Shahzia Sikander

Shahzia Sikander, *Promiscuous Intimacies*, 2020, Patinated bronze, edition of 5 with 2 APs. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York.

Photo by Jason Wyche, New York.

A sculpture depicting two intertwined female figures juxtaposes Hindu and Greco-Roman artistic styles. The figure at top wears an elaborate crown, hoop earrings, a necklace, armlets, and wide belt. She is bare-chested and her left arm ends at the elbow, as if broken off the sculpture. She stands on the tip of her right foot, twisting and looking down while her left shin rests on the right shoulder of the lower figure. This other figure is nude, seated on a small pillow. Her head is tilted back as she gazes up at the figure above. She reaches up and around and uses a single finger to lightly hook onto a dangling necklace. The sculpture is a heavily patinated bronze.

Walk into the South Asian galleries at a museum, leaf through a survey book on Persian art, or Google “Hindu sculpture”—you will find artworks isolated against white gallery walls, images cropped from pages aged hundreds of years, sculptures extracted from temples and set against jet-black voids. For Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander, seeing centuries-old works of art ripped from their original contexts and elevated to artificial pristineness opens the questions of “What is tradition?” and “Who gets to decide what is traditional?”

Invoking historic visual languages and spanning media as disparate as mosaic and digital animation, Shahzia Sikander’s work contemplates these questions in a distinctively contemporary artistic practice. The high level of technical sophistication in Sikander’s work recalls her training at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, where she opened a new chapter of miniature painting by challenging its entrenched conventions. As Sikander brings forward miniature painting into contemporary art, its figures cast off their frozen

poses and flat profile views; animated with emotions like despair and desire, Sikander's figures reverberate with the spectrality of their interior worlds. Within Sikander's works, the figures also meet texts of history, literature, poetry, philosophy, and religion. They take on narratives such as ancient wars, colonialism's aftermath, and the rise of transnational corporations. As they have become increasingly gestural, layered, and awash with color, Sikander's figurations have also extended to expansive installations and digital collaborations with the music composer Du Yun. Compared to our contemporary encounters with illuminated manuscripts and Hindu deities deemed to immortalize South Asia, Sikander's works are refreshingly dynamic, fluid, and imaginative. Sikander does not use stark contexts to excise past visual languages; she brackets Euro-colonial and institutional perspectives. By exchange, she animates past languages as she brings them to meet their counterparts elsewhere, re-instantiates them within current crises, and infuses them with humanistic tropes.

As they weave together rich histories with contemporary resonance, Sikander's works record her process of thinking through the convergences of disparate themes and temporalities. Importantly, in evincing process, Sikander's works do not terminate in answers. (Indeed, to answer who or what determines "tradition" during our time would be to point fingers.) Instead, Sikander accentuates the tension between the exquisite materiality she pushes to the fore and meanings that slip through our fingers. Sikander's works are sensual, spiritual, allegorical and highly evocative, yet evading a single

interpretation that can outlast history's forward thrust.

—Simone Levine

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b. 1969, Lahore, Pakistan
MacArthur Fellow, 2006

Venues