NEMESIS: A DIALOGUE with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry

Nemesis is taken from one of Shahzia Sikander's recent animated works of the same name. As the work unfolds, an elephant is built through the slow accretion of a cornucopia of smaller animals. The collaged, hybrid beast wrestles with a devil character, and is eventually destroyed in the fight. In the wake of the destruction caused by the insistent "nemesis," we are reminded that the word is also the name of the Greek goddess of divine retribution. Indian gods, like Greek gods, are often capable of enacting severe punishments on their subjects even if they are generally thought of as good. Sikander's works often highlight this dark side. And in these times of political polarity, we are often forced to think in terms of friend versus foe.

IB: You began your interrogation of miniature painting in the late 1980s in Pakistan at the National College of Art in Lahore. What was your initial interest in working this way?

SS: I elected to work in the miniature format in 1988 during my second semester of foundation year at school. The choice itself was an act of defiance. At that time, there was no interest in the miniature painting department

IB: Your paintings are often described as disturbing the "purity" of this traditional form.

SS: The notion of purity is interesting, because it isn't found in the practice of historical or contemporary miniature painting. It has nothing to do with purity. It has a lot to do with appropriation. Within the current practice, there is a lot of blurring in terms of what gets appropriated from older sources. What makes a work more original is always interesting, because the whole notion of copying is heavily embedded in the tradition. I was interested in practice and application both formally and conceptually. Initially the visual references for me were images found in books and exhibition catalogues printed by Western institutions. I was invested in an objective approach from the start, and I was never seduced by the romanticism of the miniature. It started by my finding ways of stepping outside the tradition in order to create a dialogue with it.

IB: Even though your work was a confrontational break with an expected form, it was received with great success in Pakistan, and it has had a lasting impact on artists there.

SS: Yes, I received a great deal of success in 1991-92 before I decided to come to the United States. I was the first to create visibility for the genre locally as well as internationally later on. Pakistan in the 1980s was very restrictive and in that context, the National College of Arts was a haven for free thinking and expression. It was a great place to be amidst the rest of Lahore and Zia's military regime. Military presence has a way of prevailing, and either you respond in ways that are reactive or that become subversive. It is only with distance that my responses have become clear - I was barely 17 at that time. The conventional approaches in the painting department pushed me towards miniature painting because no one else was interested in it. Its social context was so intriguing. It supposedly represented our heritage to us, yet we reacted to it with suspicion and ridicule. I had grown up thinking of it as kitsch. My limited exposure was primarily through work produced for tourist
consumption.

I found, and still find, the presentation and documentation of miniature painting to be very problematic. In fact, by its very nature of the term miniature is laden with issues of imperialism, and is usually followed by a very descriptive, almost ethnographic definition. At this time I also started to explore language in relation to the formal symbols of mathematics and logic. This is a big part of my most recent drawing series: 51 Ways of Looking. All this started to resonate with post-culturist theories, and I used that new information towards deconstructing the miniature.

IB: Can you talk more about deconstruction as a conceptual premise for your work?

SS: It is a given that nothing is whole. Everything has a contradiction embedded within it. Thus the notion of purity that is associated with the older painting is something to be questioned. Deconstruction involves demonstration of that issue. It is not the act of dismantling but recognition of the fact that inherently nothing is solid or pure. I read French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and was influenced by his suggestion of binary oppositions as creators of hierarchy. I saw my work in connection to notions like west/east, white/black, white/brown, modern/tradition, presence/absence, beginning/end, and conscious/unconscious. My desire to question established hierarchies, such as purity and authenticity, was informed by applying the logic of deconstruction.

IB: How did Feminist theory enter your thinking at this time?

SS: I was interested in understanding feminism's different brands and roles across the globe, especially as it related to my experience in
Pakistan. I was first introduced to these ideas in graduate school from writers like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helene Cixous. Equally important was reading Edward Said on one hand and Michel Foucault on the other.

The question that came to mind was always about the discourse outside the canon. What is cultural imperialism? What is essentialism? What was the representation of the other? Could representation exist outside of the binary oppositions? What could be the third space, the in-between space? I was intrigued by the concept of role reversal, especially the distance that it could afford me as an artist. Finding myself immersed in the early 1990s politics of identity, I started experimenting with the semiotic nature of various symbols that could question stereotypes of certain feminine representations, such as hairstyle, and costume as in the sari, shalwar kameez, and chador. I began to see my identity as being fluid, something in flux.

IB: Did that notion of flux gain focus when you moved to New York City? Does living in New York feel more like home to you than Lahore?

SS: Absolutely, it always has. It felt that way when I first got here. New York is essential for me. It provides me with the local and global experience simultaneously, around the clock. Its energy is infectious and productive for me. I never wanted to live in two worlds mentally, but it has been a slow process to get there. Only now, in the second decade of being in the United States, do I feel the separation much more deeply. There is less desire to have approval, so to speak, from Pakistan and I
am hopefully seen less as solely an "artist from Pakistan." The first serious introduction of my work was in 1997 at the Drawing Center and the Whitney Biennial. I was exploring experimental drawing while trying hard not to be ghettoized as a South Asian/Muslim/Pakistani/woman artist.

