

*Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities*, November 12, 2021-January 30, 2022

Born and raised in Pakistan, Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) gained international recognition in the 1990s for her pioneering role in bringing painting traditions from South and Central Asia into dialogue with contemporary practices. Her work interrogates cultural identity, racial narratives, colonial and postcolonial histories, and issues of gender and sexuality. Through multivalent narratives layered across time, geography, and tradition, she shatters established hierarchies, norms, and stereotypes, using her imagination and playfulness to conjure extraordinary realities.

This exhibition explores the first 15 years of Sikander's career, from her formal training in manuscript painting as a student at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, where she enrolled in 1987, to her early years in the United States. Sikander moved to Providence in 1993 to study at the Rhode Island School of Design. She then lived in Houston for two years before settling in New York in 1997. Her work during this period reflects a new openness in the United States toward artists working outside of commonly accepted models, as well as a dramatic shift in the perception of Muslims following the events of 9/11. The potent vocabulary of Sikander's early work continues to permeate her oeuvre today, and the subjects she confronted then have only become more relevant to contemporary discourse.

Jan Howard

Houghton P. Metcalf Jr. Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs

RISD Museum

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## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

# RISD MUSEUM

## Studying in Lahore

In 1987, Sikander enrolled at Lahore's National College of Arts (NCA) and began her study of manuscript painting—or miniature painting, as the discipline is referred to there. It was an unexpected choice for a major. Western models of art instruction prevailed at the NCA, and although the miniature had long been taught, a major had only been established in 1982, by Professor Bashir Ahmad; it was not considered a path for an ambitious artist. "I chose the medium," Sikander explains, "when it was widely considered craft, with no room allowed for creative expression, because I perceived a frontier."

Sikander was the first student at the NCA to develop an intense mentorship with Ahmad, delving deeply into the discipline's history, techniques, and styles. Ahmad supported Sikander's deviation from the thesis requirements to create one monumental work, *The Scroll* (1989–1990), which received significant attention and acclaim. Sikander's success led to increased enrollment in the NCA program, her appointment as a lecturer in miniature painting at the school, and the start of a so-called neo-miniature movement.

## A Note on the Word Miniature

Shahzia Sikander's artistic practice negotiates a vast range of histories associated with Islamic and South Asian manuscript painting. As early as the 1700s, following encounters with South and Central Asian painting traditions, European tradesmen, merchants, and writers started to call these small-scale, finely detailed works *miniatures*, as they seemed visually analogous to the miniatures from their own traditions. The word derives from the Latin *minium*, an orange-red lead compound used in European manuscript painting, but eventually came to refer to small paintings.

The use of the term *miniature* continually centers Western perspectives, however, and may be rethought. The colonial legacy has sustained its use in museums and art institutions internationally, including at the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, where Sikander studied. Collectors have continued to cannibalize original historical manuscripts, cutting out and dispersing these paintings across the world for a profit and diminishing the potency and wholeness of these illustrated worlds. Today, scholars and artists including Sikander have begun to move away from the term *miniature* as they decolonize their fields.

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Indian

*Portrait of a Young Woman*, late 1600s

Opaque watercolor and gold on paper mounted as an album page

11.4 x 4.8 cm (4 1/2 x 1 7/8 inches)

Museum Appropriation Fund 17.468

Standing female figures in transparent dress, such as those seen in this case, were a common subject in South Asian illustrated-manuscript painting. Even when created as portraits, these depictions were idealized, and typically paired with poetry. Beautifully ornamented calligraphic texts are found on the back of both of these works.

Sikander copied such paintings as a student, and similar figures can be seen beneath layers of imagery in some of her paintings in this exhibition. Female figures like these continue to inspire Sikander's large-scale watercolors and mosaics.



Indian

*Portrait of a Standing Woman*, 1700s

Opaque watercolor and gold on paper mounted as an album page

18.1 x 6.7 cm (7 1/8 x 2 5/8 inches)

Anonymous gift 17.488

Standing female figures in transparent dress, such as those seen in this case, were a common subject in South Asian illustrated-manuscript painting. Even when created as portraits, these depictions were idealized, and typically paired with poetry. Beautifully ornamented calligraphic texts are found on the back of both of these works.

Sikander copied such paintings as a student, and similar figures can be seen beneath layers of imagery in some of her paintings in this exhibition. Female figures like these continue to inspire Sikander's large-scale watercolors and mosaics.



# RISD MUSEUM

Persian

*Laila and Majnun at School*, ca. 1570

Opaque watercolor and gold on paper

Plate: 24 x 19.2 cm (9 7/16 x 7 9/16 inches)

Edgar J. Lownes Fund 45.069

This painting, from a copy of the manuscript *Khamsa* (Quintet) by the poet Nizami (1141–1209), illustrates the site where Laila and Majnun, protagonists of the story, fall in love. They are in school, surrounded by typical activities: students are preparing paper for use, exercising, reading, and writing. The architecture and patterning in Safavid-period works such as this one were among the inspirations for Sikander's thesis painting, *The Scroll*.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Miniature in Mughal Style: Imaginary Man*, 1991-1992

Ink and brush, tea, and gold leaf on wasli paper

Sheet: 27.9 x 20.3 cm (11 x 8 inches)

Frame: 46 x 38.1 x 3.2 cm (18 1/8 x 15 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection of Anu and Arjun Aggarwal TL54.2021

Sikander made drawings such as this as exercises while she was a student at the NCA. The practice that her teacher, Bashir Ahmad, transmitted to his students begins with preparing the paper. Dampened cotton-fiber sheets are layered together with wheat-starch paste and a preservative. After the paper is pressed and dried, both sides are burnished with a seashell, creating a smooth, luminous surface. For this example, the paper was also stained with several applications of tea. Using a brush fitted with only a few hairs, Sikander carefully outlined the image. She then applied layers of gold leaf and transparent wash. Like several other works in this exhibition, this painting was completed over a number of years—common to Sikander's process then and now.



