

Hessel Museum of Art

Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum
of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College,
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

R1999.49

This work's title comes from a song in the popular 1993 Bollywood film *Khalnayak* (The Villain). In the scene where the song plays, two women sensuously dance together while a man observes them. In Sikander's response to the scene, she portrays a solitary feminine figure in male dress. The turban, skirt, *patka* (belt or sash), and compositional format reference Mughal court fashion and painting of the seventeenth century. The fluid figure contains a multiplicity of meaning; in Hindu religious thought, the creation of the universe emanated from a lotus that sprouted from the god Brahma's navel.

Seen as a whole, Sikander's figure moves beyond history, religion, and binary definitions of gender to consciously and playfully queer convention.

"The women in my work are always complex, proactive, confident, and intelligent and in their playful stances they are connected to the past in imaginative ways without being tied to a heteronormative lineage or conventional representations of diaspora and nation."

Fixed, Fluid

2022

glass mosaic with patinated brass frame
Dr. Fatima Zuberi

Fixed, Fluid brings together multiple motifs that reflect Sikander's practice, including the autonomous female figure, lotus base, fragmented border, and abstracted natural forms. Since 2015, mosaics have become an essential medium for the artist. With its inherent fragmentation, mosaic serves her interest in disrupting historic assumptions and ideals. Having worked with the pixels of digital animation since the early 2000s, Sikander is interested in how fragmented pieces of visual information can become whole. The two mediums remain linked through her process: she begins each mosaic by creating a digital animation out of multiple drawings. She stops the animation when she finds a frame she likes, using that as the basis for the mosaic's image. Sikander then works closely with a fabricator, Franz Mayer of Munich, on each mosaic to select the glass and determine its orientation, often placing the glass pieces on their side and upside down—a material prompt to look at ideas from many angles.

Liquid Light II

2024

painted, etched, and laminated glass
Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Sikander considers light to be a medium that she works with—whether it is the use of light within a composition, or here, where light streams through the painted glass activating the artwork. She seeks to understand how light tracks through the different layers of paint; when installed with natural light behind, as it was in Venice, it changes how the painting reveals itself throughout the day.

Created for the Venice presentation of *Collective Behavior*, *Liquid Light I* (at this exhibition's entrance) and *Liquid Light II* activate a medium long associated with Venice. Sikander's use and manipulation of the form merge global trade histories with South Asian imagery. *"I leave the possibilities open to allow ideas to fall into place, sometimes through dreams and reflection, but always through experimentation with physical materials."*

Baggage Warrior

2024

pulp painted collagraph and watermarked Pellon transfers with printed kozo inclusion and stenciled pulp painting on two-color cotton background
Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Prints

In *Baggage Warrior*, Sikander imagines a powerful female figure who carries her history, one that is fluid and luminescent, with her wherever she goes. While that history follows her, it does not weigh her down, she instead appears buoyant. The print revisits imagery from a site-specific wall drawing Sikander made in 1997 at Deitch Projects, a gallery in New York City. The artist often mines her own work and reframes forms to suit a new time, place, and medium.

Sikander created *Baggage Warrior* through pulp painting, in which she applied pigmented pulp to a freshly made sheet of paper submerged in water. As the artist worked, external water pressure was applied, which caused unpredictable surface effects. Because the paper surface must remain wet throughout production, there is a window of

Weightless

2024

mixed media collage

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Left to right
Migrant Love
2024

stenciled and sprayed pigmented handmade paper
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Gendered Currents: Gopi Regatta
2024

graphite on paper
Lent by Kenneth J Birdwell

Thrust
Sway
Her-Vimana
Procession
2024

mixed media collage
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Sikander created this collection of drawings for the Venice presentation of *Collective Behavior*. The artist returned to her primary medium, paper, in her generative process. She manipulated paper by cutting and combining it to construct an image through collage. Sikander also submerged paper in water and added pigment to create a marble effect.

