

Rejecting Binaries: Imagining a different present and future

By Sana Burney



Gallery view of an exhibition

Around November 2020, a Pakistani art fraternity fellow shares a picture on Twitter of two goddesses entangling each other in the form of a sculpture. This picture is taken from Shazia Sikander's recent exhibition - a decade after her previous exhibition. A sinuous bronze sculpture, video installations of kinetic animations, monumental and intimately scaled drawings using ink and gouache, and complex glass mosaics make up an expansive exhibition, 'Weeping Willows, Liquid Tongues' by Shahzia Sikander at Sean Kelly art gallery in New York.

Amidst many distresses owing to the current pandemic, Shazia Sikander's recent exhibition, which is also available online, reduces polarities by providing an opportunity for art learners across the world. The online show includes only snippets of each of the video installations. Therefore, one video installation has been examined in this review.

When one thinks of Shazia Sikander's work, the instantaneous series of images that flash in one's mind are an eastern female form of a court dancer, an abstract headless female form, a multi-headed female form – all derived from traditional and modern styles of miniature painting. Shahzia Sikander's practice originates from classical Indian Persian miniature painting and has evolved into a pre-modern style incorporating contemporary influences. Her practice is now in multiple media such as painting, drawing, printmaking, animation, mosaic, and sculpture. Her practice revolves around class & gender, systematic racism, violence, cultural fears, fear of the unknown, migrant, immigrant, Muslim, and LGBTQ. Sikander's work also highlights the subjects of power and powerlessness, colonization, postcolonial societies, capitalism, feminism and climate change. For this exhibition, Sikander aspired to share a range of works that are interdisciplinary and multilingual. Sikander's recent exhibition rejects the ideas of binaries and dichotomies that are engrained in us and have shaped our societies. In her works, the allegory and metaphors of female duos have been repetitively used to put her ideas forward. Also, such use of metaphors puts this body of work in the centre of the current LGBTQ and feminism movements.

Sculpture: *Promiscuous Intimacies*

Of the many wonders of the exhibition, one is that Sikander created her first-ever sculpture. She embarked on a 3D form of art by creating a free-standing sculpture of two females. The two intertwined female bodies cast in bronze with meticulous detail and bearing each other's weight are goddesses: *Venus* and *Celestial dancer*. The lower figure shown seated on a cushion demonstrates an ancient Greek style of beauty and adornment with delicate facial features, body postures & proportions, and head jewellery suggesting the Greco-Roman goddess *Venus*. This Greco-Roman goddess is inspired by Agnolo Bronzino's painting of 1545, 'Allegory with Venus, Cupid, Folly and time'.

The upper figure was laden with heavy jewellery that included an ornamented headpiece, necklaces, waistband, and that had significant Indian facial and body features suggesting it was the Indian celestial dancer Devata – a term that means goddess. The sculpture of Devata is inspired by a sandstone sculpture made in mid 11th century that is placed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The female archetype has always been part of Sikander's practice. The female archetype is always present in some form and always as a protagonist. Here, the two protagonist figures are from two different regions of the world, representing two different mythologies. The goddesses carry the weight of their communities and are shown here carrying this weight together. The entangling postures of the two figures could be a joyous depiction of a dancing duo as suggested by the indulgence in each other's presence. Where the Devata – celestial dancer is joyous, Venus looks pleased. Both the figures looking at one another and completely immersed at the same time look disturbing. The two sensual figures depicted intimately interlaced strongly symbolize non-heteronomy that is considered unorthodox, factitious, and far-off. It also challenges the existing notions of tradition, culture, and identity. As the artist explains, *'the work is a contemplation between; languages, histories and dichotomies that are brought between; nature and human, women and power and migrant and citizen'*.



Promiscuous Intimacies, 2020

Bronze - Patinated
3.5 x 2 x 1.5 Feet
5 Editions with 2 APs

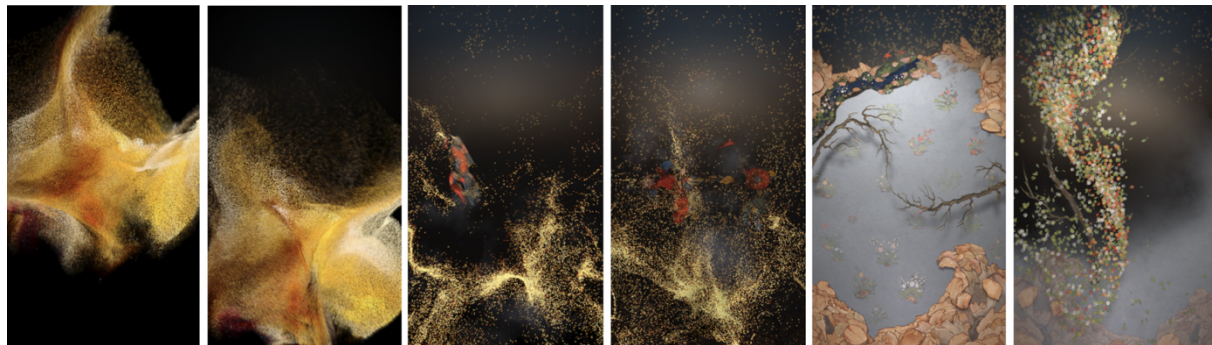
It also highlights power for women through women since both figures are providing support to each other. The western 'Venus' is carrying the weight of the eastern 'Devata', suggesting perhaps the acceptance of migrants. While at the same time 'Venus' is keeping her balance intact by holding a necklace of 'Devata'.