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Study of Figure*, 1992

Vegetable color, dry pigment, and watercolor on wasli paper

Image: 22.8 x 10 cm (9 x 3 15/16 inches)

Mount: 33.9 x 20 cm (13 3/8 x 7 7/8 inches)

Frame: 56.8 x 42.9 x 3.8 cm (22 3/8 x 16 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of Elaine and Barry Fain TL9.2020

Sikander likely completed this full-color painting while she was teaching at the NCA, as an example to show her students. Once the paper was prepared and the design transferred to the sheet, she carefully added watercolor using a dry brush. This technique, called *pardakht*, builds up color through many layers of quick, short brushstrokes that are adeptly and meditatively applied with a minimum of pigment to avoid disrupting the delicate surface. The richness and depth achieved by this method is noticeable throughout the sheet—even in the white cloth.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Study of "The Lovers" by Riza-yi 'Abbasi*, 1991

Vegetable color, dry pigment, and watercolor on wasli paper

Image: 14.8 x 10.5 cm (5 13/16 x 4 1/8 inches)

Mount: 27.8 x 19.7 cm (10 15/16 x 7 3/4 inches)

Frame: 56.8 x 42.9 x 3.8 cm (22 3/8 x 16 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of Roger and Gayle Mandle TL165.2019

Sikander based this painting on a reproduction of a Safavid work that was made in Iran in the 1600s and is currently found in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Copying historical examples was part of the training at the NCA, although students had little access to original works: due to the legacy of colonialism, most South and Central Asian manuscript illustrations now reside in Western museums. "My first visual encounter with miniature painting was with its facsimile," Sikander recalled. "But even in printed reproductions, the inherent eroticism and beauty of the works captivated my imagination and challenged my assumptions."



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)  
*Simurgh Study after Zal Is Sighted by a Caravan*, Attributed to Abdul Aziz, 1988

Vegetable color, dry pigment, and watercolor on wasli paper  
34.3 x 25.4 cm (13 1/2 x 10 inches)

Frame: 56.8 x 42.9 x 3.8 cm (22 3/8 x 16 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of William Drew and Ruth Davis TL30.2021

This scene—an example of Sikander's early interest in fantastic creatures—refers to the extraordinary 16th-century manuscript known as the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp, now disassembled. Based on a leaf at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Sikander's version focuses on the simurgh, a magical bird from Persian mythology. The simurgh symbolizes divinity in the 12th-century Sufi allegorical tale *The Conference of the Birds*. In Islamic belief, birds in flight are associated with the ascension of the soul to a higher realm. Birds are rich in personal meaning for Sikander, who frequently equates them with imagination.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

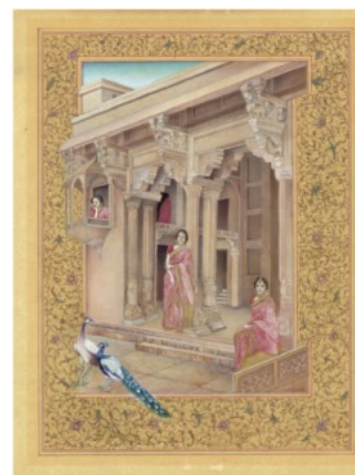
*Mirrat I*, 1989 - 1990

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

48.3 x 40.6 cm (19 x 16 inches)

Collection of the artist TL140.2021.1

In these compositions, which preserve the format and decorative framing of manuscript illustrations, Sikander portrays her friend Mirrat. In *Mirrat I*, she appears at Lahore Fort, a citadel in the capital city. *Mirrat II* shows her in an empty Sikh haveli, a historical home abandoned after the partition of India and Pakistan. Both of these works were painted shortly after the death of Muhammed Zia-ul-Haq, the Pakistani military dictator who imposed the oppressive Hudood Ordinances restricting women's rights.



Mirrat wears the sari, "an outfit worn by countless Pakistani women in public until the Islamization project made them 'un-Islamic' because of their association with India and Hinduism," explains art historian Kishwar Rizvi. By placing Mirrat within a Mughal setting,

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Sikander “reclaims Lahore’s heterogeneity and utilizes her as a powerful critique of Pakistan’s move away from its own historical roots.”

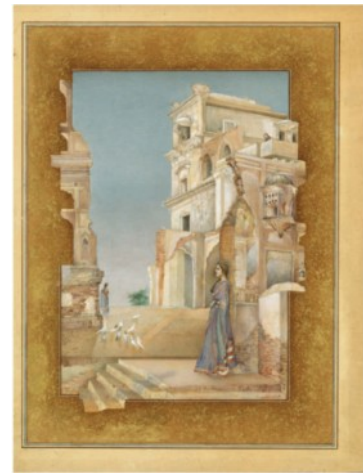
Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Mirrat II*, 1989 - 1990

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

48.3 x 40.6 cm (19 x 16 inches)

Collection of the artist TL140.2021.2



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*The Scroll*, 1989 - 1990

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

34.3 x 162.2 cm (13 1/2 x 63 7/8 inches)

Frame: 38.1 x 167.6 x 7.6 cm (15 x 66 x 3 inches)

Collection of the Artist TL140.2021.4



In this composition, her NCA thesis, Sikander depicts herself within a space inspired by her teenage home, rendered in a style that references Safavid painting traditions. “I am a floating ghostlike presence in every chapter or segment,” she said, “privy to the unfolding narrative while functioning as a channel through which an observer can access and navigate the painting. My diaphanous moving and morphing form is rendered in white gouache, and one can never see my face. I was making a statement on the restlessness of youth and the quest for identity. The claiming of the freedom for the female body in the domestic setting.”

Although *The Scroll* is informed by a range of traditions, its subject, format, setting, and details were newly imagined. Painted over a year and a half, this was a breakthrough work not just for Sikander but also for the contemporary practice of manuscript painting.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*The Scroll II*, 1991

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on bark and paper  
33 x 89.5 cm (13 x 35 1/4 inches)

Framed: 32.4 x 89.5 x 2.2 cm (12 3/4 x 35 1/4 x 7/8 inches)

Courtesy of Munazzah and Tariq Malik TL49.2021



The activity taking place across these vignettes is linked, yet mysterious. Seen through windows and mirrors, the figures feel hidden. In this more abstract follow-up to *The Scroll*, Sikander refers to Gandharan Buddhist birch-bark scrolls. She incorporates bark here, inscribing its materiality with light and form to extract a psychological dimension. At the center of the composition a woman lies on the ground, seemingly shattered by the bark and the house itself.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Riding the Written*, 1992

Screenprint over handmade marbled paper

37.7 x 28.8 cm (14 13/16 x 11 5/16 inches)

Frame: 56.5 x 42.9 x 3.8 cm (22 1/4 x 16 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.14



Sikander's appreciation of language is expressed in the wit of titles and her incorporation of script in her work. In this example, the calligraphy of horses in motion was inspired by her childhood experience of reciting and memorizing the Quran in Arabic before understanding it in Urdu or English. "The ritual was to first get acquainted with the aural and visual before the meaning. It resulted in this amazing visual memory where the beauty of the Arabic script superseded everything else."

## A Pleasing Dislocation in Providence

Sikander's extraordinary achievements in Pakistan were largely unknown in the United States—including to the faculty and students at RISD—when she arrived in 1993 to pursue an MFA. In Providence, as Sikander grappled with assumptions about her identity as a Pakistani woman, she applied the sensitivity to materials learned in Lahore as she experimented with new media and techniques with swiftness and



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abandon. Using different pressures and a large brush, she painted abstractly with ink, gouache, and, later, watercolor. Gestural marks began to suggest recognizable, often figurative, shapes.

