INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE BRANDON, CURATOR OF “SHAHZIA SIKANDER: APPARATUS OF POWER”

This year, the Asia Society Hong Kong, in conjunction with the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, mounted the first major solo exhibition in Asia of the Pakistani-born artist Shahzia Sikander. Curated by Claire Brandon, recent Ph.D. graduate of the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, “Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power” features work in a range of mediums, from drawing and painting to animations, and spans the artist’s career from her student days in Lahore to her most recent output. The exhibition places Sikander’s signature reinterpretations of Persian miniature paintings—which use mysterious and at times disturbing visual narratives—in poignant dialogue with the colonial history of Hong Kong by calling attention to the architecture of the exhibition’s venues and the urban fabric of the city. At the close of the exhibition in July 2016, Shift Co-Editor Allison Young spoke with Brandon about the curatorial process and research behind “Apparatus of Power,” as well as the nuances of Sikander’s multivalent project, both within and across her artworks.

Allison Young: How long have you known and worked with Shahzia Sikander?

Claire Brandon: I have known Shahzia Sikander since 2010: I met her through Linda Nochlin, who had worked on “Global Feminisms” at the Brooklyn Museum with Sikander several years before. Over the past few years, I have done many studio visits with the artist and have published interviews with her as well as articles on her work. Furthermore, while a doctoral student at the Institute of Fine Arts, I co-founded the Colloquium on Modern and Contemporary Art from the Middle East and South Asia in 2010, and we did an event with Sikander in 2012 as part of the series. As a result, I was quite familiar with her work prior to the planning of this exhibition.

Tell me a bit about how this project came to be.

Since the Asia Society in Hong Kong does not have a large in-house curatorial staff, the institution hires a guest curator for temporary exhibitions. I submitted a proposal for “Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power” to the Director of Exhibitions, Dominique Chan, who loved the idea, and the Asia Society hired me as the guest curator to work on the project. I worked closely with Chan and his team, in particular Ashley Nga-sai Wu, to realize the exhibition.

From the beginning, the catalogue has also been an integral component of the project. Published by the Asia Society, the book is a 332-page monograph that I
edited and for which I wrote an essay. It contains additional texts by Pulitzer-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar, East India Company historian Nick Robins, and miniature painting scholar John Seyller. The artist’s voice is also present: The book includes a statement by Sikander and an interview between the artist and critic Hans Ulrich Obrist.


The exhibition includes artworks culled from a few different phases in Sikander’s career, from her recent animations to earlier miniatures and scroll paintings of the 1980s-1990s. Is the exhibition retrospective in nature, or do the selected works cluster around a particular theme that has recurred over several decades of the artist’s practice?

A bit of both. Sikander took up the craft-based practice of miniature painting in Pakistan during the oppressive climate of Zia Ul-Haq’s military regime in the late 1980s, when the medium was unpopular for that generation’s youth. Furthermore, miniature painting was then largely unknown to the global contemporary art world, as the Euro-American canon dominated the field of painting. The region’s contemporary art production and geopolitical conditions have since entered the global purview. Sikander has challenged the medium-based restrictions of miniature painting, in which she was trained at the National College of Arts in Lahore. This exhibition spans Sikander’s artwork from her early days as a student of miniature painting in Lahore to her current work. During the last twenty-five years, Sikander has developed a series of forms that repeat and transform throughout her drawing practice and work in diverse media. At the same time that the exhibition looks “inward” to this trajectory of Sikander’s practice, the selection of works also takes into consideration the history of the Asia Society grounds as well as Hong Kong’s broader geopolitical context.
The two venues of the exhibition (a former explosives compound and a maritime museum) seem to have been intentionally chosen for their historical significance. How do you feel these spaces relate to, or echo, some of the themes explored in the exhibition?

The exhibition sought to respond to the Asia Society’s location in a former explosives magazine compound, and that response propelled the selection of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum as a satellite venue.

The Asia Society Hong Kong (ASHK) is an anomaly in Hong Kong’s landscape. The site is a lush, green oasis in the city, which is ironic given its dark past. Hong Kong became a British colony in 1842 through the Treaty of Nanjing, the agreement that ended the First Opium War. During this time in Hong Kong, the British military occupied the northern area known as the Victoria Cantonment, and the current ASHK location demarcated the Cantonment’s southern boundary.

The former Explosives Magazine Compound was built in the 1840s, when it was first used as housing for British soldiers. Twenty years later, it was transformed into a production and processing plant for artillery. The building changed ownership from the British Army to the Royal Navy in the early twentieth century as the governing powers reorganized. It fell into disuse in the 1970s and became run-down as Hong Kong’s flora and fauna grew in abundance on the site. Following the British handover to the Chinese in 1997, many of Hong Kong’s historic sites underwent publicly and privately funded renovations. As part of urban reconstructions in the 2000s, architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien worked to preserve elements of the multiple stages in the site’s history from the nineteenth century to its current iteration as a think tank and art museum.

