Project Gallery: Shahzia Sikander
May 22–September 14, 2014
Shahzia Sikander
b. 1969, Lahore, Pakistan; lives in New York
The Last Post, 2010
Color HD video animation, with 5.1 surround sound, 10 min.
Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio
The East India Company had a lasting impact on strategies of corporate operations and commercial activities. In recent books on the history of the company, Nick Robins claims that “just as the East India Company monopolized the textile production of India to force down prices and exert greater control, so many of today’s major commodity chains have become highly concentrated, generating powerful downward pressure on the price of goods exported by developing countries.” The legacy of the colonial economy is still very much alive today, as corporate monopolies and terms of production operate under some of the same entrenched mechanisms that characterized Europe and Asia in the 17th century. The Last Post refers to this period not only to subvert the historical implications of the East India Company, but also to challenge the very economic and commercial pillars that uphold modern corporate practice.

The Last Post features a soundtrack composed by De’Vron. The music combines many different sonic traditions, from the baga (a traditional instrument associated with the British army) to a womanly voice singing softly and Buddhist chants. Instruments feature in the visual repertoire of this video, as exemplified in one scene in which a French horn appears and spits atop much higher pitched notes of bugles. Spinningfragmented arrows and a human body explode over the course of the video, suggesting the violence and rupture inherent in colonial activity. The last scene completes a dark graphic image depicting an officer with a tuba that morphs into a pipe, alluding to the sinister trade routes that continue to transport valued items.

The East India Company’s trade circulation primarily occurred via waterways and, as such, the aquatic routes by which both humans and objects were transported became deeply connected to the history of colonial dominance. Through her process-based work, Sikander continues to examine the contemporary implications of these colonial legacies and the forces at stake in their continued cultural and political residues.