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Shahzia Sikander with Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Thoughts on being an “American” artist and queer theory



Shahzia Sikander, *Promiscuous Intimacies*, 2020, Patinated Bronze. Courtesy the artist.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel: When discussing your retrospective a few years back, you mentioned that you’d enjoy having one at the Whitney Museum of American art because it would mean you would be seen as “American.” I was taken aback, but in a good way—becoming American was like a Spivakian strategic essentialist act. Tell me more about your thinking.

Shahzia Sikander: It was a tongue-in-cheek response to the ‘othering’ of Asian American Art. I have been working in the US, in conversation with the communities I have been part of since 1993. Being Asian-American—or Asian-anything—in the West often means living the paradox of being invisible while standing out. (See my Op-Ed in the *New York Times*.) Because my work engages with traditions that do not sit at the center of Western art history, it would often be glossed over and interpreted very narrowly in terms of my biography. My work was seen through the lens of a Pakistani, a female, a Muslim female, and an Asian first. Such opaque and broad projection emphasized my work as that of the “other.” All of these adjectives can describe my work, but when I create contemporary miniatures in which women resist simplistic categorizations, I am responding to the difficulty of finding feminist representations of brown South Asians in America as well.

Patel: From another point of view, it has taken more than two decades for your work to be seen through a queer frame. What about queer theory appeals to you?

Sikander: Apart from countering dominant binaries in art history and patriarchy through my practice by cultivating intersectional lines of inquiry, I’ve long mulled over the eroticism inherent in the interdisciplinary arts of the Sub-continent. Eroticism is sacred, and spiritual and can be read as androgynous, genderless, and non-binary. Queer theory is the first-ever lens and critique of my work to clearly articulate such fluid categories the works enable and thrive upon.

Contributors

Shahzia Sikander

Shahzia Sikander is a Pakistani-American visual artist, a MacArthur fellow and pioneer of Neo-Miniature.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Alpesh Kantilal Patel is associate professor of contemporary art at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University. His art historical scholarship, curation and criticism reflect his queer, anti-racist, and transnational approach to contemporary art.





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