Finally, she disintegrated paper in water to transition the medium back into pulp, where she incorporated lace and other textiles to conceptualize and realize a pattern, as seen in *Procession*. Throughout, the work's subject matter is echoed in the material chosen. "Lace holds significance to me. It is threaded, broken apart, and rebuilt. I look within the patterns for forms, it offers a map like armature for me to build." Two of these works, *Her-Vimana* and *Migrant Love*, served as initial articulations of the concept and composition for the new glassworks positioned nearby—*Liquid Light I and II*.

Collective Behavior at La Biennale di Venezia

This exhibition premiered as a Collateral Event of Venice's Biennale Arte, the world's largest gathering of contemporary art exhibitions. It was presented at the Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel, a fifteenth-century Gothic palace in Venice's Cannaregio district. Installed within a series of stately rooms, Sikander's artwork integrated seamlessly with the historic architecture, creating new and exciting visual connections between past and present.

Venice is the perfect location to explore Sikander's artistic practice. There are rich histories of trade between Venice, Asia, and the Middle East resulting in mixed and borrowed iconographies that reverberate through Italian Renaissance paintings, illuminated manuscripts of Central and South Asia, and textiles of the Islamic world. These histories are reflected in the exhibition's newer works, including a selection of drawings, collage, and two glass artworks. Throughout this new body of work, Sikander examines the female form and feminine presence in art, religion, and society from a global feminist perspective.

The Venice iteration of *Collective Behavior* was co-organized by CAM and the Cleveland Museum of Art. This collaboration inspired the graphite drawing *Gendered Currents: Gopi Regatta*, where Sikander imagines water and land relationships through socio-political and climatic lenses while also announcing the arrival of a feminine entourage to Venice.

Liquid Light I 2024

painted, etched, and laminated glass
Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

In a new artwork created for the Venice presentation of *Collective Behavior*, Sikander has once again reinvented her self-rooted figure by portraying her atop the abstracted form of a *simurgh*, the mythological bird from Persian literature known for its great size, benevolence, and association with wisdom. The mounted figure appears weightless, unburdened by histories, or free after overcoming unseen hardship. Recasting and adapting historical forms is a dominant theme in Sikander's practice.

“In historical art and literature, the feminine has been related to the monstrous, the abject, the immense, and the vulnerable. Femininity intersects with race and relates in particular ways to war and violence. Women in my art function as agents of resistance, change, nurture, and power. They are centered as symbols of endurance and transformation within vast global histories of empire to offer redemptive possibilities as a counternarrative to the exploitative and extractive forces.”

Negotiated Landscapes and Contested Spaces

The works in this section consider the complex histories of colonialism in South Asia and their legacies in language, trade, empire, and the migration patterns of today. Over 300 years of rule, the East India Company (1600–1874) and later the British Raj (1858–1947) divided political power and cultural authority, fracturing the subcontinent’s interwoven histories. Eventually, in 1947, colonial powers carved a vast geographic terrain into two modern countries, India and Pakistan (and later Bangladesh in 1971), based on each region’s respective Hindu and Muslim religious majorities.

Following Independence, the conflicts of Partition gave way to the fraught transition to new nationhood.

In her work, Sikander responds to this history, which continues to fracture land and people. Through globe and map motifs, she explores how geography and nationality are formally characterized. The recurring image of an oil rig stands for the global economic and ecological consequences of that industry. And, the image of a flying *peri*, the mythical being or angel from historic Islamic manuscripts, plays with the ambiguity of "right" and "wrong" in global politics. As Sikander reframes symbols and iconographies, she invites us to reimagine established interpretations of an inherited past.

