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The Exploding Company Man and Other Abstractions

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2.19 / Review

The Exploding Company Man and Other Abstractions

By John Zarobell

June 13, 2011

It is not often that one finds monographic exhibitions at the Walter and McBean Galleries at the San Francisco Art Institute, so when it happens, it is worth paying attention. Curator Hou Hanru has a reputation for staging thematic exhibitions at the gallery and for bringing some of the most compelling and timely contemporary art to the Bay Area. His decision to give a solo show to the artist Shahzia Sikander is a testament to the complexity and force of her work. Sikander is known for her richly layered and intricately detailed paintings, which often engage with the traditions of Mughal or Persian miniature painting, but this exhibition includes primarily animation and video works, and may come as something of a surprise. To be sure, drawings are included; one fantastic large-scale piece, *Confrontation* (2011), greets the visitor upon entering the gallery, and a handful of other works on paper are grouped in two other locations. But the force behind this exhibition is the animation, elaborated in multiple projects realized between 2003 and 2010, all of which explode the pictorial elements of her drawings into real time.

Though the death of painting has been repeatedly proclaimed, the practice continues due to the fundamental strength of its model of viewing and cognition. Looking at paintings is a phenomenological sort of exercise that forces viewers to engage the works' visual signs as they exist in space and in history, connecting what they know of the world to what they study in art. Therefore, the properties of a work of art can never be strictly formal, because they are always imbued with character and history that a viewer must decode in order to apprehend its meaning. Sikander's animations are the perfect illustration of the complexities of the act of viewing.

I stood on the stairway between the upper and lower level of the galleries to watch *The Last Post* (2010), where I saw elements of re-created historical painting (from both Mughal and **Company style**) taken apart and remade into new



Confrontation, 2011; ink and gouache on prepared paper. Courtesy of the Artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.



The Last Post, 2010 (still); HD video animation; 10 min. Courtesy of the Artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

configurations of image and ground, self and other, form and formlessness. Normally, looking at a picture takes time; one must observe and interpret the various elements, performing an operation that includes a multitude of conscious acts of thought and an instinctual grasp for significance. Watching *The Last Post* is like watching this procedure in slow motion. The difference is that the stability of the (single, unified) work is put into question and the dynamic energy of the animation in some ways overwhelms the model of perception. What is more, the work includes a sound element composed by Sikander's collaborator, Du Yun, which contributes to its complexity by extending its phenomenal component beyond vision.

This is not Sikander's first foray into animation. She created *SpiNN* in 2003 and *Pursuit Change* in 2004 (both represented in this show), both of which suffuse her existing imagery with the added dimension offered by film. While viewers are consistently amazed by the decorative arabesques of Sikander's exquisite craft, her animations and videos focus the viewer's attention on the conceptual domain of her images, demonstrating that every style, indeed every picture, is a means to reinvent the world. The most recent works in this show are politically charged (as her work has always been), focused upon colonialism and its legacy in art and contemporary politics. As a native of Pakistan who has resided for more than a decade in New York, Sikander is uncommonly aware of the ways that politics of East and West play out in life. Here she demonstrates how the historical moment might be given a new life in images and in motion.

The Company style, which Sikander references in her most recent work, was a body of art made by South Asians based on traditional miniature painting but retooled for the colonial elite, the British men who laid the groundwork for the expropriation of resources in what was then called "the subcontinent." This hybrid style both obscured and revealed the uneven power relations in the colonial world, in which native artists repurposed their skills to produce decorative painting to suit new rulers. On one hand, these self-consciously quaint pictures, featuring colonial governors and businessmen in their domestic and professional domains, suppress the modern forms of dominance that emerged in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, various aspects of domination and its repudiation by artists are encoded in such apparently direct, or naïve, works.

Sikander seizes upon this double-edged condition of subaltern artistic production, and *The Last Post* draws its significance from this historic confrontation. The animation delivers a quasi-cosmic resolution between those who commission and those who create works of art. Watching the figure of the company man dissolve into his pictorial elements and literally explode into the cosmic soup seems like the

fulfillment of a wish, a long-awaited demolition of an inherently destructive paradigm that the term colonialism can only begin to describe. Yet the artist also offers another explanation here based on the power of image and interpretation. What we see has the clarity of an image, and we put faith in the domain the image conjures, even if we know that certain details may not be entirely truthful. This ideology of the work of art's fundamental authority is put under pressure here. How do we know that what the image seems to suggest is the message it actually subtends? Such questions abound in this exhibition, and they are the best reason to go see it. The meaning is not found in the picture itself, but in the dialectic between image and viewer, the space in between history and the present.

Shahzia Sikander: The Exploding Company Man and Other Abstractions is on view at the **Walter and McBean Galleries** at the San Francisco Art Institute through **June 25, 2011**.

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