However, I think what followed from 1997-2001, was exotification of some type. Most of the readings of my work focused on cultural definitions rather than the work itself. I became the spectacle in many reviews - it didn't help to have exaggerated information like making my own brushes, pigments, and paper floating around. I can clarify something here once and for all - I don't make my brushes or my pigments! I make my ideas and I try to express them in as many ways as possible. At that time I was driven by sharing as much as possible, perhaps in an attempt to shrink gaps of knowledge. But filling in the gaps doesn't necessarily change the assumptions people already are bringing to the equation.

IB: Did you make any work at this time that spoke directly about identity?

SS: I made a few works that specifically addressed the notion of identity as being fluid and unfixed, primarily in response to the rigid categories I found my work and myself being placed in or put in. Identity became theatrical, malleable through conditions such as production, location, duration, conventions of staging, reception of audience, the construction of the audience as well as the substance of the performance itself, including body language, gesture etc. In one I dressed in braids and aggressive clothing and mapped my movements around an airport, observing how people react when there is a visual encounter that looks familiar and is not. In another, I wore a costume that disguised my body thus made me transparent at times. The work got read as a plea for liberation for women who are subjected to wearing veils. I am amazed even now how limited people's understanding is. Pakistan is not Iran and Iran is not Lebanon and Lebanon is not Saudi Arabia. My being from a so-called "Muslim" country often became my primary categorization.
Unfortunately it still persists.

IB: So you are pleased when viewers create distance from your story and find their own narratives in your work?

SS: Well, there is no particular narrative in my work. There is definitely not "my story" in an autobiographical sense. My lived experiences are at times conducted as experiments to gather material that becomes fodder for work. The impulse is very different in such a context. The feedback also informs the process. I often see myself as a cultural anthropologist. I find open-ended encounters and narratives compelling and perhaps seek to express that more than anything else. Symbols, icons, and images are not automatically about one thing or one way of reading. A crucial reading for me has been the underlying exploration of beauty. The average response to my work usually includes 'beautiful.' For me, issues of aesthetics are always in flux in context to the genre of miniature. Its transformation from thing like kitsch to beautiful, low to high, craft to art, regional to international, artisan to artist, group to individual. These are interesting ideas for me. I am always exploring questions such as: does beauty move towards formalism? Is beauty trivial? When does it become perverse?

IB: Can you describe how your notion of flux relates to the text that has appeared in your work?

SS: The usage of text is very similar. For example, Writing the Written is about memory and the ability to read several languages, especially languages that come from the Arabic script. I can read them fluently, but I don't understand them. It is a very ritualistic tradition that I come from where reading the Koran was one of the many things we did, but we were reading without any understanding. This work is prompted by memories of that experience. I am interested in looking at language verses its usage and meaning - recitation of the

Koran as opposed to reading it. Issues of translation and mistranslation are very important in my work. Language is as fluid and chaotic as image.

IB: This notion of fluidity is put into physical use in your studio when you layer images on top of one another, constantly moving things around. The formal properties of layering are a perfect match for all the conceptual ideas you speak about - whether you are layering washes of paint, tissue paper...

SS: ...or the layers of animation.

IB: That is your medium, layering.

SS: Yes, layering is the medium because with every addition it alters perception, every time the process provides another way to look at the same thing. Although the many layers we are addressing here are not just process related. Conceptual layering is always the focus. It becomes a means of trapping all my various issues and ideas. It also can help strip away the baggage surrounding the work.

IB: You made your first wall installation in 1997?

SS: Right, it happened in Texas when I was in residence at the Core program in Houston. It was in response to my environment. I selected one image from my vocabulary of forms and shifted the scale from 10 inches to 10 feet to mimic "big is better," but also to see what would happen to the image itself: would it become more confrontational? more noticeable? more painterly? more precise? more stylized? less exotic? more accessible? less feminine? more macho? more minimal, more economical, less precious? and so forth... I was also trying to figure out a way to navigate spatial constructs.

IB: Is it the same kind of spatial thinking when you are inside a miniature? You don't paint as many literal architectures as you did earlier, but is there any similarity between managing that artistic space and managing actual museum spaces?

SS: I think there is, because the space of the miniature painting is big in concept, even though it may be less heroic than putting paint on stretched canvas. Both spaces remain very architectural in that there remains a lot of symmetry, perspective, attention to surface, texture, light, etc.

The installations are entirely ephemeral. They are time based and created completely on site; therefore I always take into consideration the space. Such an evolving process has a parallel to miniature paintings, which are layered and change over a period of time. I always have a plan before hand and the challenge for me is to be resilient, to make decisions which are spontaneous and risky.