The World is Yours, The World Is Mine 2014

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and gouache on wasli paper

Created for *The New York Times Magazine* opinion page, December 4, 2014

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Commissioned by *The New York Times* as a response to the Ebola outbreak, Sikander created a connection between a pandemic, the music of Nasir (Nas) Jones, and South Asian painting. Africa is the glowing green and yellow heart of this painting; the swirling ink recalls topographic maps or satellite imagery. The central quasi-mythological figure has three heads. The figure on the left is Langston Hughes, the 1920s Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist. In the center is death, a white skeleton figure with its organs spilling out of its chest. And on the right is Nas, a hip-hop artist known for his vivid observations and storytelling. Hughes and Nas have distinct relationships with lyric and verse in their narratives: Hughes through poetry and Nas through rap. Sikander felt an affinity with Nas's use of personal narrative to disrupt poetic languages and histories. For her, a painting can become a tool, document, or story that creates myriad connections.

Mirror Plane

2012

color direct gravure
Cincinnati Art Museum
Museum Purchase
2012.55

Behind the central image on this print are lines of "text" created through floral imagery. The repetition implies a book or manuscript page, but with a playful, symbolic exploration of language. The circle of text applied on top of the figure is also unreadable. Sikander often creates prints and is interested in the medium's multiplicity and an image's reproducible nature. Much like her manipulation and reuse of images in other mediums, through the print process, meaning can also evolve and images can expand or contract. In 2014, the central image of *Mirror Plane* became the template for a monumental glass mosaic commission at Princeton University.



Ecstasy as Sublime,
Heart as Vector
2016

glass, ceramic, and
marble mosaic
Permanent, site-
specific commission
Julis Romo Rabinowitz
and Louis A. Simpson
International Building,
Princeton University,
Princeton, New Jersey

Epistrophe

2013–2015

gouache, ink, and gold leaf on paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia

Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

These circular collective forms, referred to by Sikander as “singing spheres,” infuse rhythm, pattern, and movement into this composition. Through repetition of the written word, abstracted image evolves into text and back again. The forms cluster and disperse, and language drips down the page through gestural markings made of ink. These marks and gestures swarm into arrows, writing, and *gopis’* hair and coalesce to create both a musical score and poetic text. Sikander relates this to the way individual instruments combine in an orchestral score.

Epistrophe was originally one continuous sheet—a play on the format of the scroll that was painted in an iterative fashion and added to over years. Repeated across this composition are lines of poetic text, including a line from the Urdu poet Ghalib, “*The cypress, despite its freedom, is held captive to the garden,*” referencing how each individual can understand freedom differently.

Promiscuous Intimacies

2020

patinated bronze

Courtesy of Joel S. Pizzuti

Promiscuous Intimacies depicts a flirtatious encounter between the Roman goddess Venus and a Hindu celestial dancer. Playing with traditional power hierarchies, Sikander represents Venus, a symbol of European culture, gazing upwards at an icon of South Asian heritage. She based the two figures on, respectively, Agnolo Bronzino's *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (circa 1545) and an eleventh-century temple sculpture fragment from Madhya Pradesh, India.

Sikander first created this composition as part of a drawing from 2001. When she enlarged the drawn image for the sculpture—her first foray into this medium—she had live models assume poses which she rendered in clay and cast in bronze.

The Many Faces of Islam 1993–1999

vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor,
tea, and gold leaf on wasli paper
Commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine*
for the special issue "Imagining
the Millennium," September 19, 1999
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia
Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Sikander created this painting for *The New York Times Magazine* feature "Old Eyes and the New: Scenes from the Millennium, Reimagined by Living Artists" published in the September 1999 issue. The two central figures hold between them a piece of American currency inscribed with a quote from the Qur'an: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessing do you both deny?*"

The surrounding figures speak to the shifting global alliances between Muslim leaders, the American empire, and capitalism. "*The 1990s was about war, coalitions, alternating friends and foes, imposed sanctions, debts forgiven, and human rights brushed under the carpet as America flexed its military muscle around the world. This work*

took this history into account, and I proposed that American policy in Islamic countries would become a defining issue in the new millennium.”

