

## 6.3. The self-sustainable world of Shahzia Sikander

*Conceição Cordeiro*<sup>143</sup>

**A b s t r a c t**

This paper aims to put into perspective the need to create a feminine figure. A flat figure, in black in most works (drawing and painting), a shadow which is present in some of the works of the artist Shahzia Sikander (1969, Pakistan), and considered by Fereshteh Daftari as an alter ego, as the representation of self-feeding and self-survival: a woman who generates and feeds on her own energy, in a will to safeguard her own identity (self-sustainability). Shahzia Sikander is a diaspora artist and her works presents hybrid qualities, in a process of reconciliation between the West and the East. Her work is influenced by Hindu mythology, by Mughal's miniature paintings and by Western artists like Sigmar Polke, amongst others. As a woman born in a Muslim territory, Pakistan, Shahzia Sikander takes us to places/spaces where the delicacy and fluidity of the Mughal miniature painting is significant, a presence felt even in her digital animation work, consisting of several layers, in a palimpsest process. Her work questions the issues of gender, religion, hierarchy, Western and Eastern culture, from a perspective of dialogue and numerous solutions.

**Keywords:** *Painting, hybridity, alter ego, identity, culture.*



## 1. Shahzia Sikander's first works

Regarding the work *Perilous Order* (1994-1997)<sup>144</sup> by Shahzia Sikander, Fereshteh Daftari writes:

*A pure invention of Sikander's hovers in the lower centre: the shadowy silhouette of a female figure, perhaps an alter ego, with roots in place of feet – inter-connected roots that absorb energy only from themselves, suggesting that this woman is self-nourishing. (Daftari, 2006, p. 14)*

This text resonates again and again as we approach the work of Shahzia Sikander. Throughout her work this image of a headless woman with feet transformed into strings, navel-strings, which provide the circulation of vital elements for existence, essential for self-sufficiency, arises frequently. Shahzia Sikander (1969), born in Pakistan, now living in New York, recognised internationally as a re-inventor/translator of miniature Persian paintings. She began this artistic process of study and reinterpretation of indo-persian miniature painting after studying Mughal miniature paintings (sixteen to nineteen century), at the Lahore National College of Art, Pakistan (1992). Already in the U.S.A., she took a master's degree from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), in 1995. Her prolific work has altered within the miniature painting process and the production of digital animated projections of large scale. We sought to trace the development of this feminine silhouette, which accompanies Sikander's work, created in the 1990s, until 2016.

### 1.1. Shahzia Sikander and her alter ego

The work *Untitled* (1993)<sup>145</sup>, as shown on Shahzia Sikander's webpage, corresponds to a pictorial vocabulary created during her studies at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

*Shahzia Sikander: I made this work in 1993-94, many moons as a young female artist saddened at the lack of women representation in the arts and the constant expunging of the feminine by all sorts of disrespect and fear of the female<sup>146</sup>.*

*In 1998, Homi Bhabha interviewed Shahzia Sikander, in which he asks her about this female form.*

*H.Bhabha (...) Sometimes you have a Durga figure or a Kali figure, a destructive character from Hindu pantheon. And then again, uncannily shadowing it and doubling it will be a veiled form. (...)*

*S. Sikander: For instance, the red, floating female form with the loops at the bottom. It evolved over those yellow tissue drawings. It was very much about how the pigment sits on the paper, and*

<sup>144</sup> We can see this work in *Shahzia Sikander*, Catalogue of exhibition held March 8-April 19 of the Renaissance Society, 1999, plate 7. Retrieved 20 April 2018 from <https://pt.scribd.com/document/82892166/Shahzia-Sikander>.

<sup>145</sup> The work *Untitled*, gouache on board, 12 x 24 inches, 1993. Appears titled as *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, 1993, in the solo exhibition *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power*, 2016, at the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre. We can see the same form *Untitled* in the catalogue of the Renaissance Society, 1999, plate 1.

<sup>146</sup> shahzia.sikander, Instagram (30 October 2017).

*in that respect the form began as a set of very painterly marks. When I did these drawings in graduate school, I was asked if I had seen Eva Hesse's work, Nancy Spero's work. Obviously, these were references outside the tradition of miniature painting. Sure, I looked at their work. But I was trying to generate forms not for the sake of making art historical references, but simply at the level of experimentation with materials and process. I then subjected those forms to the experience making miniatures, subjecting them to detail, definition - accessorizing, ornamentalizing, and decorating them. I started adding things to the floating figure. Where there were feet, I substituted with root forms. I was obsessed with interconnections and the idea of being self-contained, not rooted in any one context. Obviously this was a large part of my experience at RISD (Bhabha, 1999, pp. 18-19).*

The pictorial vocabulary that gives rise to the female figure of *Untitled* brings together the feminine Hindu mythology, with the works of feminist artists such as Eva Hesse and Nancy Spero. A newcomer to the United States of America and still a student of RISD (1993), Sikander proposes with this vocabulary the affirmation of what it is to be a Muslim woman in a Western country. Sikander's firm resolution to remain attached to the Hindu-Persian miniature painting, traditionally transmitted through a male language, which dominated this pictorial process, results in this female figure without a head, or sometimes with a veil and whose feet are replaced by strings that join the two legs, in a process of self-sufficiency, as she herself states in the interview with Homi Bhabha.

