

History, Narrative, and the Female Figure

(as Disruption)

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Shahzia Sikander began studying painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore, working closely with Bashir Ahmad, a master of the art of manuscript illustration. The “miniature,” as the genre he taught is sometimes referred to, places Sikander’s work in a lineage that is at once local and historically grounded. Although once perceived by Euro-American scholars as conventional and repetitive, early modern illustrated manuscripts and drawings—the foundation of Sikander’s practice—are now understood to be a platform for innovation and artistic virtuosity. Her paintings are in fact imbedded within a complex tradition of art-making, with its strategies of allegory, narration, and appropriation. They build on past precedents and are made contemporary through their subject matter and through her rendition, scaled up or down and translated to other media, such as animation. Sikander’s perspective is informed by the social, political, and religious cultures of her home in Lahore, while reflecting her participation in the broader art world of New York, her current residence.

There is never any one inspiration for an artist, and the trajectory of Sikander’s work points to multiple sources—from feminist discourse to Islamic mysticism. This essay considers how her practice engages with previous masters of illustrative manuscript painting in sixteenth-century Lahore and also in the twentieth century. The comparison is not meant to create a teleology for her work but rather to reveal tropes within the genre and explore the manners in which Sikander adapts, expands, and disrupts them. Most significantly, she occupies a space often closed off to women, who, while sometimes patrons or amateur enthusiasts, seldom achieved entry into a profession that was limited to male artists. The term *master* (*ustād*), reserved for her teacher, points to this tension.¹

In the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century *kitābkhāna* (atelier), artists worked from models, either from a manuscript or from albums in which paintings depicting stock figures and characters were collected. In addition to dynastic and imperial chronicles and Sufi hagiographies, the Mughals (r. 1526–1857) commissioned illustrated histories, fables, and poetic anthologies. The texts, as well as the paintings, built upon earlier examples, forming chains of transmission passed down from teachers to students. For artists of this period, individuality was a goal, but only within the parameters of tradition—that is to say, one could claim talent not by being different, but rather by refining the past and being part of a lineage

of great artists. Like poetry, paintings were incorporated into the performative rituals of the court, where the cognoscenti gathered to admire and evaluate the works of art.

Lahore was well known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as one of the capitals of the Mughal Empire, with a magnificent fort, mosques, and gardens. The imperial household included talented scribes, poets, and artists from across India. Among the most well known were Miskin (active ca. 1580–1604) and Basawan (active ca. 1580–1600), both of whom were extolled by



Fig. 01
Miskin (Indian, active ca. 1580–1604)
Bahārīstān (*While Lovers Meet, the Friend Gets Beaten*), 1550–1600
Bodleian Library, Oxford University. Photo
Bodleian Libraries. MS. Elliott 254, fol. 42a

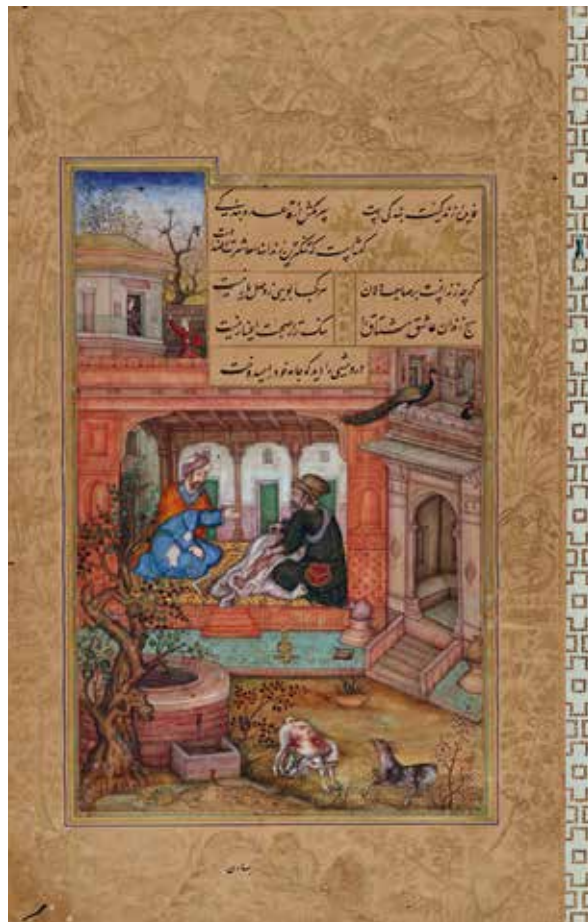


Fig. 02
Basawan (Indian, active ca. 1580–1600)
Baharistan (The Vain Dervish Rebuked),
1550–1600
Bodleian Library, Oxford University. Photo
Bodleian Libraries. MS. Elliott 254, fol. 9a

guises himself in Jayida's clothes to deceive her husband. He unfortunately spills milk and is severely beaten by the husband, although his ruse is maintained, and he is sent away to spend the night with Jayida's sister. The center of the painting shows a tense scene of the furious husband outside the sister's tent, being held back as the friend hides inside, his face partially obscured by a veil. In the background, Ashtar and Jayida sit beneath the protective foliage of a verdant tree. Similarly tranquil scenes fill the foreground; for example, a young shepherd is milking his cow while goats and sheep rest peacefully nearby. Miskin's focus on storytelling is evinced in the manner with which discrete vignettes wind their way across the picture plane, depicting temporal and narrative shifts spatially.