Fig. 2. Interior view of Asia Society Hong Kong Center’s Chantal Miller Gallery (Former Explosive Magazine) with the installation of Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power. March 2016. Photograph by Scott Brooks.
The Maritime Museum is the former terminal of the historic Star Ferry, and the museum’s current site was constructed in 2013. It extends onto Victoria Harbor, a waterway that played an integral role in securing Hong Kong as a British colony in the nineteenth century because of its suitability as a setting for maritime trade in the South China Sea.

Located above the waters of Victoria Harbor within Hong Kong’s Pier 8, the Maritime Museum provides a new vantage point (both literally and figuratively) from which to view Sikander’s work, as the museum’s current location was once under the immediate purview of the British Navy. The East India Company circulated its goods primarily via waterways and, as such, the aquatic routes by which both humans and objects were transported became deeply connected to the history of trade and colonial dominance. In its installation at the Maritime Museum, the animation Parallax draws immediate attention to the fluid transmission of objects and people via water.

Do these sites help to bring out the kinds of political meanings that are not always explored overtly in her art?

The sites are not meant to politicize or instrumentalize the work in any way. Instead, they are meant to open up more questions about the evocative imagery in Sikander’s practice. For example, Sikander created The Last Post (2010) around the time she was developing a large repertoire of related two-dimensional works whose imagery refers to the colonial history of South Asia and the legacy of the British East India Company, such as Walled States (2011) and Practice Makes Perfect (2011).
Fig. 4. Interior view of Asia Society Hong Kong Center’s Chantal Miller Gallery (Former Explosive Magazine) with the installation of Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power. Walled States (2011) at far right. March 2016. Photograph by Scott Brooks.

The Last Post deals with the history of colonial struggle and international trade in India. The rich architectural details and depictions of vegetation in the work allude to the Company Painting School, a style of painting developed in the eighteenth century among local artists hired by European officials to depict India’s plants, animals, and architecture. In this anthropologically-oriented style, artists often incorporated portraits of British officers into their work in miniature. The subject matter of these miniatures shifted from grand themes to mundane life: inventory functioned as subject while color became subdued and line-drawing paramount. The Last Post takes as its subject an “exploding” East India Company Man, a riff on the figures of authority associated with the British trading company of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

Moreover, the animation resonates with the nineteenth-century presence of the British in Hong Kong. The Company Man was a figure who derived the majority of his wealth from the East India trade instead of from his salaried position. Sikander’s version highlights his greed by assigning him a potbelly: a symbol of gluttony and colonial excess. He is clad in the traditional red tailcoat, shoes, hat, and other colonial accoutrements. In contrast to this detailed sartorial rendering, the man’s facial features are indiscernible, thereby playing on the tensions and contradictions inherent in the notion of a stereotype. This figure appears several times throughout the course of The Last Post: first, he is ensconced in a court theater apparatus, looking out through an opening in the structure; next, he floats through a dark landscape; and finally, he explodes atop a gouache background.

The Company Man is precisely the official who would have lived in the Explosives Magazine Compound in the nineteenth century, and he was a visible figure in China during the Opium Wars. Accordingly, the final scenes of The Last Post suggest the dark history of the opium trade in China, as a faceless monk topples over and, in the next frame, a man smoking a pipe appears.
Why did you choose to include *Parallax* (2013), an immersive animation that Sikander made for the 2013 Sharjah Biennial?

Like Sikander’s earlier animation *The Last Post, Parallax* deals with several historical aspects of the British East India Company, though it does not feature the Company Man of the 2010 work. Instead, *Parallax* focuses on the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, where Sharjah is located. While *Parallax* was made specifically for the 2013 Sharjah Biennial, there are several confluences between the East India Company’s relationship to Sharjah and its role in Hong Kong. Indeed, the Strait of Hormuz played a crucial role in the Company’s history. The Portuguese took control of Hormuz in 1507, and it served as a base to control the Persian Gulf until a century later, when the British East India Company joined forces with Iran’s Shah Abbas I and captured Hormuz after a ten-week siege in 1622. Moreover, the Strait of Hormuz and Hong Kong are similar in that they were both entrepôts and hubs for the British East India Company’s maritime trade at pivotal points in its history. *Parallax* visualizes such aerial and aquatic routes. The geographic location of the Strait is a key point of departure in the video: topographical images of the peninsula feature prominently in its visual repertoire. By including floating fragmented bodies as well as liquid elements such as oil and water, the animation explores the broader exchange of images, bodies, and objects imposed by colonial rule.
Sikander’s colonial-era subject matter and her signature artistic style (which recalls Indo-Persian miniature painting) relate to both cultural and aesthetic histories in South Asia. How does the artist integrate these references within contemporary modes of artistic production?

