



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

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Project Gallery

Shahzia Sikander

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English

The Last Post

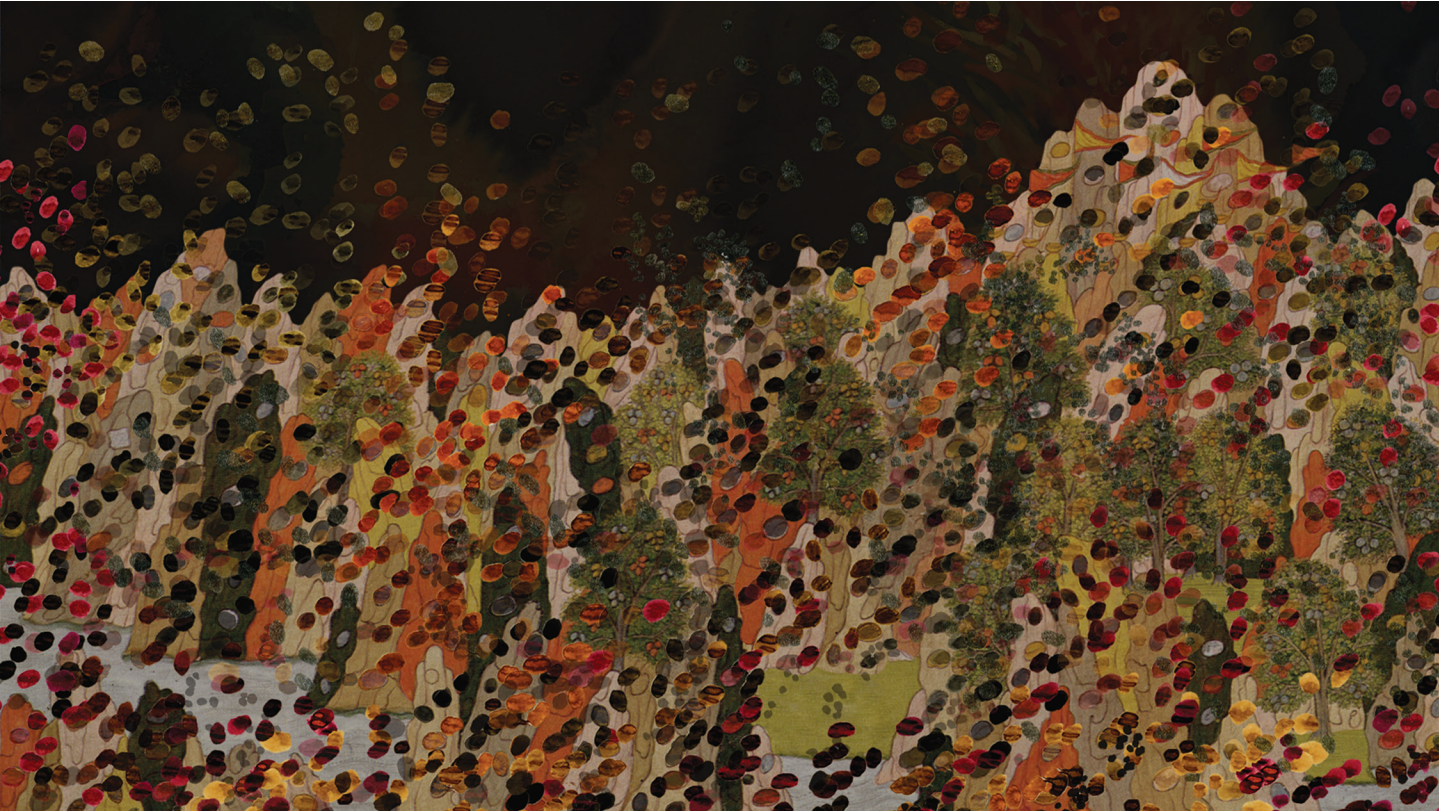
Shahzia Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010) is a digital animation made from a series of drawings. Drawing is at the heart of Sikander's practice, as she was trained in miniature painting—rooted in the 16th- and 17th- century Indo-Persian practice—at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan. There, she challenged the language and format of miniature painting by playing with methods of layering in her drawings and by manipulating scale. Cultural critic Homi Bhabha writes, “Sikander transforms this conventional ‘scale’ of the miniature-image in her work—paintings, installations, animations—by shifting the balance of the picture-plane to allow one to ‘look into’ a world as opposed to ‘looking at’ an image.”¹ In 2001, during a residency at ArtPace in San Antonio, Sikander began working in digital animation, and in 2005 she created the video *Dissonance to Detour*, which was exhibited at the Miami Art Museum the following year. *The Last Post* is her first video made in high-definition. Sikander seeks formal elements with transformative potential in order to alter or cultivate new associations for trenchant symbols and motifs from her own surroundings or historical sources. Of the process of working digitally, she has said, “Layering works as a strategy to juxtapose overlaps of culture, politics, art history, and commentary culled from newspapers, journals, and media.”²