Basawan's painting *The Vain Dervish Rebuked* (fig. 02), also from the *Baharistan*, illustrates the conversation between Abu'l Abbas and a dervish who places more importance on his clothing than on his devotions. The setting replicates the red sandstone architecture of the Lahore fort, with a white marble edifice in the foreground indicating the presence of a holy figure. A pair of goats stand by while their kid suckles, and two peacocks rest on the marble building. The foreground is occupied by a gnarled tree with intertwined branches, while in the background two figures greet each other within a garden setting. The pairings reflect the themes of companionship and dialogue that are at the center of the story.

Basawan utilizes perspective to indicate distance, with shading and modeling giving depth and three-dimensionality to the figures. The sky is rendered in shades of yellow, pink, and blue, echoing the coloration in early modern European paintings. Artists such as Basawan had access to prints and paintings that were gifted to Akbar by European missionaries and visitors to his court. In the *Baharistan* painting, Basawan has merged his training under the master Abd al-Samad, an émigré from Safavid Iran, with the Mughal interest in naturalism and pictorial depth. The result is a unique and captivating image that succeeds in working within conventional topoi even as it transforms them through contact with other forms of visuality. The painting reveals the dynamism of Mughal art at the end of the sixteenth century, enlivened by the presence of diverse artists and a multitude of inspirations—from Hindu religious iconography to Christian biblical images—by way of the long Persianate tradition of manuscript painting.

court historians and commissioned to illustrate deluxe imperial manuscripts. Signed paintings by them reveal distinct styles in composition and coloration, as well as—in the case of Basawan—a focus on portraiture. Representative paintings of both artists can be found in an illustrated manuscript of *Baharistan* (Spring Garden), which was compiled in the Lahore kitābkhāna in the years 1550 to 1600. Written by the fifteenth-century poet and mystic Jami, the text comprises short didactic stories that serve as allegories of wisdom and spiritual fulfillment.

Jami's works were popular in the Mughal ateliers, and the illustrations of the *Baharistan* were delegated to the most elite artists of Emperor Akbar's court. Miskin's painting *While Lovers Meet, the Friend Gets Beaten* (fig. 01) is a story of friendship and devotion. The lovers Ashtar and Jayida secretly meet, while Ashtar's friend dis-

Jump ahead three hundred years to a Lahore under the British Empire, colonized and yet distinct in its identity as one of the centers of artistic production. The Mayo School of Industrial Art was established in 1875, named after the Viceroy of India, Lord Mayo. Perhaps the most well known of its students was Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1894–1975), a Lahore native descended from a family of craftsmen and calligraphers.² Chughtai's paintings and etchings speak to his multiple identities, loyalties, and experiences during the intense historic period that saw the collapse of British power in South Asia, the 1947 partition of India into separate Muslim and Hindu states, and the first three decades of Pakistani nationhood.

Chughtai came of age at a time when ethnic and religious identities were significant. Although he painted Hindu and Buddhist subjects, it was Islamic history, especially of the Mughal dynasty, and popular Punjabi tales that inspired many of his works. He was also drawn to Persian and Urdu poetry, which explore the emotions of love and romantic yearning—themes common to both the Hindu and Muslim literary traditions—and present love as a metaphor for spiritual devotion. Chughtai placed his work within the broader context of a European and Islamic art history, citing as inspiration such diverse figures as Raphael, Leonardo, and Rembrandt; Bihzad, Aga Mirak, and Mir Sayyid 'Ali. Although the past stimulated him, the work was of its time, drawing on contemporary trends such as Art Nouveau and Romanticism.³

The Fruit Seller (ca. 1960; fig. 03) exemplifies Chughtai's oeuvre. Two women occupy the foreground, dressed in yellow saris, one of them languidly holding a branch of bamboo. Their faces are in profile, with large doe eyes and delicate features, their bodies adorned in colorful jewelry. A third woman sits at their feet, while others are seated in the rear behind fruit baskets filled with pineapples and watermelons. The warm yellow and orange tones of the painting illuminate the brown skin of the women, the whole cast in a radiant glow. Watercolor, the medium Chughtai uses, lends transparency to the painting, making the surface appear porous and delicate. Unlike the flatter gouaches used in Mughal painting, watercolor here creates a different experience of pictorial depth and movement. The poses of the women draw on classical Indian dance with its stylized hand and body gestures, as well as Orientalist ethnography with its interest in rites and costumes. Women were a favorite subject in Chughtai's work; indeed, his manner of drawing the faces and bodies would become a signature element.

Yet the women appear as types more than personalities. Their shaded eyelids conceal any form of agency, even as their voluptuous bodies appear to invite the male gaze.