This new type of work allowed ideas to percolate and spill out without judgment or overthinking. "Some of the images," Sikander stated at the time, "came out of recent acquaintances and memories of traditions, cultures, and experiences, combined with syncretic sculpture; South and Central Asian schools of painting (such as Pahari, Safavid, and Mughal); Celtic art; and Kufic calligraphy. The knitting together of these references and mythologies, as well as more private inner encounters, dreams, and fantasies, gave birth to my explorations of feminine power."

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation II*, 1994 or 1995

Ink on sketchbook pages

13.5 x 67.2 cm (5 5/16 x 26 7/16 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.3.a



This repertoire of forms and figures emerged during a period Sikander was rapidly creating 50 to 100 gestural ink drawings each week. Suggestive forms were later given definition and supplied with appendages, typically using a marker pen. The resulting characters—often female, sometimes androgynous, occasionally monstrous—repeatedly enter her work, frequently as a collection of alter egos.

According to Sikander, the figures address "the lack of female artists represented in art history and the art world and the misogyny women encounter in almost all spheres of work and life. The act of drawing became about converting erasure into opportunity through wit and candor."

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation II*, 1994 or 1995

Ink on sketchbook pages

13 x 67 cm (5 1/8 x 26 3/8 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.3.d



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation II*, 1994 or 1995

Ink on sketchbook pages

13.5 x 67.3 cm (5 5/16 x 26 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.3.f



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Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Pleasing Dislocation*, 1995

Ink on tracing paper

60.6 x 45.1 cm (23 7/8 x 17 3/4 inches)

Frame: 67 x 50.6 x 3.8 cm (26 3/8 x 19 15/16 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL140.2021.5



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

Donnamaria Bruton, American, 1954-2012, (RISD Faculty 1992-2012,  
Painting)

*Intersectional Forms, Homage to Friendship*, ca. 1994

Opaque watercolor over pastel monotype on gray paper

Sheet: 28.7 x 38.5 cm (11 5/16 x 15 3/16 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.12



Sikander enjoys collaborating with like-minded artists. In this early example, the pastel monotype ground and central figure are the work of Donnamaria Bruton, a RISD professor who was Sikander's close friend. As painters and women of color, they shared concerns about the white art world and patriarchal societies. This monstrous family-like grouping may reflect malicious societal attitudes toward accomplished, ambitious women.

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Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*The 100 Public Lashes, 1994*

Pastel monotype on tan paper

Sheet: 36 x 27 cm (14 3/16 x 10 5/8 inches) (irregular)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.1

In this work, a vigorously marked pastel monotype by Donnamaria Bruton serves as the base for Sikander's own graffiti-like, emotional response to one of Pakistan's Hudood Ordinances, introduced when Sikander was 10. Unmarried women victimized by rape or accused of adultery were threatened with public lashings, as intimated at the center of this image. Deformed bodies and coiled designs resembling ovaries or watchful eyes surround the spectacle.



Donnamaria Bruton, American, 1954-2012, (RISD Faculty 1992-2012, Painting)

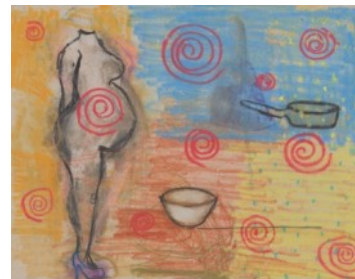
*Domestic Series: Expecting, ca. 1994*

Pastel monotype on gray paper

Sheet: 29 x 38.1 cm (11 7/16 x 15 inches)

Esther Mauran Acquisitions Fund 2020.65.3

Sikander's appreciation for Donnamaria Bruton's loose mark-making, experimental techniques, and feminist subject matter is especially evident when *Domestic Series* is viewed alongside Sikander's own work in pastel monotype. Bruton's expressive backdrops set the stage for images honoring and critiquing housework, in particular her grandmother's labor as a maid. Both Bruton's and Sikander's vocabularies include headless figures, which suggest the disregard for women in patriarchal societies—a frequent topic of conversation between the two artists.



Donnamaria Bruton, American, 1954-2012, (RISD Faculty 1992-2012, Painting)

*Domestic Series: Frying Pan, ca. 1994*

Pastel monotype on gray paper

Sheet: 28.5 x 38.2 cm (11 1/4 x 15 1/16 inches)

Esther Mauran Acquisitions Fund 2020.65.4



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Housed*, 1995

Gouache and charcoal on clay-coated paper board

106.7 x 80 cm (42 x 31 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL140.2021.7

The movement of Sikander's brush, fully loaded with white gouache, is palpable in this depiction, yet the figural or architectural form itself remains ambiguous. The top portion, a face covering for a shuttlecock burka, is most clearly articulated. This haunting image responds to the Orientalist obsession with the veil in the Western imagination: Is it perforated armor, a shelter, a mask, or a shell?



According to Sikander, "*Housed* is about the constraints of escaping an imprisoning representation. The cage-like form has a door, and a pink heart lurks inside. This painting tapped into my anxiety of being boxed into a stereotype on behalf of a culture or a religion."

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Spaces in Between*, 1995

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, graphite, and tea on wasli paper

27.4 x 25.9 cm (10 13/16 x 10 3/16 inches)

Framed: 46 x 44.5 x 3.5 cm (18 1/8 x 17 1/2 x 1 3/8 inches)

Private Collection, Göttingen, Germany TL33.2020

This is one of the earliest works that combined Sikander's new gestural vocabulary with the precision of traditional manuscript painting. She freely applied gouache to tea-stained wasli paper, joining abstract shapes with what could be seen as a multilimbed creature or a shredded veil with an embedded eye. The color white



references the ground layer in manuscript painting, on which color pigments are applied. Below, the delicately rendered spiral-horned antelope could have come out of a manuscript illustration. Both the antelope and the multilimbed creature emphasize the gaze. Sikander asks, "Where lies the power, in the eye of the beholder or in the art itself?"

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Self-Rooted*, 1994

Ink and gouache on layered tracing paper

43.5 x 28.8 cm (17 1/8 x 11 5/16 inches)

Frame: 49.2 x 34.3 x 3.8 cm (19 3/8 x 13 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches)

Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund and Walter H. Kimball Fund 2020.28

This double female representation exemplifies Sikander's use of redrawing, reorienting, embellishing, and recontextualizing to arrive at new interpretations. Rendered here as a deity and its avatar, both with looping, "self-nourishing roots," this image would become iconic in Sikander's lexicon. The figures are presented in conversation with each other: one vertical, active, buoyant, and light; the other horizontal, passive, grounded, and dark. The liquidity of the ink on the slick paper created an unusual mottled pattern that resembles skin.

