It Remains to Be Seen

Shahzia Sikander, *Kinship*, 2019-2020, Ink and gouache on paper. Paper: 60 x 96 inches (152.4 x 243.8 cm), Framed: 65 5/8 x 99 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches (166.7 x 252.1 x 5.7 cm). © Shahzia Sikander.

Photo by Adam Reich, Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York.

A gouache painting in a white frame on a gallery wall depicts an abstracted, faceless figure lying flat with their head at the left of the paper, arms at their side, legs outstretched. They are surrounded by waves of blue brush strokes against an unpainted background. Overlapping and melding with this figure is a second, less defined figure in a similar pose, their head at the right side of the paper, arms at their side. Urdu scripts are written in layers over both of the figures.

You road I enter upon and look around,
I believe you are not all that is here,

I believe that much unseen is also here.
—Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road"

I. Iconoclasm

On the morning of May 31, 2020, the statue of Confederate Navy Captain Charles Linn lay face down on the ground in the Birmingham, Alabama, park bearing his name. The night before protestors had gathered in front of another historical marker—the city's Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument, erected in 1905—to express their outrage over the latest extrajudicial killing of a Black man by a white police officer. Unable to overturn the 52-foot-tall obelisk, they set upon it with hammers and rocks, until Linn's effigy could be thrown to the ground. The upwelling of anger prompted by George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis just days before led to public and sometimes violent confrontations with and over monuments. Seemingly overnight, and continuing throughout the iconoclastic summer of 2020, scenes resembling those associated with the fall of Baghdad or the demise of the Soviet Union occurred across the Western world. There were some spectacular examples: Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, was dragged off his pedestal in Richmond, Virginia; the seventeenth-century slave trader Robert Colston was dislodged from his plinth and rolled into Bristol Harbor in England; King Leopold II of Belgium, founder and brutal overlord of the Congo Free State, vacated a public square in Antwerp after his enthroned likeness was set on fire in the middle of the night. However, the majority of the conversations about who and what should represent the United States of

America took place quietly, as cities and states across the country passed laws, established commissions, and removed monuments.[i]

The tumult surrounding this dramatic reimagining of how we visualize our collective history first reached fever pitch while I was participating in an ongoing dialogue with the two artists whose work is the subject of this exhibition: An-My Lê (American, b. 1960 Vietnam) and Shahzia Sikander (Pakistani, b. 1969). My discussions with Lê focused on *The Silent General* (2015–ongoing), an epic examination of the US present that began as a road-trip-cum-artistic-journey in 2015, prompted by the murder of nine African American worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Meanwhile, Sikander and I had been discussing the vagaries of representation and monumentalism, in various guises, since early 2018. It became clear in the course of these respective exchanges that both artists were grappling with similar questions; Lê and Sikander were connected by an impulse to see America, to see oneself in America, and to see America seeing itself. Both were using the monument as a cipher, a key to understanding history's embeddedness in our present. Somewhat surprisingly, I found myself discussing Walt Whitman and his enduring relevance with each artist. In speaking with one, I invariably left also thinking about the work of the other, so I asked them if we could bring the two threads together. The result is *Much Unseen Is Also Here* (Museum of Contemporary Photography, June 3–August 29, 2021): the story of two Asian American women exploring their relationships to the United States, its monuments, and the history of art in the

midst of our nation's collective upheaval.

An-My Lê, *Fragment VI: General*

***Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans, Louisiana*, 2017, Pigment print. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.**

Two bronze statues, a bronze plaque, and half of a stone pedestal are enclosed in a wooden structure. The wood appears new, freshly built. The ground is bare. The statues depict soldiers from the Civil War. One rides a horse. The other stands, arms crossed, sword at his side. Resting in the foreground, the plaque reads, upside down: Robert E Lee, Commander in Chief, Confederate States of America.

Toggle Media Description

II. Points of Departure

In 2017 Lê was in Louisiana photographing historical reenactments of Civil War battles restaged for the film *Free State of Jones*. By happenstance, she found herself in New Orleans just in time to witness the decommissioning of the monument to P. G. T. Beauregard, the Louisiana-born Confederate general who ordered the first shots to be fired at Fort Sumter (launching the Civil War in April 1861), an action mandated by

a resolution passed in 2015 by the city council sanctioning the removal of four of the city's Confederate monuments. New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu responded to critics decrying the move as a historical outrage by defending the decision as a long overdue historical correction. The monuments, Landrieu pointed out, were erected decades after the Civil War not to memorialize Confederate losses but as sculptural expressions of the so-called Cult of the Lost Cause. Proponents of this cult had long sought to recast the Civil War as a heroic and ultimately tragic stand against northern aggression rather than a defense of the enslavement and exploitation of African Americans. Their effort to enshrine the cause of white supremacy was wildly successful: some seven hundred such monuments were erected across the United States, the majority between 1890 and 1950.[ii] When Le turned her lens to the decommissioning of the Beauregard monument in particular, the country had already been in turmoil for some time. After Donald Trump's election to the US presidency, and just before the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville that resulted in the death of one anti-racist protester, the controversy in New Orleans reflected the divisiveness and anger of the moment. The opening suite of Lê's photo project *The Silent General* powerfully captures the tensions engendered by competing visions of Americanness and foreshadowed the turmoil to come.

The Silent General represents a departure for Lê. Where her earlier series deconstructed collective histories, this work seeks to capture the turbulence and discontent of our present. Where her previous projects focused on specific geographies and

landscapes, her current undertaking ranges across the United States. Lê's work has long probed the ways in which identity and history are both projected onto landscape and codified by the traditions of American landscape photography. With *The Silent General*, Lê negotiates her relationship to the tradition of American road trip photography in particular, that storied genre associated with the likes of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and Danny Lyon. These pictures—the first by an artist known for her black-and-white pictures to have been made in color—confront the political rhetoric of the moment and tackle current events. Overwhelmingly associated with the work of male-identifying artists and featuring subject matter of grit, transience, and chance encounters, the traditional iconography of the road has a pronounced masculinist connotation that Le□'s work both engages and questions.