The sculpture's title, 'Promiscuous Intimacies', is taken from Gayatri Gopinath's essay which is a monologue in which Gopinath advocates the artist's practice. Gayatri Gopinath is a writer and professor who has written a book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*.

Video Installations: Parallax, Disruption as Rapture and Reckoning

The exhibition also includes video installations. Sikander has been working with the medium of animations for more than two decades. The iconographic forms in her drawings and their development can be seen in her animations.

The animations 'Parallax' and 'Disruption as Rapture' were created in 2013 and 2016, respectively. Both animations have been re-exhibited in this show. The animation 'Reckoning' was created in 2020. It starts with an abstract female portrait that falls and explodes into a million particles. During this explosion, two forms of Indo-Persian style start to appear. These forms carry swords and seem to be in battle. This opposition between two warriors symbolizes a battle between nature and human or perhaps life and death. These forms then disappear into what may be a pond or a shape representing the sky, and then a tree starts to appear. This sinuous tree begins to float and as the artist describes *'it is kind of built on the lyrical depiction of a nature of the Persian paintings. I thought of this work as a staging of an imaginary Indian-Persian-Turkish sort of encompasses geographic and stylistic region that I often have been mining and colling for my research'*.



Stills from *Reckoning*, 2020
Video Animation: 4:16 sec
7 Editions with 2 APs

A second tree enters from the other end and moves across, symbolizing migration and migratory patterns. According to the artist, this could also illustrate dismissal from Eden. The second tree glides across the first symbolizing tensions between migrants and citizens. As the first tree meets the second, it starts to blossom while the second tree is unable to flower, symbolizing a struggle of rebirth and the future.

Paintings: The Shadow's Struggle 1, The Shadows struggle 2 and The Shadow (Series)

The paintings 'The Shadow's Struggle 1', 'The Shadows struggle 2' and 'The Shadow (Series)' have been created in a similar style. All six paintings have a plain blank background with a main form as the only engaging element.

In 'The Shadow's Struggle 1 & 2' a human form wrapped in an American flag with flowing paints symbolizes the struggles of immigrants.



Shadow (Series) 2020
Gouache, ink and gold on paper
1.3 x 1 Feet

In 'The Shadow (Series)', there are four works in a sequence. These works have two human forms connected through a battle. These forms are violently confronting and struggling for personal space. The artist refers to these two human forms as citizens and migrants struggling for acceptability. Since the gender of these forms has not been disclosed, this battle can be interpreted as a battle between a man and a woman. The battle between them may therefore highlight a tussle for gender equality. These forms have also been used in the animation 'Reckoning'.

Mosaics: Arose and The Perennial Gaze

For Sikandar, mosaics are similar to animations because both are composed of many small units. Sikander's mosaics have a unique style of drawing that is a reminder of her kinetic animations where she plays with millions of pixels like a single unit of a mosaic. Sikander started working with mosaics in 2015. At that time, she was working on a permanent public artwork and was therefore thinking about its longevity by using appropriate material and thereby engaged herself with mosaics and the material of glass.

Sikander uses varying sizes of glass pieces to construct her mosaics and chooses not to grout mosaics to preserve their sculptural sensibility. The artist has not

compromised on any detail of the image. The detail in each mosaic is evidence of the painstaking process by which small pieces are put together to make a larger whole. In this exhibition, she displayed two mosaic works: *Arose* 2020 and *The Perennial Gaze* 2018.



Arose, 2020
Glass mosaic in a patinated brass frame
6.92 x 4.9 Feet
5 Editions with 2 APs

In the first mosaic, '*Arose*' Sikander depicted two interweaved female forms, perhaps protagonists again that have evolved into a circular flower representing a poppy flower. It is not anchored and is in a natural environment, thus presenting it in the language

of miniature painting. The artwork breaks the notion of binaries and dichotomies such as man or woman. It hints at platonic or queer interpretations of women companionship. Also, the two interlocked females look like one broad figure with two heads and may symbolize women's power.



The Perennial Gaze, 2018
Glass mosaic in a brass frame
5.8 x 3.6 Feet
4 Editions with 1 AP

In the second mosaic, 'The Perennial Gaze', Sikander depicts two female figures, one seated and the other an abstract form with neither head nor arms and with tendrils flowing from her legs. This work expresses female agency that is the ability of women to decide and choose for themselves and is an idea related to feminism. The seated form is shown in traditional Indian Mughal attire, wearing pearl necklaces and armbands with long hair and a translucent dupatta (scarf). On the other hand, the abstract form that encircles the seated figure is a very common icon in Sikander's practice. It is very feminine and has been kept abstract to represent a broader and universal female identity. It symbolizes a female that breaks the boundaries of stereotype and that relies entirely on itself. Sikander's practice discusses feminism and women and notions of their freedom.

Drawing: Entwined

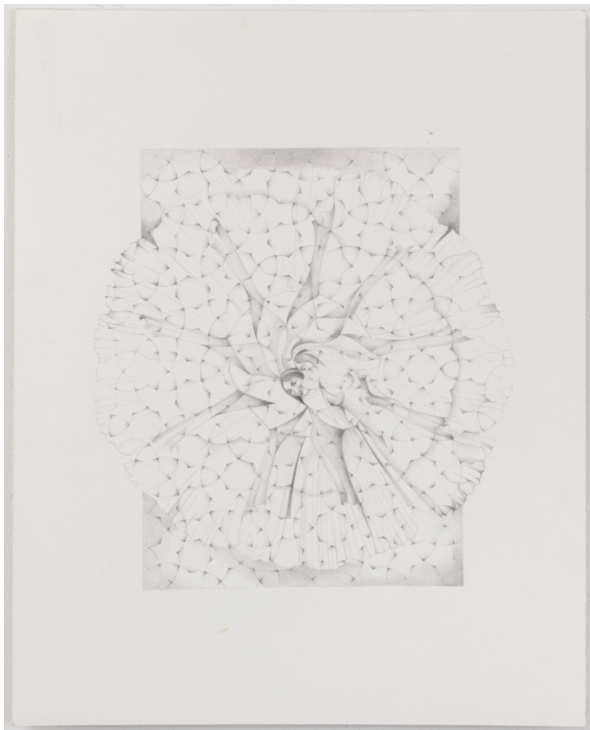
Expanding on the conversation on feminism, women and their diversity, in the drawing *Entwined*, Sikandar portrays a female form with multiple heads. She uses the

female form and its multiple manifestations to symbolize multiplicity in women, particularly intellectual diversity.

Drawing: *Embrace and Inner Circle*

When Sikandar challenges the notions of binaries, she also portrays androgyny and epicene. In this exhibition, both her drawings, *Embrace* and *Inner Circle*, depict interweaved female forms symbolizing androgyny as well as intelligence and optimism. These drawings are a reminder of queer history in Indian miniature.

These drawings have been created using graphite and have exceptional detail. In both drawings, the female forms are made visible using a geometric pattern. The pattern is mind-boggling and amazes the viewer with its delicacy and intelligence. In *Embrace* 2020, Sikander depicts two entangled female forms with fine details, including gestures, minutiae of hands, fingers and nails.



Inner Circle, 2020
Graphite on paper
17 x 13 inches



Embrace, 2020
Graphite on paper
17 x 11 inches

This drawing has a clear use of two types of stars: The Star of David and the five-pointed Islamic star. It allows viewers to see the image from both a political as well as a cultural perspective.

Paintings: *Kinship, Constitutions of the Globe, X, and In sand lay Rustum by his son*

Sikander extends her ideas of tensions between power and powerlessness in 'Kinship'. She depicts two protagonists whose gender is not disclosed. These forms are horizontally layered on top of each other, exposing a large human torso. These two forms could be life and death and are shown in a kind of tension.

Sikander uses text as an integral part of her practice. She also uses iconography and archetypal forms as a language, where she reorganizes these forms to come up with new meanings. In this exhibition, Sikander presented several works that were created with text as an integral element. She uses text to depict the relationship between the languages Urdu and English. The use of Urdu and English text takes one to the histories of colonialism. Colonialism has left behind a tension between these languages and has associated their use with a sense of superiority and inferiority, where the use of English is associated with superiority, and the use of Urdu is associated with inferiority. These languages are also associated with the notion of foreign and native, where the use of the foreign English language represents superiority. In 'Constitutions of the Globe', Sikander has used Urdu text with other iconographic forms that collectively emerge as a poppy flower.



Details of Constitutions of the Globe, 2019 - 20
Gouache, gold leaf and ink on paper
7.6 x 5 Feet

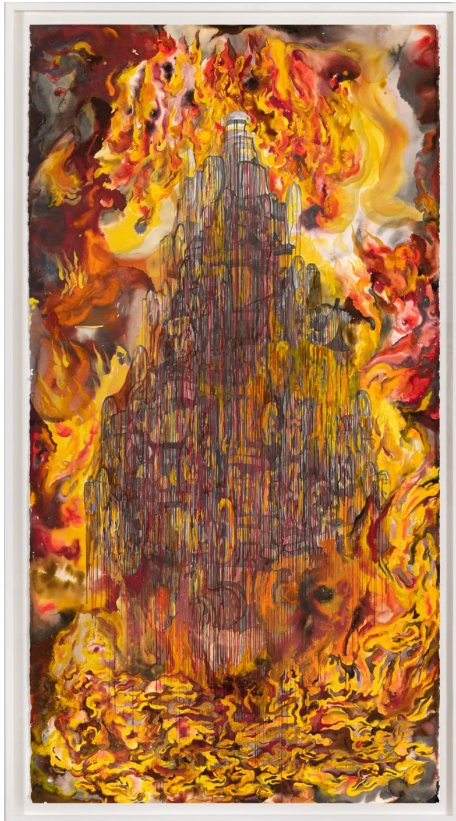
In Sikander's work, where other iconographic and archetypal forms have been used, a poppy flower is a form that has been used repetitively as a symbol of extractive capitalism. The text in Sikander's work, particularly in the artwork 'X', is taken from poems of Ghalib – a well-known poet of the Indian subcontinent as well as the larger East. She used Ghalib's poetry in Urdu as well as English in equal proportion to create an image that has the form 'X'. This X has numerous connotations – it can be: the centre of this exhibition, the centre of American Art that is the artist herself, the X chromosome, representation of the tension between the languages Urdu and English, representation of the tension between East and West or simply a crossing over of cultures East and West.

In the work 'In sand lay Rustum by his son' the text is very dense, repetitive and has been layered. According to the artist, the accumulation of text is meant to reflect a sense of loss, whereas layers symbolize history. In it, she references the mythic Persian tale of *Rustam and Sohrab*. This tale is written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi and is about a father who kills his son. This work points to violence in histories, cultures and societies. The dripping of red ink and the dense text plays a powerful role in the

making of the X – the central figure of the artwork. It seems that X is a chromosome representing the link between Rustam and Sohrab and symbolizes the inherent nature of violence. The circular form could be a shield used in battles as part of the armour.

Drawings: Flared, Shroud, Oil and Poppies and Sub Blues

Where Sikander uses text as a decisive element in her works, she also expands her viewer's visual vocabulary by presenting new iconography. Sikander's use of iconography is not just unique but also very powerful and convincing.



The four drawings 'Flared', 'Shroud', 'Oil and Poppies' and 'Sub Blues' have been created using an oil rig as an icon of extractive capitalism. The oil rig is also called a Christmas Tree. The drawings have the form of a Christmas tree in their centre surrounded by elements such as fire, birds, smoke, poppy flowers and clouds using specific vibrant colours such as yellow-orange, green, red and blue. The first drawing, 'Flared' that portrays fire is a potent reminder of the Australian Bush fires. Also, the oil rig directs attention towards petroleum resources, their consumption, regulation and transportation and has been the reason behind many oil wars, such as the US intervention in Afghanistan.

Image on the left
Flared, 2020
Gouache and ink on paper
8.1 x 4.2 Feet

Other symbols such as poppy flowers have also been used with oil rigs to highlight the histories of opium extraction back in the days of the East India Company and Britain's wars with China over opium. The titles of the above three drawings are self-explanatory. For instance, the title 'Sub Blues' suggests sadness and melancholy.



Shroud, 2020
Gouache and ink on paper
8.1 x 4.2 Feet



Oil and Poppies, 2019-20
Gouache and ink on paper
8.1 x 4.2 Feet



Sub Blues, 2019-20
Gouache and ink on paper
8.1 x 4.2 Feet

Sikander's exhibition is a reflection on global feminism, capital modes of production and transnational histories. In this context, the ideas of binary and dichotomy are metaphorical. She highlights social issues and does psychoanalysis of them.

That leads to more significant contemporary debates on feminism & gender inequality and institutionalized racism & capitalism. Sikander's works, such as the multi-headed female and the winged female forms, represent intellectual diversity, female proactiveness and independence. Her artworks also speak about hyphenated identities, for example, Pakistani-American and the challenges these identities face as tensions between migrants & citizens and Americans & outsiders. Additionally, in her works, she articulates tensions and power dynamics between languages Urdu and English perceived as binaries in postcolonial societies.

This exhibition is a proposal of a different present and a different future and it discards binaries and dichotomies. It also urges to rethink global histories and shared experiences.

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