*Self-Rooted* is one of Sikander's earliest works to employ layered tracing paper—note the vertical lines showing through from the sheet below. This strategy would soon become central to her practice.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Dislocation*, ca. 1995

Ink on layered tracing paper

37.5 x 27.6 cm (14 3/4 x 10 7/8 inches)

Framed: 43 x 32.7 x 3.8 cm (16 15/16 x 12 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL140.2021.6

Sikander has described the genesis of *Dislocation*: "Forms like these sprung forth from my resisting the racial straitjacketing I encountered in the 1990s in America. The assumptions that were projected onto me about who I was or what I represented felt not just unfair but alien. Becoming the other, the outsider, through the prevalent and polarizing dichotomies of East-West, Islamic-Western, Asian-White, oppressive-free, led to an outburst of iconography of fragmented and

severed bodies, androgynous forms, armless and headless torsos, and self-rooted, floating half-human figures. They refused to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, or to be stereotyped."



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Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Cycles and Transitions*, 1995 - 1996

Watercolor, gouache, and tea on wasli paper

22.5 x 34 cm (8 7/8 x 13 3/8 inches)

Frame: 41.3 x 53 x 3.2 cm (16 1/4 x 20 7/8 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection of Alton and Emily Steiner TL34.2020.1



Here Sikander used thin washes over areas of figuration to conflate bodies with the landscape. Female forms, in guises from comical to dark, resist categorization. "I was responding to my inability to locate Brown South-Asian representation in the feminist space in 1990s art-history books," the artist recalled. "The monolithic category 'third-world feminism' felt offensive and limiting while it also pointed out white feminism's blind spots and exclusions."

Sikander began this painting in Providence, exhibited it in her thesis exhibition at RISD (which also featured *Let It Ride*), and reworked it in Houston.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

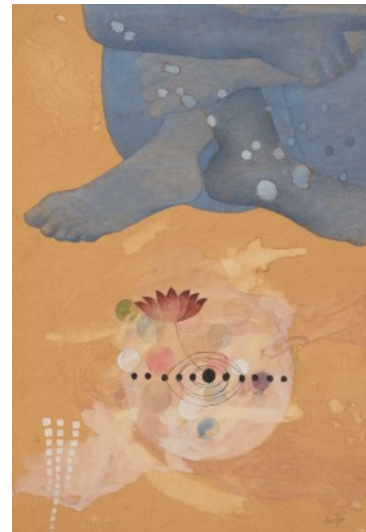
*Let It Ride*, 1995 -1996

Watercolor, gouache, and tea on wasli paper

38.1 x 25.4 cm (15 x 10 inches)

Frame: 56.8 x 44.1 x 3.5 cm (22 3/8 x 17 3/8 x 1 3/8 inches)

Collection of Alton and Emily Steiner TL34.2020.2



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Separate Working Things I*, 1993 - 1995

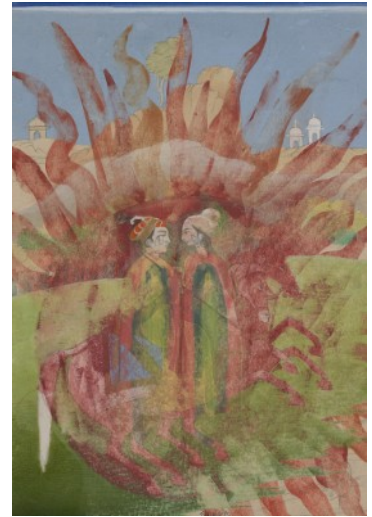
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold (paint), and tea on wasli paper

24 x 16.6 cm (9 7/16 x 6 9/16 inches)

Frame: 56.8 x 42.9 x 3.8 cm (22 3/8 x 16 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Private collection TL27.2020

This work records the first time Sikander boldly painted over one of her meticulously crafted traditional compositions. Sunlike red flames extend to the sheet's edges, creating a new image that feels both celebratory and destructive, drawing attention to and obliterating the central couple. The gesture, according to Sikander, "shatters the trope of 'ideal love' from within the Indian painting vernacular. The stock characters of the Lovers on Horseback (here from the celebrated story of Baz Bahadur and Rupmati) become the site for rupture, a destabilizing of the motif of heterosexual love itself."



## Uprooted Order in Houston

A critical moment for Sikander came with her selection as a Core Fellow at the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. During a period when few residencies provided artists the space and time to develop, Sikander was given two years (1995–1997) to further explore the discoveries she had made at RISD. Houston, a region with its own cultural dynamics and history, stimulated Sikander's creativity and dialogue with a broader spectrum of racial and diasporic communities.

In Texas, Sikander became more aware of racial complexities in the United States, including African American and civil rights histories and immigrant patterns and movements—all, she recalled, "magnifying my desire to understand the other in the shifting contentious multiplicity of the American sociocultural topography." During this time, Sikander's work increased in scale as she built wall-sized installations that combined her tracing-paper drawings. She also continued layering traditional painting with a growing personal vocabulary, producing work that quickly brought her to the fore of the American art world.

# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Pendulum*, 1996

Watercolor, gouache, graphite, and tea on wasli paper  
38.1 x 25.4 cm (15 x 10 inches)

Frame: 56.8 x 44.1 x 3.5 cm (22 3/8 x 17 3/8 x 1 3/8 inches)

Courtesy of Mrs. Claire Ankenman TL32.2020

The pendulum is an apt symbol for Sikander, who has been both stereotyped and rendered invisible, and it also suggests the nuanced spectrum of constantly shifting interpretations she encourages in her work. Some of the new vocabulary she developed in Houston revolved around signifiers of identity, especially hairstyle and clothing, as she questioned the stereotypes associated with them. Here, a self-portrait with an elaborate coiffure and a high collar masking her face functions as the pendulum's weight. Sikander was exploring how outer appearances have historically been used to control and contain women.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Extraordinary Realities IV*, 1996

Photo collage, vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on  
found miniature, mounted to wasli paper

24.1 x 16.5 cm (9 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches)

Frame: 47.3 x 37.1 x 3.8 cm (18 5/8 x 14 5/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of Lois Plehn, New York TL39.2020

Enthroned and dressed in red, Sikander floats in a bubble above a painting she found in a market in Houston's Little India neighborhood. Perhaps in a nod to her new Texas home, she seems to lasso some unseen desire lying outside her sphere.

This work is from a series of six collages, each using as its base a traditional manuscript painting made for tourists. Sikander overlaid the paintings with photographs taken of an installation she had mounted at Project Row Houses, a community revitalization project and art space. The series was part of her continued experiment in disrupting traditional narratives.





# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Ready to Leave*, 1997

Transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, and graphite pencil on  
marbled wasli paper

25.1 x 19.2 cm (9 7/8 x 7 9/16 inches)

Frame: 51.8 x 41.6 cm (20 3/8 x 16 3/8 inches)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds  
from the Drawing Committee, 97.83.3 TL143.2021.1

In Houston, circles became increasingly common to Sikander's work, along with the griffin, an eagle-lion hybrid from Greek myth. "Under Alexander the Great, the Hellenic world extended to the Indian region of Punjab," Sikander explains, "making the griffin a remnant from an earlier period of colonialization. I was connecting the griffin to the chalawa, a Punjabi term for a small farm animal that is now disappearing due to the region's urbanization. The chalawa is a ghost. In my usage, it's somebody who is so swift and transient, you can't pin down who they are. I am identifying with the chalawa, resisting the routinely confronted categories: 'Are you Muslim, Pakistani, artist, painter, Asian, Asian American, or what?'"



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Who's Veiled Anyway?*, 1997

Transparent and opaque watercolor, tea, graphite pencil, and  
charcoal on wasli paper

28.6 x 20.6 cm (11 1/4 x 8 1/8 inches)

Frame: 51.8 x 41.6 cm (20 3/8 x 16 3/8 inches)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds  
from the Drawing Committee, 97.83.1 TL143.2021.2

Sikander explains this painting's layered commentary on gender and religion: "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."



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Uprooted Order I*, 1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold (paint) and tea on  
wasli paper

25.4 x 11.4 cm (10 x 4 1/2 inches)

Frame: 44.1 x 30.2 x 3.2 cm (17 3/8 x 11 7/8 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection of A. G. Rosen TL26.2020.1

Sikander's ghostly figure merges in this work with Radha, a Hindu goddess and a gopi (consort of the god Krishna). Radha is often depicted in Hindu iconography as Krishna's preferred lover. Here, however, Sikander presents Radha as an independent and powerful deity in her own right, excluding him from the picture. A nude figure crouches at Radha's legs, and she holds to her chest a chalawa, a creature that typically cannot be confined.

By placing Radha on a lotus—a pedestal for many male deities in religions across Asia—Sikander shifts power to the female in all her multiplicity. The hand gesture illustrated at top is the yoni mudra, used to summon the energy of creation.



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Uprooted Order 2*, 1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold (paint), and tea on wasli paper

25.4 x 11.4 cm (10 x 4 1/2 inches)

Frame: 44.1 x 30.2 x 3.2 cm (17 3/8 x 11 7/8 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection of A. G. Rosen TL26.2020.2

Sikander's work often reimagines familiar figures to locate new interpretations and tell richer stories. She explains that this image could represent "the transmutation of the Hindu gods Krishna and Vishnu, an inversion of the Greek snake-haired Medusa, or the Greek hero Heracles with Krishna (being linked to the mythologies of the serpent monsters Hydra and Kaliya)." As with many of the works in her *Uprooted Order* series, Sikander presents tradition not as a static notion, but as "alive—a space of unexpected juxtapositions."



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Uprooted Order, Series 3, No. 1*, 1997

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

16.8 x 9.2 cm (6 5/8 x 3 5/8 inches)

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Joseph Havel and Lisa Ludwig, 2003.728 TL141.2021

Here the lotus floats over the central figure and acknowledges the umbilical cord as literally the life force of the mother. This multilayered avatar gives form to the heterogeneity of South Asia, including Jain, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Sikh, Zoroastrian, and Christian cultures.

"The central character's attempt to pin down with its one foot the ghost-like female suggests the paradox of rootedness," Sikander explains. "In a place like Houston, with its multiple immigrant narratives and nationalisms, the *Uprooted Order* series addressed the fallacy of assimilation versus foreignness."



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Eye-I-ing those Armorial Bearings*, 1989 - 1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper  
22 x 14.7 cm (8 11/16 x 5 13/16 inches)

Frame: 42.2 x 34 x 2.9 cm (16 5/8 x 13 3/8 x 1 1/8 inches) Confirmed  
Collection of Carol and Arthur Goldberg TL28.2020

In Houston, Sikander was deeply involved with Project Row Houses, a housing and arts organization in the Third Ward, a predominantly African American neighborhood. This painting celebrates the organization with an upside-down portrait of its cofounder, the artist Rick Lowe, surrounded by various recontextualized images and icons. Sikander explains, "I wanted to counter derogatory representations of blackness in the medieval West—as seen in the silhouetted figures above the shields—through my construction of the armorial seal with the row houses. I also wanted to address politicized contemporary representations of the veil, and to reclaim positive representation for both. I am reimagining these entrenched and contested historical symbols by bringing them into conversation with overlapping diasporas."



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Eye-I-ing those Armorial Bearings IV*, 1994 - 1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper  
23.1 x 17.9 cm (9 1/8 x 7 1/16 inches)

Framed: 55.6 x 45.4 x 3.2 cm (21 7/8 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/4 inches)  
Courtesy of James Casebere TL14.2020

Sikander acknowledges that she is driven by "an urgent reexamining of colonial and imperial stories of race and representation." The many heads and circles in this work suggest the many lenses through which the artist or the viewer (who is the *I* eyeing in her title?) could, as Sikander says, "question the neat and tidy classification systems that control and maintain social structures."



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Venus's Wonderland*, 1995 - 1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, traces of graphite, and tea  
on wasli paper

31.6 x 27.7 cm (12 7/16 x 10 7/8 inches)

Framed: 52.1 x 47.3 x 2.9 cm (20 1/2 x 18 5/8 x 1 1/8 inches)

Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann Collection TL43.2020

Barely contained within the decorative border of this painting is a fanciful cast of characters brought together from several different narratives. The biblical story of the serpent is reimagined here as a monkey tempting Eve to take a bite of the forbidden fruit. Eve is posed as Venus in Botticelli's iconic painting *The Birth of Venus*, with the crocodile lying in her shell. Sikander's use of animals to convey human traits is grounded here in *Kalila wa-Dimna*, a collection of fables in the Persian illustrated-manuscript tradition, itself a translation of the *Panchatantra*, an Indian fable collection written around the third century. Its story of the relationship between a crocodile and a monkey who lives in an apple tree is also clearly referenced.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Hood's Red Rider No. 2*, 1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold (paint), and tea on  
wasli paper

26.1 x 18.3 cm (10 1/4 x 7 3/16 inches)

Frame: 45.1 x 36.8 x 2.9 cm (17 3/4 x 14 1/2 x 1 1/8 inches)

Collection of Susan and Lew Manilow TL12.2020.1

Cinderella's prince holds her slipper at center while a powerful veiled heroine takes control above as a reimagined Red Riding Hood. Sikander explains, "European fairy tales, which carry deeply entrenched gender bias, were part of my childhood storybooks in Pakistan. When I started examining manuscript painting as a young adult, the passive depictions of women often perturbed me. I wanted to make female protagonists who were proactive, playful, confident, intelligent, and connected to the past in imaginative ways."