Sikander was born two generations after Chughtai and educated at the same institution in Lahore; the Mayo School of Industrial Art would be renamed the National College of Arts in 1958. Although she was trained in the classical tradition carried on since at least the Mughal period, her paintings depart from earlier precedents in distinct ways. For starters, her subject matter is neither dependent on historical precedent nor does it seek refuge in an idealized past. Although her paintings certainly reference Mughal art, they dig deeper into her own personal life and offer commentary on issues that are of significance to her. Of particular importance in Sikander's

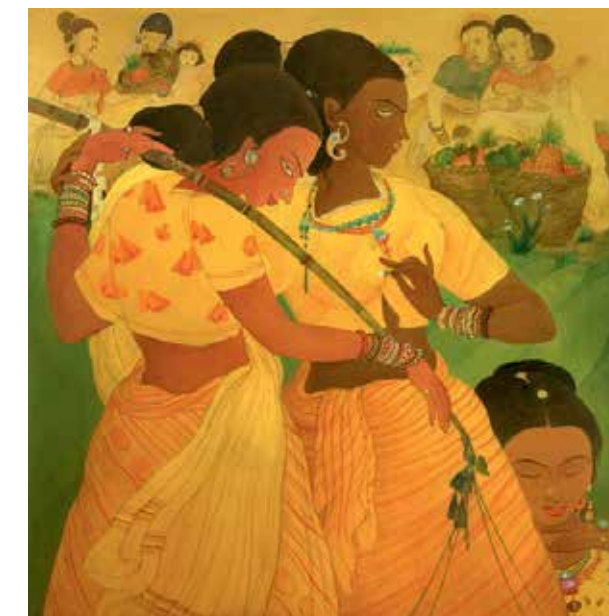


Fig. 03
Abdur Rahman Chughtai (Pakistani, 1894–1975)
The Fruit Seller, ca. 1960
Reproduced with kind permission of Arif
Rahman Chughtai, Chughtai Museum, Lahore,
Pakistan, holder of the copyright, and owner of
the work

work is the female voice, which had been excluded from the genre since its inception. While women populate the works of Miskin and Chughtai, they are used merely in the service of the narrative or added as decorative flourishes. Sikander deploys the female figure instead as a

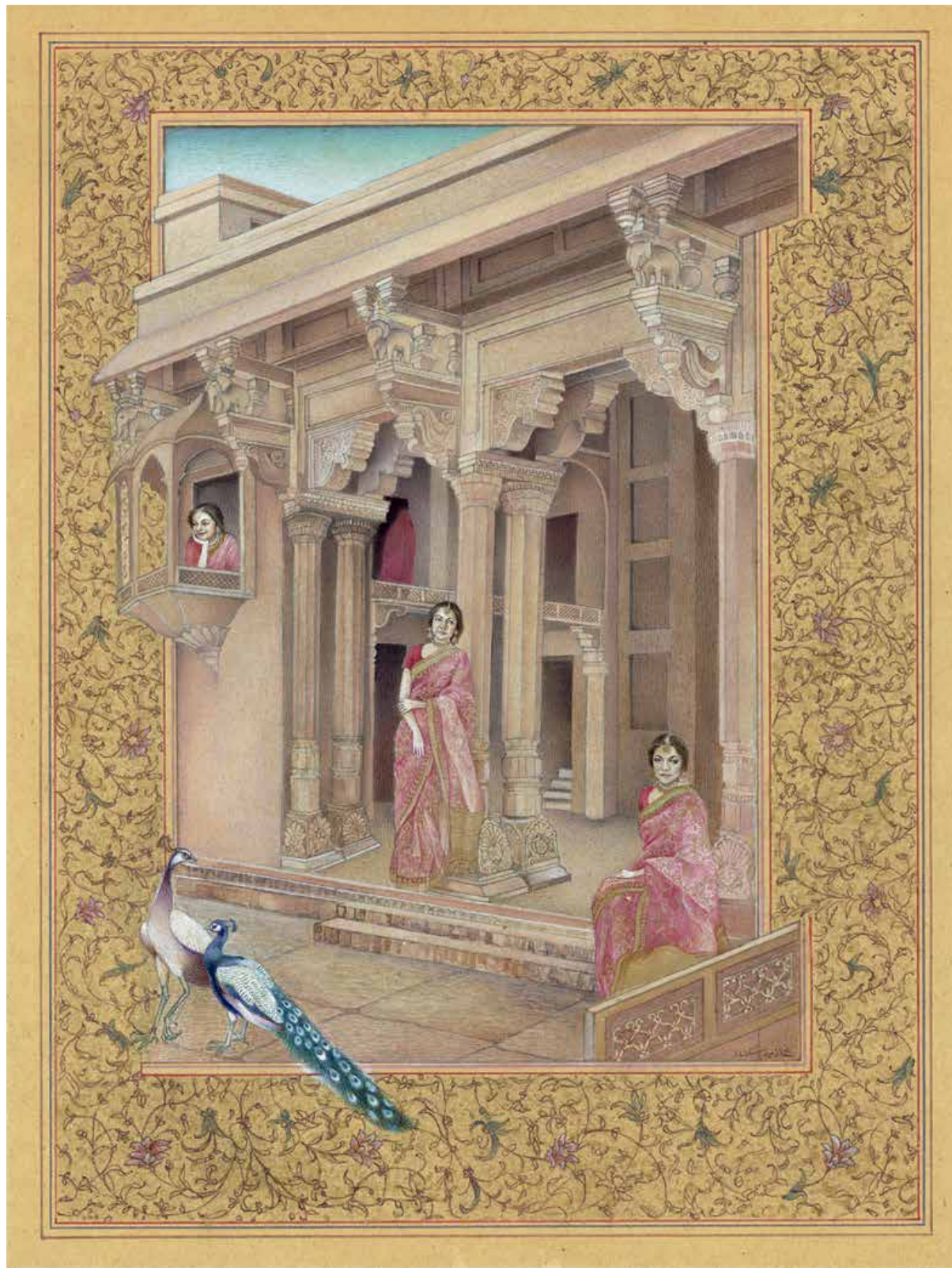


Fig. 04
Mirrat I, 1989-90
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold leaf, and tea on paper;
48.3 × 40.6 cm. Collection of the artist