The installations provide an opportunity to be free of the miniature's spatial constraints. The picture plane is entirely about 'looking in' to a world as opposed to 'looking at' an image. The tissue installations can span up to 20 feet high and even more in length, and up to 8 feet in depth from the wall, and at no point is the work entirely visible. The imagery unfolds as one walks in and around the piece.

IB: Animation is a recent addition to your work. What does it offer that is different from drawing, painting, and installation?

SS: Digital process is yet another way for me to explore both formal and subjective issues within the tight parameters of the miniature. Combining a non-traditional medium with a traditional genre allows me to build a relationship between present and past, space and dimension, narrative and time all in service of destabilization. In a miniature a slower more controlled pace is in operation. It is clearly a series of steps - step one leads to step two which eventually leads to step ten, allowing for the build-up of form, content, structure and materials. The process of creation hence has a heirarchy surrounding the investment of labor, which may not necessarily be true of a digital process, where there is no particular heirarchy.

Using digital technology for me is not very different from how I have worked in the past. I have always been inspired by information and images from a range of sources (whether art historical or personal) and played it out through layers in my miniatures and murals. The shift is purposefully subtle, not challenging or confrontational and technology is not instant, it is controlled. I am less interested in direct illustration, because I find open ended, timeless narratives more compelling.

IB: Gopi Crisis, and several works after that including SpiNN feature swarms of bodiless figures piled together like an army marching together or maybe a population which has died and vanished. How do the gopis function for you?

SS: Gopis are the lovers of the blue god Krishna in Hindu mythology. Their primary reason for existence tends to be to worship him. Using the gopi over the last several years has lead me to see it in a variety of ways one being to use humor to address gender and power hierarchies. In this case I am focusing on the gopi as a formal device for abstraction. The multiplicity of the gopis symbolizes women's view of their own spirituality as opposed to the male dominated view. Despite being marginalized, women have found ways to create their own spiritual space the archetype of the Great Mother is an example of this.

If the layers are read like part of a language, strains of myths can be knit together from them and familiar fables can be conjured, albeit in incomplete or abbreviated forms. Blind Justice is blinder with her vision intact, or are the gopis who lacking Krishna's guidance are truly lost? SpiNN takes imagery that forces simplified understandings of global multiculturalism to be challenged through a vocabulary that is as vague as it is specific. The notion is that a foreign image, technique, or style is creating a counter exoticism full of mutual intrusions. The title SpiNN also alludes to powerful mass-media corporations and to the ways in which core information about a subject is often hidden behind layers of perception that can suggest multiple meanings. Perception is shaped and altered on a daily basis, and information is spun to show us what we want.

IB: Can you describe your recent series entitled, Land-Escapes? They seem like a break from your previous way of painting.

SS: The Land-escape images are derived from details found within a few selected schools of Persian and Indian miniatures. The often-obscure elements of landscape are brought to the forefront by shifting the scale and removing all other figurative information. The drawings are then scanned into digital files to further eliminate the hand drawn element. Although the work is inspired by a range of painting schools of both Hindu and Muslim cultures, they have been simplified and stylized to become non-nostalgic and stripped down of any type of sentiment. They are whimsical and buoyant and are intended to transport the viewer into

imaginary worlds.

IB: Would you describe these works as a single layer of information as opposed to the many physical layers found in your installations and miniatures?

SS: The layering process is in reverse in this body of work. Instead of developing layer after layer of information, I am using subtractive labor in an attempt to create a space devoid of any recollection. Whereas miniatures tend to deal with intimacy, these works are much more open in their depiction of space.

IB: Do you think the contemporary art world's focus on cultural and personal identity has lessened over the past decade?

SS: I think there was a greater focus on identity in the 1990s and it is a very different moment now. I was from another country, and people's understanding of who I was or what my work dealt with needed to be partly culturally specific. Because of this, identity issues were a natural point of discussion, but I was acutely aware that I didn't want to get stuck in any one category.

My works are a combination of overlapping commentaries on lived experiences, art history and pop culture. When art is used as a tool for transgression, it can become material for questioning more than mere contemplation. Art for me is mostly experience; it is not necessarily about politics, feminism or religion. I think that boundaries do exist, be they physical, emotional, geographical, cultural or psychological. My role as an artist is not about being political, but to point at the shifting nature of such boundaries.

IB: How would you describe the war images that appear in some of your recent work? Are they a reflection of what we are living through now?

SS: I think they are a reflection with what is happening around the world. My work has always been in response to my lived experience, providing me with a space of concern, or a space of expression. I search for loaded images. I am interested in the duality of things and I find that when I move back and forth between New York and Lahore, the perspective shifts. When you have the liberty of having distance from a situation, you become more objective and perhaps can engage in a more meaningful dialogue. I try to engage with very specific issues that may resonate with others, and thus exist in our larger social consciousness, without suggesting answers. I am never interested in providing a conclusion.