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*In Your Head and Not on My Feet*, 1997

Graphite on paper

Sheet: 27.9 x 19.9 cm (11 x 7 13/16 inches)

Frame: 33.3 x 24.8 x 3.8 cm (13 1/8 x 9 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of Susan and Lew Manilow TL12.2020.3



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Where Lies the Perfect Fit*, 1997

Graphite on paper

Sheet: 27.9 x 20 cm (11 x 7 7/8 inches)

Frame: 33.3 x 24.8 x 3.8 cm (13 1/8 x 9 3/4 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of Susan and Lew Manilow TL12.2020.2



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*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  
Sheet: 24 x 13.1 cm (9 7/16 x 5 3/16 inches)

Frame: 42.2 x 30.8 x 2.5 cm (16 5/8 x 12 1/8 x 1 inches)

Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
TL142.2021



This work's title is drawn from a song in the popular 1993 Bollywood film *Khalnayak* (The villain). In the scene in which the song plays, two women sensuously dance together while a man observes them. Flirting with queer desire, the song questions and refuses to reveal the gender of its subject. Sikander, recognizing a knowing audience, responds with an equally fluid notion of identity. As scholar Gayatri Gopinath writes, "What is revealed under the choli (blouse) and chuniri (skirt) is both female and not female, dismembered, remembered, and multimembered. Sikander mobilizes a queer optic that 'sees' gender and sexuality outside a conventional visual logic of secrecy/disclosure, invisibility/visibility."

## Settling in New York

In 1997, as opportunities to show her work in New York expanded, Sikander decided to move there. She embarked on more ambitious installations of layered tracing-paper drawings, wall drawings, and projects combining the two. The speed and looseness of these large-scale works contrasted with the increasing refinement of her paintings. During a 2001 residency at Artpace San Antonio, she created her first animation.

In response to life in New York, Sikander continued to focus on female multiplicity and agency while also developing fresh concepts, especially after the events of 9/11, which affected her work deeply. "Questions of wealth and class, trade, global economics, race, and capitalism all started to percolate," she said. "Negotiating a sense of belonging during this phase was riveting."

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

David McGee, American, b. 1962

*Segments of Desire Go Wandering Off*, 1998

Collage with vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, graphite, and tea on wasli paper

24.3 x 50 cm (9 9/16 x 19 11/16 inches)

Framed: 55.9 x 45.1 x 3.2 cm (22 x 17 3/4 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg TL29.2020



# RISD MUSEUM

At the center of this painting, a multiarmed 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 this figure over a large portrait of a trickster drawn by the Houston-based artist David McGee. All of the faces have been partly obscured, keeping racial and cultural identities shifting. As an immigrant, Sikander was questioning the prevalence of hyphenated identities in America and who is recognized as a citizen.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*The Many Faces of Islam*, 1999

Gouache, vegetable color, watercolor, gold leaf, graphite and tea on wasli paper

43.2 x 30.5 cm (17 x 12 inches)

Frame: 61 x 71.1 x 3.8 cm (24 x 28 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.13



This piece was created for the *New York Times Magazine* feature “Old Eyes and the New: Scenes from the Millennium, Reimagined by Living Artists,” published in September 1999. Two figures dominate the center—one modeled on the Statue of Liberty and the other fully veiled in white, bearing a placard that reads, “Who’s veiled anyway?” They hold between them a piece of American currency inscribed with a quote from the Quran: “Which, then, of your Lord’s blessing do you both deny?” The surrounding figures speak to the shifting global alliances between Muslim leaders and American empire and capital. According to Sikander, “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.”

The portraits are, clockwise from upper left: Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt; Menachem Begin, prime minister of Israel; Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Pakistani singer of Sufi devotional music; Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan; Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, president of Pakistan; Benazir Bhutto, prime minister of Pakistan; Malcolm X, Muslim American political leader; Salman Rushdie, Indian-British writer; Nawal el Saadawi, feminist writer, physician, and spokeswoman for the status of women in the Arab world; King



# RISD MUSEUM

Hussein of Jordan; King Faisal of Saudi Arabia; Asma Jahangir, Pakistani human-rights lawyer and social activist; Hanan Ashrawi, spokeswoman for the Palestinian nation; Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian religious and political leader; Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Elusive Reality*, 1989 - 2000

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

28 x 18.7 cm (11 x 7 3/8 inches)

Frame: 50.2 x 38.4 x 4.3 cm (19 3/4 x 15 1/8 x 1 11/16 inches)

Collection of Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, New York  
TL46.2020.3

Two female figures meet at the center of this work. The seated woman is inspired by Deccani painting traditions that originated in Central India in the 1500s. The overlaid, upside-down portrait is of Sharmila Desai, an Indian dancer with whom Sikander worked closely in New York. Desai sometimes performed in spaces installed with Sikander's drawings. Sikander photographed the dances and then incorporated select postures into her paintings.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Intimacy*, 2001

Dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper

21.6 x 27.9 cm (8 1/2 x 11 inches)

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Partial and pledged gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein TL145.2021.1

At center left in this work is an Indian celestial dancer modeled on a sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The dancer flirtatiously entwines herself around a figure taken from Italian Mannerist Agnolo Bronzino's ca. 1545 painting *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*. Sikander created this pairing in response to Partha Mitter's 1977 book *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, which points to the role of cultural stereotypes in the European perception of Asia. At right is another pair of figures, sourced from Greco-Roman and Indo-Persian traditions. They stand



# RISD MUSEUM

arm in arm beside a two-headed creature, reinforcing multiplicity and suggesting the closeness and overlap of histories and cultures.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)  
*Riding the Ridden*, 2000  
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper  
20.3 x 13.7 cm (8 x 5 3/8 inches)  
Collection of Niva Grill Angel TL144.2021



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)  
*Pleasure Pillars*, 2001  
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper  
43.2 x 30.5 cm (17 x 12 inches)  
Frame: 51.1 x 44.8 x 3.8 cm (20 1/8 x 17 5/8 x 1 1/2 inches)  
Collection of Amita and Purnendu Chatterjee TL66.2020

The array of archetypes portrayed here reveals the range of sources that Sikander looked to as she celebrated female sensuality and desire. Her central self-portrait with ram's horns conjoins fragmented statues inspired by the Roman goddess Venus and a South and Southeastern Asian celestial dancer. Above, two images of destruction threaten this scene of unrestrained pleasure: a winged hybrid creature that seems to shoot fire from its hands, and fighter jets, which Sikander added in the aftermath of 9/11.