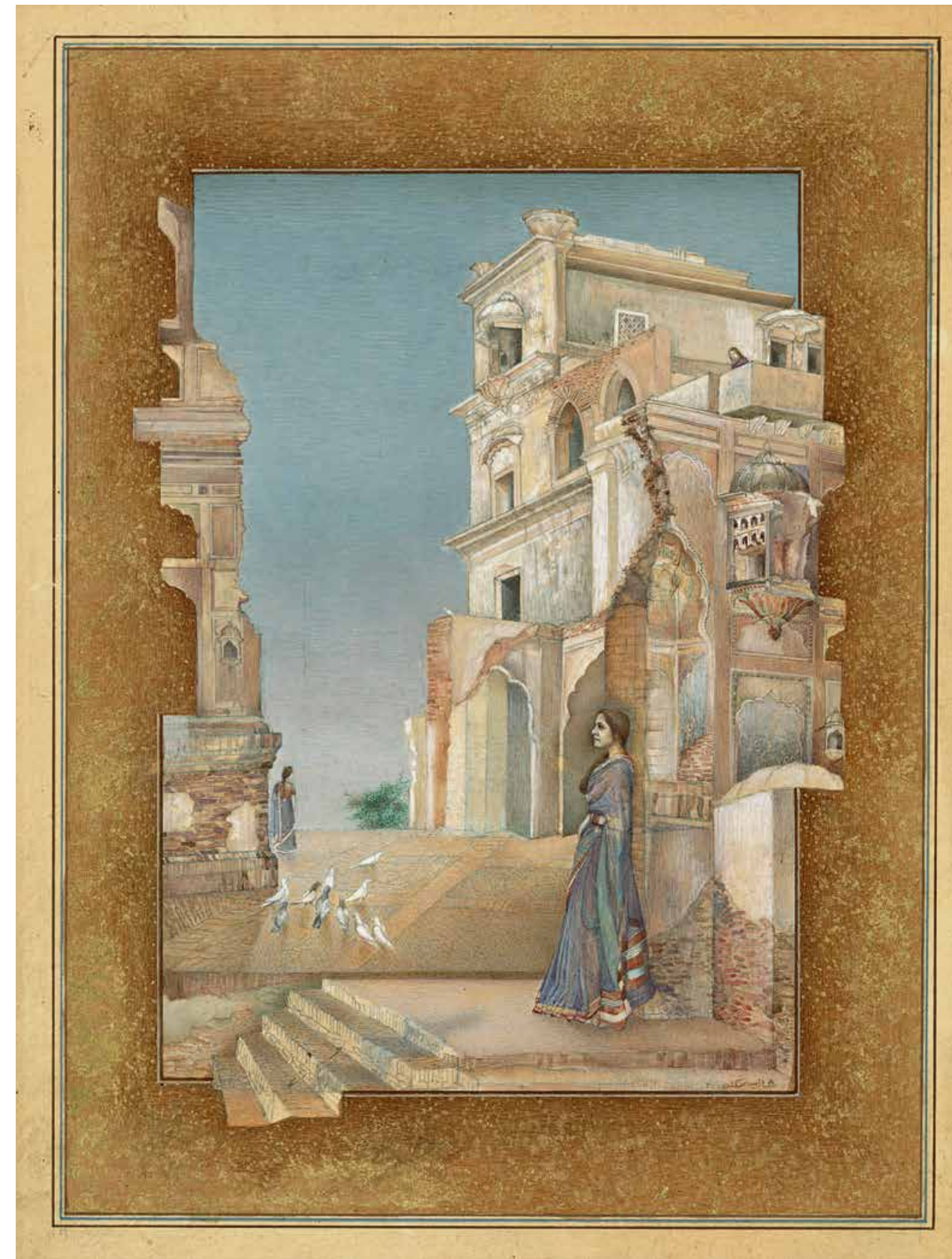


Fig. 05
Mirrat II, 1989-90
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, gold leaf, and tea on paper;
48.3 × 40.6 cm. Collection of the artist

biographical device, a critique of medium, and an avatar of disruption that entirely subverts the very history of illustrative painting.

In the 1980s, the National College of Arts (NCA) was a heterotopic microcosm of political and economic ambitions, of a Pakistani society held together by national and religious identities, and of a vibrant arts community that chafed against authoritarianism even as it yielded to the brutal realities of military dictatorship. For Sikander, NCA provided an opportunity to interact with a variety of compatriots from across ethnic and provincial boundaries. It also provided a space away from the increasingly oppressive restrictions placed on women in Pakistan. The work she produced at this time displayed a mastery of her skill in visual representation—and revealed her early interest in politics and female agency.

A pair of paintings Sikander made in 1989 and 1990 that portray her friend Mirrat preserve the format of manuscript illustration and its decorative framing. The manner in which Mirrat moves through the space relies on compositional devices that would have been familiar to Basawan, Miskin, and Chughtai—for example, the perspectival recession and change of scale. The first painting, *Mirrat I* (fig. 04), is situated in the Lahore Fort, with its biomorphic brackets and floriated column bases. Peacocks wander across and out of the painting, turning to look back into the world occupied by Mirrat. She in turn looks out at the viewer, as though in conversation. She has been replicated in three different spatial registers: sitting on the steps; standing and facing the viewer; and gazing out from a balcony, her chin resting thoughtfully in her hand.