It is possible to visualize this pictorial vocabulary in a video of 2000, where the form to which we refer materializes with ink on paper, where Sikander exposes:

*A lot of images that exist in my work were happening because I was interested in subverting Hindu with Muslim and Muslim with Hindu. Having grown up as a Muslim in Pakistan I didn't have that much information about Hindu mythology and when I came here I realized that these were the things which still interested me, and I was looking at the idea of the Hindu goddess, but it didn't matter how many hands it had, just the notion that it was the female body with several hands was important (...).*

In 2013, Hilarie Sheets (2013) establishes the relation of this feminine form and the works of the Cuban / American artist Ana Mendieta:

*'It was about a form afloat and uprooted', says Sikander, who felt a kinship with Ana Mendieta's bodyworks. Her signature nomadic silhouette has reappeared in many finished works, sometimes like a*

*spectre feminizing the head of a Mughal courtier, sometimes joined with the multi-armed Hindu goddess brandishing an array of weapons and wearing a veil, like a cross-cultural female superhero.*

In the works *Who's Veiled Anyway* (1994-97)<sup>147</sup> and *Separate Working Things II* (1993-95)<sup>148</sup> we can see from the lower left side of the frame, small figures as they exercise the formulation of the final form: woman standing with veil, woman with feet in shape of strings with veil, woman with strings replacing the shape of the head. In the upper left corner, the same shape is just outlined, not filled. These works result from a reworking, over previous works, where the white and blue colour of the ink, erase parts of the frame, as she explicitly states:

*I remove all the colour and took the white and that white became as an editing tool, but as I placed the white on top of the veil archetypal forms figure that I created a prototype of sort, but it got hijacked completely by issues around identity and I was very interesting to see that there was so much fluctuation in what one was doing. At the same time there was this kind of a graffiti's gesture which broke the preciousness of this object which was something that I was very eager to engage in, also plus it was the androgynous notion of the self. They're not necessarily just the gender in terms of male/female (Sikander, 2017).*

Regarding the representation of the veil, Shahzia Sikander, in the interview, recently mentioned (1999), with Homi Bhabha, she explains:

*Even for me such thing as the veil, which I use a lot in my work, remains exotic. It is a charged and provocative stereotype. The first time I put it in my work, everyone reacted strongly. Why? It is not a question of what kind of meaning the image is transmitting but what kind of meaning the viewer is projecting. I actually wore a veil, for a brief period of time, for the purpose of recording people's reactions. I would go to the grocery store and to the bar, and people would get confused and intimidated. Obviously, for me, it was just the opposite. Nobody could see my body language or facial expression. That gave me more control, security, and articulation. (Bhabha, 1999, p. 24).*

In the 2000 video, Shahzia Sikander (2000) clarifies the placement of the veil on these female figures:

*The goddess had a very specific face and here I was tripping off the face, and putting like a headdress like the veil on top of it, and yet, the veil is on*

<sup>147</sup> We can see this work in the catalogue of the Renaissance Society, 1999, plate 20.

<sup>148</sup> We can see this work in the catalogue of the Renaissance Society, 1999, plate 18.

*top of her, in the goddess, not to underestimate what's behind the veil. The minute you bring the word veil into the equation it kind of connects you to a Muslim identity or a woman's identity and these are loaded issues to take on, because anything associated with Islam is either terrorism or oppression for women. Culturally it's not, you know, my experience.*

The goddess, the archetype, the form emerged as self-affirmation and self-sustainability, now appears to us on a higher projected scale where support is infinite and weapons become swift, as in *Unseen* at The Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art (2008), and at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2012). Shahzia Sikander (2014) defends this project thus:

*Another project which is part of the exhibition on view here was done in Shangri-la at The Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, the large scale projections were done at night and they were an attempt to engage with the site itself. My ongoing interest in the colonial history of the subcontinent functioned as a portal into the space. Some of the projections work as framing devices that expose elements of landscape hidden at night, while also extending the architecture itself like the wall of the living room that descends to open the house to the environment. The projections erect an invisible wall rising high above the architecture hoisted by the density of the trees, while transforming the space. The projections also recontextualized my own ideas by shifting the scale of the drawings and rendering them in foliage and architecture. Light and shadow take centre stage highlighting the textures colours and geometry of the space into a theatre of light evolving into a dimension that is sculptural illusionistic and temporary imagining Doris Duke. It was how I grasped the stunning sight. Her presence was everywhere permeating her collections, her house and its extensions into nature. The projection of the multi-armed female is a metaphor for Doris Duke herself mythical majestic monument rising from the Mughals suite looming over Shangri-la, overlooking the formidable Pacific where her ashes were sprinkled (...).*