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Sly Offering*, 2001

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, inkjet outline, and tea on wasli paper

23.5 x 15.8 cm (9 1/4 x 6 1/4 inches)

Frame: 51.1 x 38.7 x 3.2 cm (20 1/8 x 15 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection of Judy and Robert Mann TL175.2019

The foundation for this work is *Ascension of Solomon*, a Safavid painting from the early 1500s now at the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC. Sikander disrupts the notion of sovereignty by removing King Solomon and handing the empty seat of power to Indian and Greek female protagonists, who share or vie for control.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation*, 2001

Acrylic on board

Frame: 238.2 x 128.4 cm (93 3/4 x 50 9/16 inches) Confirmed

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.4

This unfinished panel was part of a 50-foot mural Sikander was commissioned to make for a New York law firm. The image's powerful iconography suggests female resilience and potency. According to Sikander, "the referents are manifold: the Jewish Shekhina, or Saqueena in Quranic parlance—the feminine complement to the masculine divine—and the chthonic mother goddesses of the Indus Valley." The hovering female avatar holds implements of defense (weapons) and justice (a scale). After 9/11, the figure was misunderstood as referring to violence rather than inner strength. When asked to change it, Sikander instead withdrew from the commission.



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Monsters, Female Desires and States of Dislocation*, 2001

Ink on tracing paper

Image: 29.8 x 23.6 cm (11 3/4 x 9 5/16 inches)

Frame: 55.6 x 45.4 x 3.8 cm (21 7/8 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.6

In the early 2000s in New York, Sikander expanded her vocabulary, turning again to ink on tracing paper to create ever more refined imagery. These uncanny forms interpret an array of objects, including swords, vessels, cannons, amulets, and masks—the types of images that might feature in Western coffee-table books on Islamic and Indian art. Sikander's representations transform the inanimate objects into human-animal hybrids, imbuing them with agency. Her approach, she explains, was “an inventive and ironic play on the colonial histories of dispersing, rupturing, archiving, cataloguing, and institutionalizing art and artifacts of native cultures.” The distinct pattern created by the coagulation of ink on the sheets suggests reptile skin—ideal for rendering these subjects.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Monsters, Female Desires and States of Dislocation*, 2001

Ink on tracing paper

Image: 36.1 x 25.7 cm (14 3/16 x 10 1/8 inches)

Frame: 55.6 x 45.4 x 3.8 cm (21 7/8 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.8



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Monsters, Female Desires and States of Dislocation*, 2001

Ink on tracing paper

Sheet: 30.8 x 36.8 cm (12 1/8 x 14 1/2 inches)

Frame: 55.6 x 45.4 x 3.8 cm (21 7/8 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.10



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Monsters, Female Desires and States of Dislocation*, 2001

Ink on tracing paper

Image: 29.8 x 21.2 cm (11 3/4 x 8 3/8 inches)

Frame: 55.6 x 45.4 x 3.8 cm (21 7/8 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.11



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Gopi Crisis*, 2001

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

Image: 24.6 x 15 cm (9 11/16 x 5 7/8 inches)

Frame: 46 x 35.9 x 3.8 cm (18 1/8 x 14 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of the artist TL30.2020.5

The small female characters portrayed here derive from gopis, female cowherds and devotees of Krishna. Depicted from the waist up, they seem to be bathing, as they are often shown in Indian paintings. Large shadowy creatures—vaguely human, somewhat phallic—protect and contain the gopis, while bats or birds disperse from the center of the image. On close inspection, these flying forms are the hair of the gopis, detached and given life as a new symbol that will populate and animate Sikander's work.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995,  
Painting & Printmaking)

*Turmoil*, 2001

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, inkjet, and tea on wasli  
paper

Image: 17 x 11.8 cm (6 11/16 x 4 5/8 inches)

Sheet: 20.9 x 14.6 cm (8 1/4 x 5 3/4 inches)

Frame: 54.6 x 42.2 x 3.2 cm (21 1/2 x 16 5/8 x 1 1/4 inches)

Collection Philip H. Isles TL42.2020

This playful landscape scene features the female cowherds and devotees of Krishna known as gopis (also seen in several other paintings on view). Freed from previous restrictions, they seem ready to take on the world. At left are their scooters—not that they need them, as they seem capable of flying. They only have traffic signals to stop them.



# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*No Fly Zone*, 2002

Watercolor, dry pigment, gravure, and inkjet outline on wasli paper  
21.5 x 11.4 cm (8 7/16 x 4 1/2 inches)

Frame: 46.2 x 33.5 x 3.5 cm (18 3/16 x 13 3/16 x 1 3/8 inches)

Collection of Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg TL25.2020

Sikander returned to the same Persian painting here that was the base for *Sly Offering*. Painted just as the United States was ramping up its response to the 9/11 attacks, *No Fly Zone* imbues the monstrous protagonists of Sikander's early vocabulary with new political relevance. As scholar Sadia Abbas has noted, the empty throne in this painting—one of Sikander's favorite motifs of the early 2000s—"marks a crisis of postcolonial sovereignty in an era of revived imperialism." The jets and angels clad in red, white, and blue wings make clear the central role played by the United States.



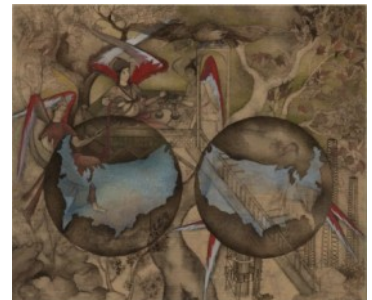
Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*United World Corp*, 2003

Watercolor, dry pigment, and inkjet on wasli paper  
20.3 x 24.1 cm (8 x 9 1/2 inches)

Frame: 44.8 x 46.2 x 3.5 cm (17 5/8 x 18 3/16 x 1 3/8 inches)

Collection of Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, New York  
TL46.2020.2



A detail from *A Garden of Heavenly Creatures*, a 16th-century Safavid painting in the Freer Gallery collection, forms the backdrop for this work. In Sikander's intervention, the garden has been overrun with an American presence. Globes featuring maps of the United States appear at center, an eagle reigns at top, and the angels have red, white, and blue wings.