The imperial architecture and Mirrat's red sari lend an air of formality to the painting. Her solitary figure(s) suggests an intimate encounter between the viewer and the subject, captured as if through an old camera. The temporal disjunctions are clearly intentional—the young woman in a red sari is adorned with jewelry, and her gestures are reminiscent of stills from 1960s Pakistani cinema, an era and a genre associated with social and artistic progress. Anachronistic as the painting may appear—like its counterpart, *Mirrat II* (fig. 05), which is also set within historical architecture—it is at once confrontational and nostalgic. The woman's gaze is unfaltering and confident, even as her clothing is modest and feminine.

Sikander's thesis submission, *The Scroll* (pages 11, 13–17, 21), is no longer in the format of a manuscript page but rather a long rectangular scroll. An autobiographical

narrative unfolds from left to right, in which a young woman, representing Sikander herself, moves room by room through her family home. The architecture ushers the young woman, and with her the viewer, from one space to another. Playful kittens and expressive trees break the frame like punctuation marks forcing the eye to pause and linger. Within the house various activities are depicted—from family gatherings to private conversations—revealing a domesticity that's troubling in its strange “perfection,” and which seems lifted from the ubiquitous television serials (“dramas”) piped into homes in the 1970s and 1980s. But here they've been cleansed of controversy or conflict. Or so it seems at first glance.

The Scroll, *Mirrat I*, and *Mirrat II* were made shortly after the 1988 death of Pakistan's military dictator Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq. As Sikander has noted in several interviews, Zia-ul-Haq's coup d'état brought with it an Islamist government with little tolerance for progressive ideals. Music and the visual arts were restricted, women were forced to dress conservatively, and public spaces became arenas for policing people's lives. Pakistan turned to the strict Wahhabism of its Saudi Arabian patrons, cleansing from its customs all traces of heterodoxy or multiculturalism. Women's bodies and their movements were highly restricted with the imposition of Sharia judicial laws, including the draconian Hudood Ordinance of 1970, which widely circumscribed women's rights and imposed an “Islamic” dress code. The women in *Mirrat I* and *Mirrat II* wear the sari, an outfit worn by countless Pakistani women in public until the Islamization project made them “un-Islamic” because of their association with India and Hinduism. Sikander's placing of the sari-clad Mirrat within a Mughal setting reclaims Lahore's heterogeneity and utilizes her as a powerful critique of Pakistan's move away from its own historical roots and toward a Saudi-influenced more extreme religious dogma.

At first glance, Sikander's miniature paintings suggest a traditionalism consistent with the Zia era, though in reality they assert the opposite. In showing the inner lives of women such as Mirrat and herself, Sikander sends a message of resistance against the regressive and repressive politics of the time. In these early works, it can clearly be seen that she's claiming the freedom to tell her own story and to move at will through the spaces she creates. In *The Scroll*, women at different stages of life—from childhood to maturity—can be seen at work and play, inhabiting the various spaces of the house. The tightly framed paintings feel oppressive with their heavy

borders, above and below, and subtle ochre and rust tones. The protagonist, the author-painter, is, however, clad in luminescent white, echoing the open doors and windows that give access to a world beyond her imagination. Her movement, like that of the trees and animals, breaks free of the frame—liberated from the social and religious restrictions imposed on Pakistani women in the 1980s.

The female body as subversion is a theme that remains deep within Sikander's art, from these early explorations of illustrative painting to her more recent forays into animation and digital media. While working on her master's degree at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Sikander invented a new avatar in *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation* (1993; fig. 06). At 67.5 by 37 centimeters, the painting is large in format and, even though gouache is still used, the background is not paper but board. A cream-colored headless female figure rises against an opaque black background.⁴ Her body is sexualized, with an emphasis on her exaggerated breasts and rounded thighs, at the cost of all else. There is no head or arms, the latter reduced to ribbons emanating from the shoulder and attached at the hips. The feet are similarly shredded, giving the impression of her suspension in the black medium. The modeling of the body lends it a sculptural quality and points to several sources for its inspiration. The avatar is at once a Hindu idol and a Greek deity, but ambiguous in both identifications until her realization into a warrior figure in a subsequent work.

In *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation II* (ca. 1999; fig. 07), the woman transforms into Durga, the Hindu goddess thought by believers to be “the invincible” warrior. She has thirteen arms, and in her hands she carries several weapons, including massive swords and a long unfurling ribbon, perhaps where Durga would hold a poisonous snake. Her body is the color of clotting blood, getting darker toward the feet, as though oxidizing before the viewer's eyes. The figure remains familiar, yet the addition of arms has changed its meaning. Disregarding gravity, and perhaps human perception, the fiery goddess unfurls her powerful arsenal.