Anwar Sadat
President of Egypt (1970–1981)

Menachem Begin
6th Prime Minister of Israel (1977–1983)

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan
Pakistani singer of Sufi devotional music

Muhammad Ali Jinnah
Founder of Pakistan 1947

Saddam Hussein
President of Iraq (1979–2003)

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
Supreme Leader of Iran (1979–1989)

Hanan Ashrawi
Spokeswoman for the Palestinian nation

Asma Jahangir
Pakistani human rights lawyer & social activist

King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud
King of Saudi Arabia (1964–1975)

King Hussein bin Talal
King of Jordan (1952–1999)

Nawal el Saadawi
Feminist writer & physician

Salman Rushdie
Indian-born British-American novelist

Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq
President of Pakistan (1978–1988)

Benazir Bhutto
Prime minister of Pakistan (1988–1990 & 1993–1996)

Malcolm X
African American human rights activist and Muslim minister

Empire Follows Art: States of Agitation 1, 2, 3, 4
2018–2020

ink and gouache on paper
Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Empire Follows Art: States of Agitation 8
2018–2020

ink and gouache on paper
From the collection of S. Lwin and F. Karim

Here, the winged figure, a form prevalent in South Asian, Persian, and Central Asian illustrated manuscript histories, is transformed. The imagery referenced comes from the eighteenth-century manuscript *Gulshan-i Ishq* (Rose Garden of Love), which was also the source material for Sikander's 2016 animation *Disruption as Rapture*, located in the first section of this exhibition. Within the manuscript, the winged figures feature in a dreamscape and are the physical and philosophical vehicles that offer the protagonist clairvoyance and vision.

Sikander's playful reinvention isolates, abstracts, and partially conceals the winged forms with broad

swaths of pooled color and overlapping, repeating motifs. As a whole, the series carries tension between the act of ascending and descending flight. Through such reinvention, Sikander explores new ways of seeing and thinking about imperial and colonial histories and contemporary events.

Land of Tears

2021

watercolor, ink, and gouache on paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia

Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

One of Sikander's signature motifs, an oil rig called a Christmas Tree used to extract oil across the Middle East, fills most of this large painting. Sikander first saw a photograph of this type of oil rig in British Petroleum (BP) magazine published in 1962. She elaborated the form into a series of twelve paintings, which is ongoing.

Surrounding the oil rig are numerous figures, some with wings drawn from illustrated historic manuscripts, while others are abstracted, writhing forms. Below lies a female figure and a skeleton. Sikander describes this work as visualizing the concept of eco-feminism. While oil is extractive, the feminine offers a counterbalance to the depletion of natural resources. She sees women as abundant and redemptive. As you continue to look at the painting, notice how multiple female forms emerge from the surrounding darkness.

Shroud

2020

watercolor, ink and gouache on paper
Nicoletta Fiorucci Collection

Part of an ongoing series of twelve paintings, *Shroud* reflects Sikander's engagement with colonial histories and current political ideologies. Here, one of her signature motifs, an oil rig playfully called a Christmas Tree used to extract oil across the Middle East, explores the industry's harmful ecological and sociological practices.

Large swaths of human civilization depend on the labor generated by this volatile trade, the extraction of which drains environmental resources while also displacing peoples and cultures. Surrounding the Christmas Tree, Sikander repeats a winged figure drawn from historic illustrated manuscripts, which are concealed and revealed by a tumultuous sky.

Parallax

2013

3-channel, single-image HD digital animation
with 5.1 surround sound

15 mins., 26 sec.

music score and sound design by Du Yun; animation
by Patrick O'Rourke

Other editions are in the collection of the Whitney
Museum of American Art, Kiran Nadar Museum
of Art, Linda Pace Foundation, Sharjah Art
Foundation, and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Parallax investigates Western intervention in the Middle East through sound and image. The score incorporates Urdu and Arabic voices alongside an instrumental crescendo, while an abstraction of the region's topographical map unfolds. Yet this pleasant "mirage" is distorted by oil gushing from the land and rockets flying overhead. "Christmas Trees," oozing with oil, appear—first one, then many, draining the land's natural resources. These oil rigs represent conflicting regional interests: U.S. military operations, migrant workers (many South Asian) searching for opportunity, and local populations.

This artwork is the result of a year-long project in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where Sikander researched the Strait of Hormuz. This stretch of water, between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, was once conquered by the Portuguese and the British Empire and is now shared by the UAE and Oman. A strategic passage, the area remains tense; Europe, the United States, and Middle Eastern powers each claim ownership and access.

Walled States

2011

ink and gouache on prepared paper

Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Shahzia

Sikander and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

This work questions the ideas and convictions that propel national identities, exploring how these closely held personal beliefs are often ephemeral. The cartological form of the United States merges with the outline of the fort in the lost city of Jalfar, connecting the United Arab Emirates with the United States via the trade, movement, and ecologically destructive qualities of petroleum.

Sikander works with the evocative capacity of ink to create delicate, almost atmospheric marks on the page to convey meaning. The lower half of the painting appears weighed down, almost in a state of disintegration, with particles rising to the surface or upper border of the page. Thumbprints create the marks in the upper area of the page, and the ink transfer varies, appearing almost translucent at times, signifying a transition from one chapter or state to another.

Upper
Utopia
2003

watercolor, dry pigment, and gouache on
wasli paper

Hessel Museum of Art

Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of
Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College,
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

R2014.40

In *Utopia*, Sikander has created a critique of American political expansion by her manipulation of American and historic Iranian imagery. Iranian Safavid-style winged figures are positioned atop an American flag, causing the viewer to consider the relationship between the countries, both past and present.

“How is time visualized in an artwork? How can artists reanimate timeworn images to create new understandings of history and new possibilities for the future? What assumptions and beliefs shape the reproduction of cultural knowledge? Can art reframe culturally charged images to help unravel

the colonial relationship between Western traditions and the art of the Global South? How can artistic transformations restore the syncretic vitality of Islamic visual culture in a polarized present?"

Lower

United World Corp

2003

watercolor, dry pigment, and inkjet
on wasli paper

The Speyer Family Collection, New York

This drawing was created during the Iraq War (2003–2011) to reflect on the global dependence on oil—a destructive resource—and the United States' engagement with the Middle East. Sikander considers oil to be a mechanism feeding climate destruction, social unrest, and imbalances in political power structures.

A detail from a sixteenth-century Safavid painting in the Freer Gallery of Art collection (now the National Museum of Asian Art) forms the background. In Sikander's intervention, an American presence overruns the garden. Globes featuring maps of the

United States appear at the center, an eagle reigns overhead, and angels prominently hold the scales of justice, their wings colored in red, white, and blue. The mirrored globe can be understood as a commentary, both on how you see the world and how you see yourself. Or, how the U.S. perceives itself, and how the world perceives the U.S.

Self-Mirage

2011

ink and gouache on paper

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Self-Mirage reflects Sikander's engagement with colonial histories through the manipulation and mirroring of the East India Company Man, a signature motif in the artist's practice. Here, the Company Man faces nefarious colonial histories through his dark consciousness, portrayed as a shadowy figure with whom he shares an intimate embrace. Through their joined form, gestural calligraphic line, and swarming accumulation of line and image, Sikander refers to the entanglement of war, patriarchal structures, colonialism, and capitalism.

Started before but completed after the 2010 animation *The Last Post*, the two works share imagery, meaning, and pattern. In both, Sikander uses repetition to meld calligraphy and the musical score, illustrating how music imprints on memory and the body. Ideas born through text, writing, and gesture fragment, disintegrate, and reassemble.