For Sikander, miniature painting is a vehicle for storytelling; her repertoire of images is culled from contemporary culture, the Indo-Persian miniature, personal experience, fantasy, mythology, and the popular imaginary. It is through drawing, more specifically, that she investigates the various omissions, removals, modes of reproduction, and acts of the imagination that are involved in storytelling. Her drawing practice challenges the conventions of miniature painting in which she was trained by extending it to various media, including installations, murals, projections, printmaking, collaborations with other artists, and performance. Working with such idioms has allowed the artist to experiment with the technical aspects of drawing on paper as well as the life of drawn forms beyond the surface of the page.

However, it is her immersive animation works that suggest a potent and contemporary permutation of the act of drawing at a time in which the global transmission of information occurs primarily through digital media. Sikander’s animations are made from a series of drawings. A high-resolution scanner translates the image from a work on paper to digital information. Scanned drawings are then mobilized using animation technology. By digitizing extant works on paper and altering them with computer-generated software, Sikander blurs the boundary between organic and synthetic drawing. Indeed, the high level of magnification produced by a digital scan makes visible what was previously indiscernible to the naked eye in miniature painting. As a result, the intricacies of gouache become the protagonist on the space of the screen.
Contemporary technology, for Sikander, has proven a means of reinventing and staking a new claim on a centuries-old technique. Sikander began digitally transposing her drawings in 2001 during a residency at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas. Since then, the past fifteen years in which Sikander has been working in animation have witnessed the rapid acceleration of the digital circulation of images, as the virtual and instantaneous transmission of visual content is the primary mode by which today’s stories are told.

Fig. 7. Interior view of Asia Society Hong Kong Center’s Chantal Miller Gallery (Former Explosive Magazine) with the installation of Apparatus of Power. March 2016. Photograph by Scott Brooks.

**What is the origin of the exhibition’s title?**

“Apparatus of Power” is the title of one of the new works in the exhibition, on view for the first time. This phrase highlights the capacity of Sikander’s imagery to communicate and elicit meaning in multiple forms and geographic contexts. Sikander’s inventive plurality of ideas and visual devices is connected to her interest in the work of Andalusian theosophist Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi. She often engages both the written and spoken word via the use of sound and through the evocative titles she assigns. The terse nature of many of these phrases, as well as her use of words and their forms, allude to revolutionary writings and political manifestos.

By the same token, each of the galleries in the exhibition is titled after a work it contains in order to enlist the artist’s own voice to draw out the thematics at stake within the exhibition. For example, one of the galleries is titled “Practice Makes Perfect,” after one of the works on view in that room. The title of this chamber refers to Sikander’s experience of rote learning as part of her miniature painting apprenticeship. She has since investigated the visual implications of repetitiously
engaging pictorial idioms, not to exhaust these forms, but rather to expose their
myriad potential. Repetition and translation are at stake here, as *Practice Makes
Perfect* also recalls the process and mechanics of writing. Here, Urdu script,
vegetal scrolls, the musical score for *The Last Post*, and dripping ink are layered
on top of one another. The script in this painting includes a phrase from the Urdu
poet Ghalib, which reads “I am also not my own enemy.” Furthermore, the
painting’s monochrome palette suggests the black and white text in printed books
and music sheets.

**Fig. 8. Interior view of Asia Society Hong Kong Center’s Chantal Miller Gallery (Former Explosive
Magazine) with the installation of *Practice Makes Perfect* (2011; left) and *Confrontation II* (2012-
2015; right). March 2016. Photograph by Scott Brooks.**

**Narrative has been a central aspect of Sikander’s practice. It is not only
crucial to the traditional format of miniature painting, but it also appears in
the artist’s engagement with the news media and storytelling. Are there
particular narrative threads that play out across works in “Shahzia
Sikander: Apparatus of Power”? Are there recurring characters, settings,
or motifs?**

Yes: this question gets to the very heart of the concept of the “Apparatus of
Power” and the life of forms over time in multiple media. For example, Sikander
developed *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* while a student at the Rhode Island
School of Design in 1993. Painted using gouache and gesso on board, the work
was one of her early forays away from paper. In addition to its technical
relevance within her practice, the painting’s pictorial language was
groundbreaking. The work’s restricted palette and uniform iconography make it
quite unlike her early miniature works such as *The Scroll*, *Mirrat I*, and *Mirrat II*
(all 1989–90), which include depictions of multiple human figures, Indo-Persian
architecture, birds, and vegetation along with elaborate borders and intricate

As Sikander’s practice expanded to encompass other media—including drawings on walls, tissue, and windows, as well as the digital realm—this figure grew in size, making its way onto the wall in 1997 at the Drawing Center 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 knifelike 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.
Could you discuss your research process for this exhibition?