The Last Post deals with the history of colonial struggle and international trade in India. The animation takes as its subject an “exploding” East India Company man, a riff on the figures of authority associated with the British trading company of the 17th through 19th centuries. Clad in the traditional red coattails, shoes, hat, and other accoutrements associated with such a figure, the man's facial features are indiscernible. He first appears ensconced in a court theater apparatus, looking out of an opening in the structure. This visual language, culled from courtly portraits of the 18th and 19th centuries, is explicitly addressed in miniature painting. Other natural and built

landscapes appear, disappear, and fracture over the course of the video, while at other times a rich expanse of gouache drawing creates a panorama of ink and pigment.

The work's iconography—including rich architectural details and depictions of vegetation—alludes to the Company Painting school, a style of painting developed in the 18th century as officials and advisors from Europe hired local artists to depict India's plants, animals, and architecture. In this ethnographic and anthropologically oriented style, portraits of British officers were incorporated into the miniature works. There was a change in subject matter in these miniatures from grand themes to mundane life: inventory functioned as subject while color became subdued and drawing paramount. One scene in *The Last Post* includes representational trees interspersed among shapes indicative of vegetation, abstracted and dotted with brush marks. This amalgam of documentary-style drawing, abstraction, text, and color study is a recurring trope in Sikander's work.

The Last Post features a soundtrack composed by Du Yun. The music combines many different sonic variations, from the bugle call historically associated with the British army to a woman's voice singing softly and Buddhist chants. Instruments feature in the visual repertoire of the video, as exemplified in one scene in which a French horn appears and spins atop much fainter depictions of bugles. Spinning fragmented arms and a human body explode over the course of the video, suggesting the violence and rupture inherent in colonial activity. The last scene comprises a dark graphite image depicting an officer with a tuba that morphs into a pipe, alluding to the East India Company's opium trade with China, in which the subcontinent was employed as a critical site in the production and dissemination of the drug.



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The East India Company had a lasting impact on strategies of corporate operations and commercial activities. In a recent book 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 prices of goods exported by developing countries.”³ 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.

In today's era, in which the global transmission of information occurs primarily through digital mediums, the format of *The Last Post* calls into question how images and ideas circulate over time. Curator Hou Hanru writes that the artist's “use of animation, as well as her layered images and the play between representational and abstract forms, visually embodies [her] central concerns of transformation and societies in flux.”⁴ The movement among various sounds and sets of visual information speaks to Sikander's interest in trade routes and the trajectories of objects and information. 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 contested cultural and political histories.

Claire Brandon is a Ph.D. candidate in the history of art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She is currently editing a forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the work of Shahzia Sikander



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Biography

Shahzia Sikander lives and works in New York. She received a BA at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan, in 1991 and an MA from the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, in 1995. Selected solo exhibitions have been presented at the Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden (2014–15); Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio (2012–13); San Francisco Art Institute (2011); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2007); Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia (2006); Miami Art Museum (2005–06); Seattle Art Museum (2003); and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2000). Recent group exhibitions include the Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh (2014); Auckland Triennial, *If you were to live here...* (2013); Istanbul Biennial, *Mom, am I a Barbarian?* (2013); Sharjah Biennial, *Re:emerge: Towards a New Cultural Cartography* (2013); Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (2009); *Compass in Hand: Selections from the Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection*, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (2009); *Not For Sale*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City (2007); and the Venice Biennale (2005). Sikander has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including the US Department of State's Medal of Art, presented by the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton (2012), and a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation “genius award” (2006). Her work is included in many permanent collections, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo; Palazzo Grassi, Venice; Whitney Museum of American Art; MoMA; Devi Art Foundation, Haryana, India; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; MAXXI, the National Museum of 21st-Century Arts, Rome; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Princeton University Art Museum; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

¹ Homi Bhabha, “Beginning Again,” in *Shahzia Sikander* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 37.

² Shahzia Sikander, “The Collaborative Terrain of Drawing and Animation: The Works *The Last Post*, *Pivot*, and *Parallax*,” (lecture, Florida Atlantic University at Boca Raton, April 11, 2014).

³ Nick Robins, *The Corporation that Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 212.

⁴ Hou Hanru and Mary Eilyn Johnson, *Paradigm Shifts: Walter and McBean Galleries, Exhibitions and Public Programs, San Francisco Art Institute, 2006–2011* (San Francisco Art Institute, 2011), 204.

Cover *The Last Post* (detail), 2010. Color HD video animation, with 5.1 surround sound, 10 min. Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio

2–4 *The Last Post*, 2010. Color HD video animation, with 5.1 surround sound, 10 min. Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio