



Shahzia Sikander: Parallax

Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio, TX

REVIEWS

Artist Shahzia Sikander is known for her specialization in Indian and Persian miniature painting, a technique she has relativized in her multifaceted practice. Her recent work *Parallax*, an energetic three-channel panoramic video installation exhibited at the Linda Pace Foundation [October 8, 2014–March 7, 2015], is a swarm of color and form inspired by the fraught political climate of the Strait of Hormuz, an elbow of water that connects the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Commissioned by the Sharjah Biennial in 2013, the work was conceived within the exhibition's stated mission to catalyze collaboration and experimentation in the Middle East and beyond. Looking at the region as a nexus of conflict, where tensions over the control of natural resources, maritime trade, and access to the Persian Gulf have played out over centuries, *Parallax* engages multiple symbolic landscapes to create a fantastical portrait related to the Strait of Hormuz. As the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean, the strait borders Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Musandam (an enclave of Oman), and it has 35% of the world's petroleum shipped through it every year.

When Sikander began researching the work, she spent a few weeks driving from the Strait of Hormuz to Ras al-Khaimah and to the tip of Dibba al-Fujairah, exploring the roles that water, sand, and oil play in the area. Sikander appropriated regional maps and used her own films, photographs, and sketches from her drives to create drawings that would serve as the basis for her video. *Parallax* follows from her previous work in that it animates hundreds of Indo-Persian miniatures, which spill out before the viewer in chapters. Sikander scanned, then enlarged her small paintings for the video, making

visible previously imperceptible details in the images. These shifts in magnitude—which result in hazy, digital mirages—remind the viewer that a magnifying glass is necessary if we are to truly perceive the historical and actual complexities feeding conflicts in the region in question. Turning to the arbitrary boundaries held over from times of colonial rule, Sikander incorporates aerial views painted from 17th- and 18th-century maps of the area with an interpretative freedom that reflects an equally flexible attitude toward the permeability of boundaries and their capacity to be blurred.

Like Sikander's stricter miniatures from the 1990s, and her digital animation work *SpiNN* (2003), *Parallax* reflects the artist's fascination with the hairstyle typical of the Gopi women, worshippers of the Hindu god Krishna. Here, these distinctive, organically shaped coifs are divorced from the body and suspended in space, where they float, swirl, and morph into birds in flight, joined by leaves blowing in the wind and thick oil spilling into the frame. Similar disembodiment features prominently throughout the video: in one scene, limbs float through space like the hands of a clock; in another, a body and skeleton overlap and slowly drift apart—perhaps a symbol of the very real fragmentation of the territories and peoples the work seeks to address, or indeed of a collective human struggle for unity. The work concludes with the Gopi hairstyle shapes swirling together into six spherical variations before fading out.

Another form that Sikander employs repeatedly is something she has referred to in an interview as the "Christmas Tree": the form of a multivalve oil well she appropriated from an image found in a 1960s petroleum magazine. Sikander's Christmas Trees are draped in chains, drip with oil, and, in *Parallax*, eventually fracture into space. Their particular shattering might suggest that the "gift" of liquid gold, now synonymous with global conflict, is neither divorceable from its discordant past, nor by any means eternal.

—Rachel Adams

ABOVE: Shahzia Sikander, *Parallax*, 2013, three-channel HD animation, 15:30 minutes
[courtesy of the Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio, TX]