

SHAHZIA BERBER SIKANDER

SHAHZIA SIKANDER was selected for the prestigious Bellagio Creative Arts Fellowship in the program's first year, 2009. She was one of three artists chosen through nominations from an international panel of curators and arts professionals. During her residency, Shahzia's main project was the concept and studies for an animation, "The Last Post."

In the first few seconds of Shahzia Sikander's animated film 'The Last Post' 2010 we can clearly identify the artist's background as a student of miniature painting at the famous National College of Arts in Lahore. Filmed as an animation, we first see a beautifully executed image of a decorated architectural façade containing a profile half portrait of what appears to be a portly British military figure decked out in a uniform that dates him to a few centuries past. The British (as opposed to Pakistani or Indian) heritage of the figure, as well as, of course, the choice of computer aided animation, is a clue that we are not retracing the familiar ground of tradition. Seconds later any hesitation about the experimental nature of her approach is dissolved as Sikander's film evolves into a complex layering of image and shifting ground changing rapidly to the accompaniment of a sound track that mixes human voice, techno, and chanting that remains as unfixed as the visual terrain. Our swaggering military man is released from the Mughal architecture that contained him and seen in full figure against an inky washed terrain—the blues, browns and grays of which resemble a vast map or aerial view of the world. Attributes of his British military context appear as floating motifs—for example a tuba perhaps released from the military band—but any semblance of a narrative is soon lost in the ever changing and mutating forms.

Sikander's animation incorporates not only references to traditional Indian or Pakistani motifs—a series of disembodied arms rotate in a spiral reminiscent of Kali's many limbs and a round monk character makes various appearances—but there are also similarities to the work of contemporary western artists. The translucent layering of her technique recalls the washed-out over printing of Sigmar Polke and his various sources or quotations in pattern and image are not dissimilar to Sikander's own diverse source of imagery and technique. Sikander's use of the silhouette draws comparison with the work of Kara Walker with whom she also shares an interest in a politically charged revisionist view of historical and popular art forms and their charged context or associations. Both artists use the disturbing device of bodies and image disintegrating on screen as elements of their forms begin to dissemble. Walker's technique is traditional stop motion animation, however, unlike the more complex arrangements achieved through Sikander's use of computerized technology. As with many of Sikander's references, however, there are multiple potential sources and her use of silhouette could equally derive from traditional eastern puppetry or the flat profile technique of miniature painting.

At times, Sikander's framing of scenes in 'The Last Post' gives the impression of looking into a miniature stage set, either the paper and card construction of a child or a model design for a production yet to be built. This impression of looking into a scaled down scene that has been constructed to hold our focused attention brings one back to the origins of the artist's work in miniature painting and, with that, the capacity to contain within one small 'window' a myriad of references, potential narratives, detail and design. In a logical development, Sikander has transferred the intensity of the 'world within a world' of miniature painting to the normally diffuse moving image screen and the results are quite unexpected.



Jessica Morgan, *The Daskalopoulos Curator, International Art / Tate Modern*