Photo by Jason Wyche, New York.

Shahzia Sikander, *Promiscuous Intimacies*, 2020, Patinated bronze,

edition of 5 with 2 APs. © Shahzia Sikander. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, 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.

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Shazia Sikander's *Promiscuous Intimacies*, 2020 is a heavily patinaed bronze depicting two female figures—a Greco-Roman Venus and an Indian Devata (deity)—intertwined. I cannot say that I was surprised when Sikander told me she wanted to create her first sculpture, an anti-monument cast in bronze. It

seemed a logical and almost inevitable next step for an artist who has built an entire career on the interrogation of traditional forms, specifically the visual language and technical precision of the Indo-Persian miniature tradition. After all, what could be more traditional and in need of reinvention than the monument?

Sikander shared this decision with me in the summer of 2019, while we were standing together in the South Asian galleries of the Art Institute of Chicago discussing the evolutions and permutations of the female figure as expressed across centuries of artistic development on the Indian subcontinent. We marveled at the way in which competing understandings of culture, religion, and gender have expressed themselves and influenced subsequent aesthetic innovations. Likewise, we spoke about Partha Mitter's seminal 1977 book *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*—a research effort undertaken in response to a question posed to the author by his academic advisor, Ernst Gombrich, who recommended Mitter attempt to explain "why he, as a European, find the many-armed gods and the florid decorations of ancient Indian art so hard to come to terms with."[iii] Mitter's research revealed, among other findings, that European imaginaries struggled to assimilate the multifaceted fantasias of South Asian art because they did not comport with their worldview. (Mitter argued that the European preference for the "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" of classical antiquity belied a fear of otherness and an unwillingness or inability to assimilate the monstrous into a putatively rationalist or logical worldview.) Likewise, Sikander's work has long probed the

interstices of power, gender, empire, and self, and Promiscuous Intimacies could be read as the apotheosis of Sikander's many lines of inquiry and streams of thought, brought together in a single three-dimensional expression of the kaleidoscopic reality we inhabit.

III. Walt Whitman and Aesthetic Democracy

The Silent General takes its title and structural inspiration from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882). Whitman's final work of nonfiction, *Specimen Days* is a loose, stream-of-consciousness autobiographical meditation on the poet's life, his experiences during the Civil War, and his feelings about America. When asked to describe the book, Whitman called it "a mélange of loafing, looking, hobbling, sitting, traveling—a little thinking thrown in for salt, but very little. . . . Wild and free and somewhat acrid—indeed more like cedar-plums than you might guess at first glance."[iv] Le□'s project, likewise composed of a series of fragments, each reflecting on what it means to live in the US now, borrows Whitman's architecture, his reverence for quiet moments and minute detail, the documentary impulse, and his tendency to wander. Meanwhile, as we worked together on this project, Sikander was finishing a series of drawings to be included in the Pakistani American Pulitzer Prize–winning dramatist Ayad Akhtar's novel *Homeland Elegies* (2020), in which the narrator (who shares the author's name, among other striking similarities), consciously evokes Whitman to express his despair at how far America has strayed

from its ideal.

It struck me how, as with Whitman, the subject of Lê's and Sikander's projects was really America–that is, the question of American-ness. Whitman's *Specimen Days* was a reaction to, and reflection upon, the political crises of the 1850s, that is, wide-spread corruption, a growing wealth gap, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and the fragmentation of the political system. (One cannot help but notice the striking similarities to the conditions of our current moment.) Together, these artists compel us to consider the political implications and possibilities inherent in the work of art. This conversation is evidently not a new one as far as the world of art is concerned—but viewing art and politics through the lens of Whitman adds an intriguing new dimension. The political theorist Jason Frank asserts that Whitman's work contains deep relevance to contemporary democratic theory because of his insistence on the aesthetic dimension of politics and its role in engendering radical democracy. "For Whitman," he writes, "the popular commitment to democracy requires an aesthetic evaluation, and he aimed to enact the required reconfiguration of popular sensibility through the poetic depiction of the people as themselves a sublimely poetic, worldmaking power. . . . Through his poetry, Whitman claimed to sing the multitudinous diversity of the *vox populi* back to the people themselves, thereby enhancing their latent poetic capacity and aesthetically enabling a radical democratic politics of collective revision."[v] If Whitman was right (and I believe he was), this assessment explains much about the visceral responses to a variety of sociopolitical shifts currently upending a visual landscape and

attendant power structure that have been in place since times seemingly immemorial. In their stead, we find ourselves attempting to navigate an emerging new world—with Lê and Sikander as our able guides.

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I would like to acknowledge the support and wisdom of my friend and colleague Leslie Wilson for helping me think through this exhibition and this essay.

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[i] Throughout this essay, I will use America and the United States of America interchangeably. I do so despite the fact that America is an imprecise, imperialistic proper noun that obscures the fact that multiple countries make up the Americas. However, it is precisely this type of meaning/connotation/assertion, the possibility of a single America or version of Americaness, that is at issue for the artists and this author.

[ii] Mitch Landrieu's speech was published in *The Atlantic* on May 22, 2017. Landrieu, "We Can't Walk Away from This Truth," https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/we-cant-walk-away-from-this-truth/527721/.

[iii] Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2013), xx.

[iv]Whitman quoted by Leslie Jamison in her introduction to *Specimen Days and Collect* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2014), ix.

[v]Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Power of the People," in *The Review of Politics* vol. 69 (2007): 403.

Written by Abigail Winograd
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