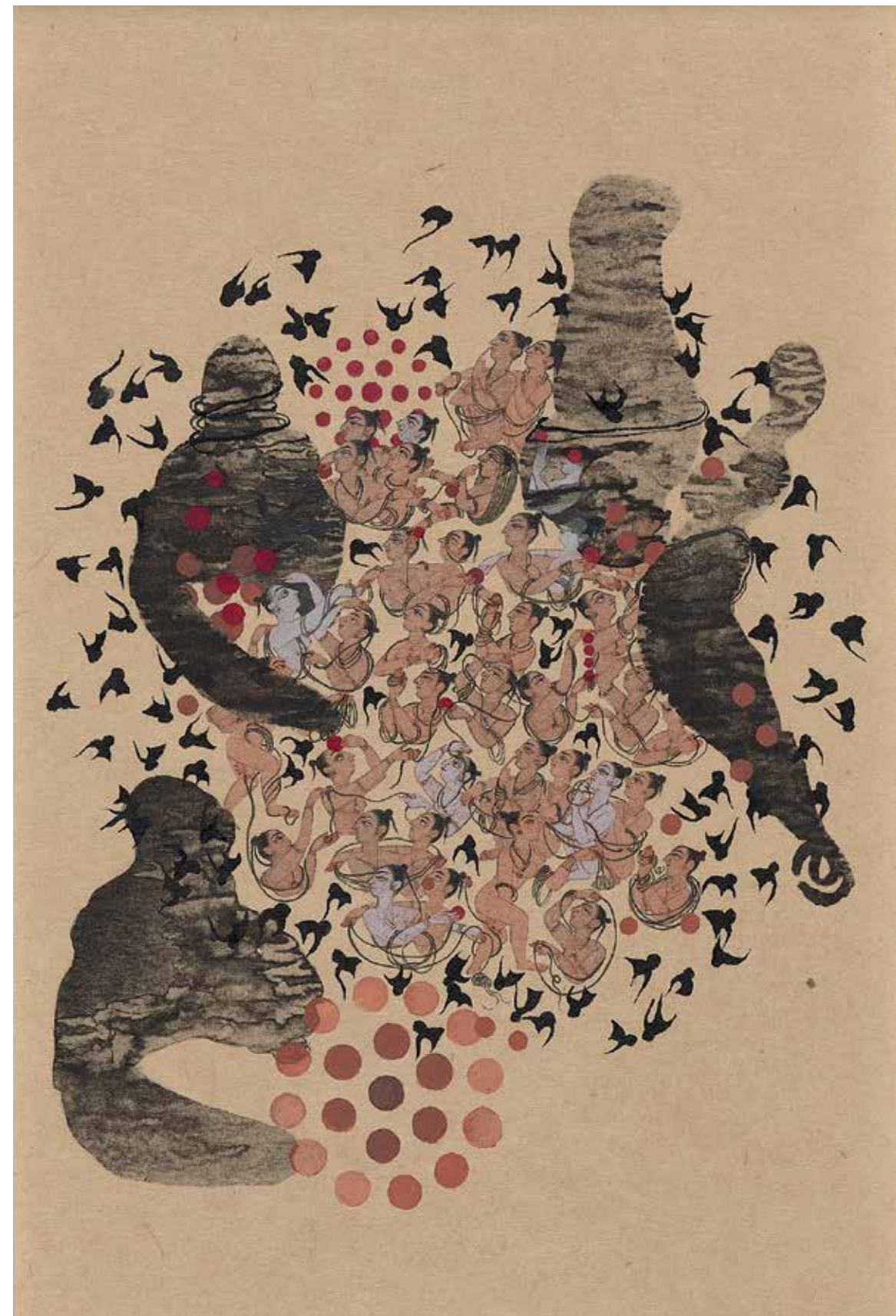
Time is an important factor in Sikander's work, both in a mythological sense and as a formal device. Durga serves as an intellectual and cultural marker in *A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation II*, but the painting also points to a core art-historical moment in the early twentieth century, namely the motion-sequencing photography of Eadweard Muybridge and the capturing of movement in paintings such as Marcel Duchamp's



Fig. 06
A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation, 1993
Gouache and gesso on board; 67.5 × 37 cm.
Cincinnati Art Museum; Alice Bimel Endowment
for Asian Art 2019.195

Fig. 07
A Slight and Pleasing Dislocation II (detail), ca. 1999
Acrylic on board; 238.2 × 128.4 cm. Collection of
the artist

Fig. 08
Gopi Crisis, 2001
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor,
photogravure, inkjet, tea, and chine collé on
paper; 39.9 × 29.5 cm. Collection of the artist



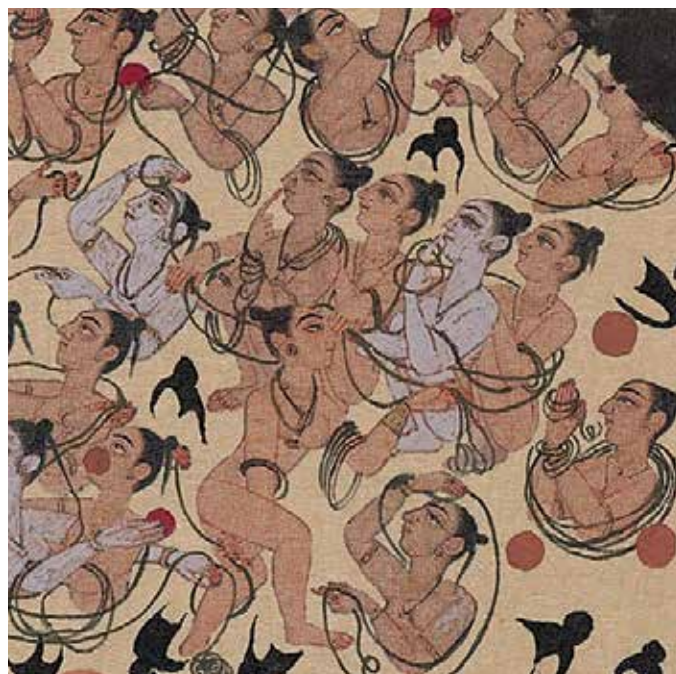


Fig. 09
Gopi Crisis (detail), 2001

Fig. 10
Bichitr (Indian, active 1600s)
Shah-Jahan Receives His Three Eldest Sons and
Asaf Khan during His Accession Ceremonies
(8 March 1628), 1656–57
Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2020