The work *Untitled* appears in 2016, in the exhibition / catalogue *Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power*, at the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, with the designation of *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*. In the interview of Allison Young (2016) to the curator of the exhibition Claire Brandon, it states:

*In contrast, A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation isolates a singular shape: a flesh-coloured female*

*figure that floats on top a black background. Its carefully articulated legs glide with structures shaped like whisks, and a series of curved lines encircle a heavily-bosomed torso. A powerful and haunting stand-alone image, A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation functions as an isolated study in Sikander's signature vocabulary of images. The form has since had a long life in many of her subsequent works, including Eye-I-ing Those Armorial Bearings (1989–97), Perilous Order (1989–97), and Elusive Realities (2000) (Brandon in Young, 2016).*

Further in the same interview, we can read:

*As Sikander's practice expanded to encompass other media—including drawings on walls, tissues, and windows, as well as the digital realm—this figure grew in size, making its way onto the wall in 1997 at the Drawing Centre in New York. In that exhibition, the figure was repeated several times in different variations, sometimes oriented horizontally or flanked on both sides by multiple arms clutching knife like weapons. This armed version appeared in Sikander's first animation, Intimacy (2001). That same year, the figure was included in the top register of the print Heist from the series No Parking Anytime. The way in which the figure in A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation has taken on new meanings in works spanning multiple media, geographic contexts, and visual variations since 1993, demonstrates what Sikander has called an 'apparatus of power'. This visual device refers to the potential of a given image to communicate differently depending on its context and format. In following the life of this image, we see that the 'apparatus of power' is sensitive and responsive to time (Brandon in Young, 2016).*

In 2016, the Princeton Museum collection, from Princeton University, USA, is enriched by the work *Untitled*<sup>149</sup>, which integrates a series of works entitled *Ecstasy as Sublime, Heart as Vector*, in glass and ceramics fixed to the wall on the landing of stairs, the same signature of Shahzia Sikander, the same form and symbolism we have been following, and for which Shahzia Sikander has the following explanation:

*A very signature image for me is the feminine form that has roots – rather than feet – but does not have a head. The idea of the female divinity was very present within a complex system. That's been expunged from so many cultures and religions and the headless form – for me, a beheading – emphasizes the removal of the feminine.<sup>150</sup>*

**149** We can read a note at the web page of Princeton Museum collection: *Ecstasy as Sublime, Heart as Vector* spans the four stories of stairs in the Louis A. Simpson International Building. This shimmering, sixty-six-foot-high, glass and ceramic scroll takes visitors on a journey from the mortal bonds of humanity to the realm of abstraction, integrating elements from diverse cultures, faiths, and the artist's personal iconography. The fourth image at this gallery is the work we refer at Princeton Museum collection.

**150** shahzia.sikander, Instagram (7 April 2017). This work as the comment we transcribe below. Excerpt from Interview @brooklynrail.

## 2. Concluding notes

Shahzia Sikander presents herself as an artist of the transnational movement, of the movement of artists who combine cultures with different origins, in a hybrid process, defended by Homi Bhabha as a process that originates the *third space*, a space where cultures combine *new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through the knowledge received* (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211). Faithful to her origins, Shahzia Sikander challenges the programmatic construction of patriarchal teaching to assert herself as a self-sustainable woman who gives voice to female knowledge and empowerment.

## References

- Bhabha, H. (1999). Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha. In Sikander S., *Catalogue of exhibition held March 08 to April 19 at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998*. Chicago, IL: Renaissance Society, University of Chicago.
- Bhabha, H. (2006). Another country. In Frankel D. (Ed.), *Without boundary: seventeen ways of looking* (pp. 30-35). New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Daftari, F. (2006). Islamic or not. In Frankel D. (Ed.), *Without boundary: seventeen ways of looking* (pp. 10-27). New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Rutherford, J. (1990). The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha. In Rutherford J. (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 207-221). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Sheets, H. M. (2013, April). Shahzia Sikander: Maximalist Miniatures. *Artnews*. Retrieved from: <http://www.artnews.com/2013/04/15/shahzia-sikander-maximalist-miniatures/>.
- Sikander, S. (2000). *Shahzia Sikander*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qW18VinqU0>.
- Sikander, S. (2014). *Shahzia Sikander: Drawing Ideas*. Retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf\\_x7WhCZro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf_x7WhCZro).
- Sikander, S. (2017). Presentation. SAI 6th annual symposium – “Migrations and Transformations”, Cambridge, Harvard University South Asia Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvqQEYq2KOY>.
- Young, A. (2016). Interview with Claire Brandon, Curator of Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power. *Shift*. Retrieved from: [http://shiftjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/SHIFT\\_Claire-Brandon.pdf](http://shiftjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/SHIFT_Claire-Brandon.pdf).