# RISD MUSEUM

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Web*, 2002

Ink, gouache, graphite, gravure, inkjet outlines, and tea on wasli paper

Sheet: 22.7 x 18.9 cm (8 15/16 x 7 7/16 inches)

Frame: 47.3 x 41 x 3.5 cm (18 5/8 x 16 1/8 x 1 3/8 inches)

Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2003.46

The towers and aircraft in this painting call to mind the 9/11 attacks. The towers also suggest oil derricks, possible referencing the dependence of the United States on foreign oil, which was brought into question during President Bush's impending invasion of Iraq. Heraldry links present-day policies to colonial-era exploitation. The dark purse-like form, a lingam casket, would have held an amulet, but as scholar Faisal Devji suggests, it "looks like grenades on a suicide belt." The spider web refers to one that shielded the prophet Muhammad from persecutors as he hid in a cave. The lush landscape with animals both nurtured and preyed on—copied from a Mughal sheet in the collection of the Freer Gallery—is the foundation of this composition filled with references to protection and destruction.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Running on Empty*, 2002

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and inkjet on wasli paper  
18 x 25 cm (7 1/16 x 9 13/16 inches)

Frame: 43 x 47.9 x 3.8 cm (16 15/16 x 18 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches)

Collection of Anika Rahman TL44.2020



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Nemesis*, 2003

Digital animation with sound

2:02 min

Collection of the artist TL33.2021.1

As Sikander infused her compositions with new movement and dynamism, she experienced a desire to see them come to life. This animation, one of her earliest, was inspired by examples of composite





# RISD MUSEUM

painting in manuscript painting traditions, in which individual components are built into a single figure. Here, different animals combine in inventive ways to form an elephant, which is torn apart as it fights off an attack. Composite artwork, which allows “a variety of things to coexist without homogenizing them,” is an attractive approach for Sikander. “For me, this aspect is fundamental to lived experience. It reflects the challenge of how different cultural practices or people with different viewpoints learn to commingle and interact.”

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*SpiNN (III)*, 2003

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper  
20.3 x 27.9 cm (8 x 11 inches)

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein in honor of Annette DiMeo Carlozzi, 2015 TL145.2021.2



This painting, created for the animation *SpiNN*, includes several scenes of gopis in an act of rebellion. The gopis join together to create the beast that Krishna rides into the durbar hall. Once inside, they take over the space. Traditional Indian manuscript paintings typically feature only a single prominent gopi, Radha, the favored consort of Krishna. As Sikander multiplies the gopis' numbers, she gives them all the agency of Radha, speaking to the power of a collective feminine space.

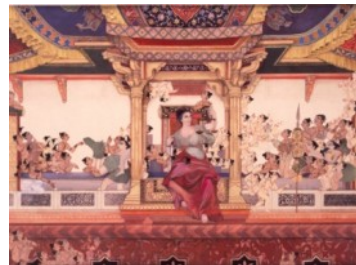
Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*SpiNN*, 2003

Digital animation with sound

Time: 6:38 minutes

Collection of the artist TL33.2021.2



Mughal imperial manuscript paintings were often set in a durbar hall, a formal meeting space for matters related to the running of the court. In Sikander's reimagining, gopis infiltrate this space to disrupt patriarchy and sovereignty. Their hair detaches from their bodies, flying around the court and dispersing its occupants. The hall is then filled by angels and women, who briefly assume the throne. The demons in the last scene may represent how women in power are treated with greater scrutiny and hostility. The work's title references

# RISD MUSEUM

the news network CNN and, more generally, the power of the media to shape information in support of a desired narrative.

To make this animation, different stages of the painting *SpiNN (III)* were scanned and coded to produce movement. *SpiNN* and *Nemesis*, another digital animation, were created before today's high-definition digital technology existed. Sikander has since developed a sustained practice of video animation, which includes elaborate multiple-channel indoor and outdoor productions with original scores. A recent animation, *Disruption as Rapture* (2016), is on view in the Spalter Gallery.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*Mind Games*, 2000

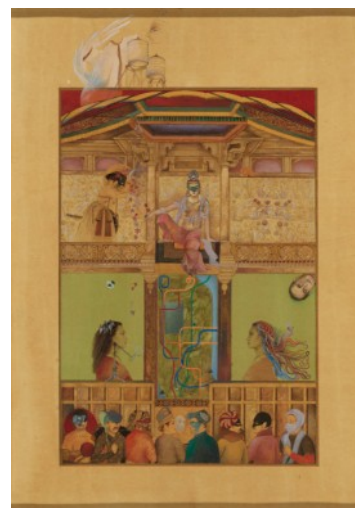
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, inkjet printing, and tea on wasli paper

42.5 x 29.8 cm (16 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches)

Frame: 59.7 x 47 cm (23 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches)

Courtesy of John McEnroe TL45.2020

This scene is a restaging of the painting *Jahangir Receives Prince Khurram* from the imperial Mughal manuscript *Padshahnama* (Book of emperors), now in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. Using the durbar hall as a compositional device, Sikander centers two self-portraits flanking a subway map, with rooftop water tanks in the top margin further signaling a New York City setting. In the lower register, courtiers from the historical painting—now wearing masks—gather, perhaps as witnesses of the past. Presiding at center is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Sikander sees this deity as nonbinary and a symbol of multitude, with the ability to look in all directions and possess any form. She was intrigued with these chameleonlike powers and with masking as a metaphor for the many sides—some unseen—of any narrative.



Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)

*The Pink Pavilion*, 2002

Ink, opaque watercolor, and watercolor on clay-coated paper

Frame: 42.7 x 32.5 x 3.5 cm (16 13/16 x 12 13/16 x 1 3/8 inches)  
(each)

Collection of Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, New York  
TL46.2020.1



# RISD MUSEUM

Returning to a technique she first developed at RISD, Sikander created many multipart works, such as this one, on paper coated with a combination of clay, gesso, acrylic, and patching compound. More stable than tracing paper, this surface allowed her to precisely delineate the forms. Varying the amount of red clay provided a color range that Sikander likened to flesh tones. This textured, absorbent surface coaxed new characters and narratives from Sikander's imagination. Tumbling, floating, and flying, the interacting figures are engaged in exuberant movement.

Shahzia Sikander, Pakistani-American, b.1969, (RISD MFA 1995, Painting & Printmaking)  
*Epistrophe*, 2021  
Gouache and ink on tracing paper  
Collection of the artist TL140.2021.3

In the late 1990s, the 2000s, and occasionally since, Sikander created installations of layered tracing-paper drawings, most often in combination with wall drawings, as a counterpoint to her painting practice. The intention was to use fluid, spontaneous gestures that involved her whole body and amplified her invented motifs. This large-scale work requires a different kind of labor, skill, and pace than her smaller, intricate compositions, but she still sees it as being in dialogue with classical traditions. Sikander is also attracted to the openness of the piece: "There is no intention to hide anything," she explains. "Everything is very visible; the paper is very transparent. It flows, it moves. All marks, including any flaws, become a part of the piece, which has no borders and can expand in any direction, marking a site that is unstable and multivalent."