Sikander's seriality continues with *Gopi Crisis* (2001; fig. 08), in which her headless female figure, always rendered in a deep wash, is quartered and further abstracted. A group of women form the center of the subsequent space, recognizable from the iconography of Indian painting, and from Sikander's own earlier work, as gopis or cow-herding devotees of the Hindu god Krishna. These women are usually shown in Indian painting as bathing in the Yamuna River, seminude and with their hair in a topknot. In *Gopi Crisis* there is no Krishna, but rather remnants of Durga, fragmented into ominous floating shadows. And instead of bathing, the gopis appear to be unraveling one another's hair or tying up one another with black string—some of them fully naked while others are only visible from the torso up (fig. 09). Red, pink, and beige dots form circular patterns and disperse, the whole controlled within what seems like a centripetal vortex, spinning into and out of a spherical domain.



Nude Descending a Staircase II (1912). The arms of Sikander's Durga figure are not immobile, as in a traditional sculpture of the deity; rather the shading and gestures give an impression of their progression through space, even as the woman herself levitates upward. Colorful dots emanate forth into the atmosphere, adding to the sense of movement and ascension.

Sikander's earlier works are also concerned with spatial and temporal progression. In *Mirrat I* and *Mirrat II*, the woman recedes into the picture plane at a diagonal, getting perspectively smaller. Such pictorial devices are not only found in European painting but were also commonly employed by Mughal artists—as seen in the examples of Basawan and Miskin. Beyond spatial movement, there is also the progression of the narrative in which each vignette adds to the framing story. Yet the viewer can also break from the linearity and flip back and forth, enjoying the images out of order. Sikander plays with the narrative sequence, and her art-historical references also flip back and forth from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.



Fig. 11
SpiNN, 2003
Digital animation with sound; 6 min., 38 sec.
Jeanne and Michael Klein; Promised gift to the
Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at
Austin

gold adding to the air of immense wealth and power. The architectural space reinforces the king's authority with its intricate columnar details and resplendent textile drapery.

Sikander's adaptation takes the imperial setting and replaces the men with gopis, the individualized portraits giving way to a swarm of homogenous women (fig. 11). The figures gather into varying formations, assembling and dissembling into a menacing and formidable mass. The center is now devoid of authority, replaced by the bodies of the Krishna-less gopis. Even they begin to disintegrate, their hair replicating itself and swarming off into flocks of frenzied birds that eventually blacken and entirely obliterate the throne from view. As the hair/birds dissolve, they are replaced by a flock of winged angels, ceremoniously floating into the center of the space. The angels are copied from earlier Mughal manuscripts with attributes from both Islamic and Christian visual traditions.⁵ And, just as seamlessly, the palace is replaced by a placid landscape. A detail from Sikander's 2001 *Sly Offering* (page 135) flashes by and the video begins to fade, ominously inhabited by demons. Each frame of the animation is a masterpiece of imagination and skill, overlaying images from Mughal paintings and Sikander's own oeuvre.

The physicality and motion in *Gopi Crisis* anticipate one of Sikander's most interesting artworks, the digital animation *SpiNN* (2003). The animation takes place within a Mughal durbar, or audience hall, such as in the Agra Fort, and in illustrated manuscripts such as the *Padshāhnāma* of Shah Jahan. The folio *Shah-Jahan Receives His Three Eldest Sons and Asaf Khan during His Accession Ceremonies (8 March 1628)* (fig. 10), painted by the artist Bichitr, provides the setting. Having recently ascended the throne of India, Shah Jahan receives his sons and a trusted official in a pompous ceremony attended by courtiers and petitioners. Included in this throng of men are several identifiable figures, and in some cases the artist has inscribed their names next to them. Just below the ruler is a painted allegory showing two holy men praying over a grave, likely that of their Sufi master, while a young calf sits between two lions in the foreground. The peace and tranquility of the vignette are in direct contrast to the rest of the painting, throbbing with the tropes of kingship and masculinity, the red and

The title of the piece, *SpiNN*, plays on the name of the twenty-four-hour news channel CNN and references the age of information blackouts and media takeovers, reflected in the density of the gopis and the threatening encroachment of demons and dismembered women. The animation activates the past in order to critique the present, yet the essential power of Sikander's female antagonists is one of possession. The gopis inhabit spaces seldom occupied by women, pointing to concerns that have been at the core of Sikander's practice—namely history and the female subject—and the ways in which the artist may disrupt both. The work is personal and serves as a way for the artist to recuperate her own bodily experience, her female voice, and her past.