The Last Post

2010

single-channel HD digital animation with 5.1
surround sound
10 mins.

music score and sound design by Du Yun

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

The Last Post marks a shift in Sikander's animated practice as it is the first collaboration with Pulitzer Prize-winning artist Du Yun, who has composed the musical scores for *The Last Post* (2010), *Parallax* (2013), *Singing Suns* (2016), *Disruption as Rapture* (2016), and *Reckoning* (2020). The work begins with Sikander's visualization of the Company Man, a fictional character and stand-in representative of the East India Company's colonial power. He appears in a Mughal court setting before disappearing into a forest of trees and an abstracted natural landscape. The narrative arc of the animation investigates the colonial trade relations between China and the East India Company over opium, with the Company Man as the protagonist who travels through India and into China. Eventually, the symbolic figure of the Company Man explodes, referring to the end of the Anglo-Saxon control over China, which is seen as a riot of color, moving image, and sound.

Reckoning

2020

HD video animation with sound

4 mins., 16 sec.

music score and sound design by Du Yun

featuring Zeb Bangash; animation by

Patrick O'Rourke

Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Sikander's most recent animation, *Reckoning*, intertwines nature with human conflict. While earlier animations explore manuscript painting within two-dimensional animated sequences that interrelate, *Reckoning's* dynamic, complex movements illustrate the evolution of her experimental practice. The central narrative is focused on two Mughal warriors engaged in combat, which plays out through sparks that whirl across the screen and blossoming, delicate floral stems. Tantric Buddhist chants are paired with the rapid chords from the violin, connecting two musical histories from different parts of the world. The musical dissonance reflects the warriors' struggles, rippling and billowing in fierce contention like a battle flag in the wind.

Boundless

2024

unique collagraph on pigmented cotton
with pulp painting
Courtesy of the Artist and Pace Prints

The three images seen here, each portraying a female figure holding hands with a skeleton, is closely associated with Sikander's oeuvre. The artist also plays with this image in the large-scale painting *Land of Tears* and the immersive animation *Parallax*, shown nearby. The use and repetition of this form speaks to Sikander's critical engagement with contemporary and historic political and societal structures, and the fundamental fear and longing of transitory states. As the name suggests, the relationships between life and death, inclusion and exclusion, subject and viewer, ink and water, are boundless.

**Portrait of the Artist (Suite of IV),
no. I, II, III, IV
2016**

etching with accompanying collaborative
text by Ayad Akhtar
Cincinnati Art Museum
Gift of the Artist
2024.128.1–5

In *Portrait of the Artist*, Sikander layers portraits of herself and novelist Ayad Akhtar with motifs from one of Islam's most miraculous events: the Prophet Muhammad's *mi'raj* (ascent into heaven). In each portrait, imagery inspired by historic Persian (Iranian) manuscripts, including the Prophet Muhammad astride a *buraq* (winged horse-like figure) and angels flying amidst the clouds, appear as ghostlike forms against the artist and novelist's faces. "The Breath of Miraj," written by Akhtar, provides a literary complement to Sikander's prints. In it, Akhtar finds wonder in the *mi'raj* and uses it as inspiration for artists to push boundaries into the unknown with their work.

This series of etchings and accompanying text is the

product of a collaboration between Sikander and Akhtar. A Pakistani-American playwright, novelist, and poet, Akhtar's exploration of immigration, religion, and the diversity of experience and identity speak to recurring themes in Sikander's work.

Segments of Desire Go Wandering Off 1998

collage with vegetable color, dry pigment,
watercolor, graphite, and tea on wasli paper
Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg

This painting layers imagery and text to explore the hyphenated identities many in the United States hold. At the center, a multi-armed, uprooted female tries to hold on to all she desires—a *chalawa* (symbolizing impermanence), a turtle (symbolizing endurance), a floating child, a portrait of a woman, and a self-portrait of the artist. Sikander painted the central figure over a large portrait of a trickster drawn by the Houston-based artist David McGee. She partly obscured all the faces, keeping racial and cultural identities shifting.

These emblems both reference and confront

Sikander's quiet discomfort with such overt signifiers of identity. The turtle flying off the page references the paradox of freedom on offer to immigrants in the U.S.—even if you want to reinvent yourself and be free, you are tethered to predetermined definitions. *“Inhabiting the feminine and Asian American—or Asian-anything—in the West often means living the paradox of being invisible while standing out.”*