Considering the life of an image was central to the conception of the exhibition. Accordingly, I was drawn to French philosopher and historian Henri Focillon’s 1934 text *The Life of Forms in Art*, which argues that forms resonate with different viewers according to the historical vantage point from which they are seen. Admittedly, Focillon was writing about elements of Gothic sculpture, antique bas-reliefs, and other pre-Modern objects. Yet his observations have contemporary relevance, and his comparison of forms to language is useful when considering Sikander’s work. It is this continued and renewed legibility of an image that is at stake in Sikander’s work. Her images are far from literal appropriations from their various sources. Instead, the artist’s accumulative iconographic language remains open-ended and polysemic.

For example, the shape of the red fence is a trope found in Safavid painting (1501–1722) that Sikander employs to suggest alternative meanings. In *The Scroll*, the red fence serves as a far-off border surrounding the artist’s childhood home. Twenty years later, the form becomes part of the subject of *Empire Follows Art* (2009), a series of four large drawings made with gouache, ink, and colored pencil on paper. The capitalized block lettering and terse phrases of these drawings recall political manifestos, and the red fence plays a key role in their composition. Specifically, in *Endless Inventiveness* (2009), the fence bisects the horizontal page and introduces the color red into the drawing’s monotone palette. A *Spontaneous Response to a Difficult Situation* (2009) includes a wandering, loosely circular line that encompasses the page and intrudes upon the carefully printed lettering, suggesting the spontaneity of the drawing’s title. *Empire Follows Art* thus illustrates the multiple iterations of the red fence as architectural feature, boundary line, and writing implement. The exhibition design also alludes to the concept of the red fence by printing each of the gallery titles in red.

![Fig. 10. Detail, Empire Follows Art series. Interior view of Asia Society Hong Kong Center’s Chantal Miller Gallery (Former Explosive Magazine) with the installation of Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power. March 2016. Photograph by Scott Brooks.](image)
Apropos to *Shift’s* current issue theme of “Networks,” Sikander’s work relates to the maritime trade routes of colonialism and the performance of power on an international scale. Can you say more about the historical “networks” that feature in the artist’s works? Does her art challenge any common understandings of globalization?

The history of the British East India Company features prominently in her work within the last ten years. It is no coincidence that this period has also witnessed a major economic reorientation of wealth away from Europe and toward Asia. At the same time, globalization is of course nothing new. Corporate networks, or circulation imposed by multinational corporations, have a much longer history.

Nick Robins’s book *The Corporation that Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational* (London: Pluto, 2012) was central to the conception of the exhibition. I had many discussions with Robins, a historian of the East India Company and a contributor to our catalogue. Indeed, the East India Company acted in many of the ways that independent nations did by issuing currency, enforcing the law, and taking military action. The Company marked a moment that saw the emergence of another form of boundary making in addition to the national framework: the multinational corporation. Several of the works in the exhibition refer to this moment. *The Last Post*, in particular, refers to this period not only to subvert the historical implications of the East India Company, but also to challenge the very economic and commercial pillars that uphold modern corporate practice. Accordingly, the animation speaks to this history, which conflates the national and the corporate with regard to stakeholders, identities, and actions. Furthermore, the movement among various sounds and sets of visual information speaks to Sikander’s interest in trade routes and the trajectories of objects and information. Through her process-based work, Sikander continues to examine the contemporary implications of these colonial legacies and the forces at stake in their contested cultural and political histories.
Shahzia Sikander: Apparatus of Power ran from March 16—July 9, 2016 at the Asia Society Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Maritime Museum.

Claire Brandon holds a Ph.D. (2016) in the History of Art and Archaeology from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University where she authored a dissertation titled “Spaces of Art in the Exhibition Age: Italy as a Laboratory for Global Exhibition Paradigms since 1970.” During 2015-2016, Brandon has been the guest curator at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center. She has recently served as editorial researcher for the first major monograph on American artist William Copley co-published by the Menil Collection Houston and Fondazione Prada Milan to accompany the 2016-2017 exhibition. She has written essays in Shahzia Sikander: Heart as Vector, Ecstasy as Sublime, Hou Hanru, ed. (Rome: MAXXI, 2016); Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists from Iran, Lynn Gumpert, ed. (New York: Grey Art Gallery NYU, 2016); and Graphite, Sarah Urist Green, ed. (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2013). Brandon was editorial and research assistant in Illuminations/Illuminazioni: Biennale Arte 2011, Bice Curiger, ed. (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2011). Brandon lives in Madrid, Spain.

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