Moving from post-Independence Lahore (severed as it was from its central place within Hindu-Muslim-Sikh culture) to New York, Sikander's work is filled with a retrospective nostalgia, yet it also sets out to redefine the

parameters of contemporary art. Transgressing historical styles and periods, it thus embodies a practice that is at once iconoclastic and appropriative. She utilizes narrative to weave stories and transforms watercolors into projected light. Such transformations ignite the imagination through unexpected formal juxtapositions and provocative encounters across time and space. For the artist herself, the dislocations are meaningful and productive. Just as her avatar/goddess suggests a powerful corporeality that nonetheless remains ethereal, Sikander's feminism asserts itself as deeply personal and yet universal.

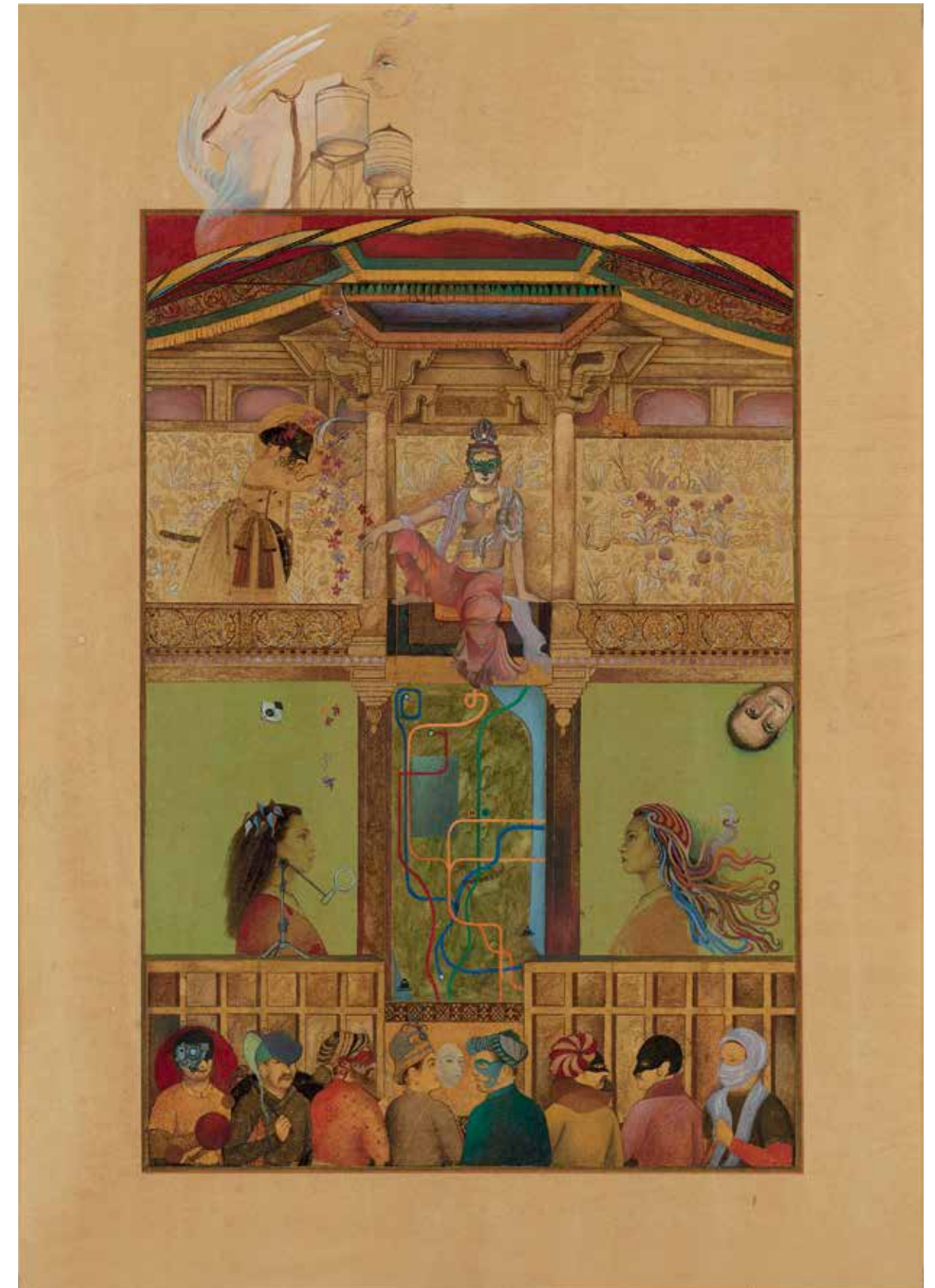
1 *Ustād* is an Arabic word, which in the Indo-Islamic context points to men who have achieved excellence in the visual, musical, and performative arts.

2 For a fuller analysis of Chughtai, see Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Arts of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 46–92.

3 The female subjects and their renditions—elongated bodies, soft features—are reminiscent of the work of Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939). An interest in myth and romance is similarly reflective of broader trends in both art and literature.

4 Fereshteh Daftari also discusses this amorphous female in her article “Beyond Islamic Roots: Beyond Modernism,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (Spring 2003): 175–86.

5 For example, the trumpeting angels are copied from a page in the 1598 Clive Album at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *The Deposition from the Cross*. With thanks to the artist for the reference.



Mind Games, 2000
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, inkjet printing, and tea on wasli paper, 42.5 × 29.8 cm (sight). Courtesy of John McEnroe



SpiNN III, 2003
Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on wasli paper;
20.3 × 27.9 cm. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin;
Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein in honor of Annette DiMeo
Carlozzi, 2015