

Shahzia Sikander

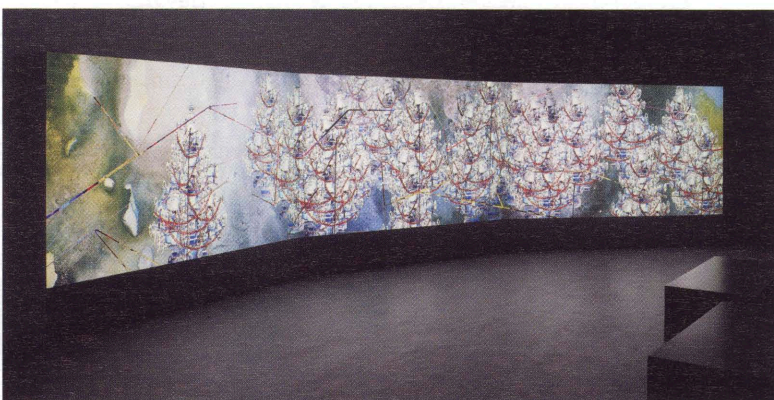
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WITH HER LARGE paper drawings, Sikander stretches our understanding of calligraphy as a form of text, indicating the force of discursive institutional authority. Her calligraphic experimentation both affirms the persistence of the text-based past and abstracts it, fissuring and opening it to an ongoing dialogue with more globalized artistic vocabularies. Steering free of illustration and narrative, Sikander also celebrates the exquisite refinement of Arabic script. In foregrounding the sensuality

the garden.” Also thematically difficult but ornate in its design is *Punctuation*, 2013, where the cryptic small shapes are human body parts, singled out from their original Mughal designs and repeated ad infinitum. There are thousands of beards and ponytails condensed in a glowing mirage but also severed arms knotted in a fight.

Sikander pursues her systematic deconstruction of the miniature and her interest in mobility in the digital animation *Parallax*, 2013. Here, Sikander returns to ideas of defense and control



of Arabic calligraphy, she makes its aesthetic permeable to the outside, disrupting any straightforward binary homology between art and national identity.

In a drawing entitled *Dissemination*, 2013, Sikander denies theoretical closure. The scripted message is interrupted by a riotous swirl of graphic connotations. No information rises above the surrounding ocean of visual noise, as the delicate laces of Arabic script are displaced by a series of elegant cypresses and four spiraling staircases. Upon closer inspection, the cypresses, sacred to Persian poets and calligraphers, remind one of atomic mushrooms and hint at an imploding world. But Sikander deflects political allusions—including Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions and the country’s arms dealing with the U.S.—and instead quotes a verse by the Urdu poet Khalid: “The cypress despite its freedom is held captive in

by focusing on the Strait of Hormuz, the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the ocean. While viewing the 3-channel video, we are assailed by myriad moving shapes—those familiar beards and ponytails—and the constant murmuring of overlapping voices. The strait shrinks and expands before our eyes, suggesting the perpetual bleeding of history with its conflicts and conquests. A nervous narrative is created, dispelled and contracted by swaths of noise and ever-condensing fields of color. Sikander would rather attract the viewer with the calligraphic figure than with language and writing, in keeping with an ancient Persian saying that calligraphy “is the tongue of the hand.” Moving between drawing and animation, her exquisite patterns jolt our eye across vertiginous landscapes on the brink of a collapsing world.

—Emilia Terracciano

FROM LEFT: JOS DE GRUYTER & HARALD THYS, GALERIE ISABELLA BORTOLOZZI, BERLIN, AND M HKA; ANDY KEATE, SHAHZIA SIKANDER, AND PILAR CORRIAS