

**VIEW, ANALYZE, DECONSTRUCT: A SURVEY OF IDENTITY IN THE  
WORKS OF SHAHZIA SIKANDER**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by  
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April 2014

Major: Biochemistry  
Genetics

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## ABSTRACT

Shahzia Sikander and the Concept of Identity. (May 2014)

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This research project will delve into a field of art history not well documented, contemporary Muslims artists. Specifically, this research project will examine the work of Shahzia Sikander, a Muslim artist native to Pakistan, and explore how Sikander portrays the concept of identity in her work. Sikander began her career in the genre of miniature painting at, experimenting with the form, testing its limitations and questioning its relevance. Sikander's quest to question and experiment with meaning is seen throughout her repertoire, which now includes miniature paintings, video animations, drawings and installations. Sikander morphs layers of techniques and symbols, from varying artistic traditions, to create complex and enigmatic works of art which serve to deconstruct meanings attached to images. Not only does Sikander address identity in her works, but radically re-conceptualizes the concept of identity. For Sikander, identity is not an amalgamation of innate attributes, but rather "identity" is a limitless and continual *process* in constant flux. Therefore, Sikander's work serves as an excellent platform for exploring, questioning, and re-examining the concept of identity. This fluid model of identity questions the rigid and supposedly unmovable labels of identity that are imposed on individuals in a world that is keen on defining individuals based on imagined differences. Therefore, Sikander's fluid model of identity is deeply insightful for evaluating the associations and meanings that are not only attached to images, but also to group of individuals.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Dr. Stephen Caffey in the Department of Architecture at Texas A&M University. Without his help and guidance, this project would have remained a hazy cloud of vague ideas. I would also like to thank Dr. Duncan MacKenzie, Dr. Sumana Datta and Texas A&M University's Honors and Undergraduate Research Program who organized the Undergraduate Research Scholars program exceptionally and made the process smooth. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Shima Mohajeri at Texas A&M University's Department of Architecture who very generously allowed me to use a chapter from her manuscript in order to better understand Persian miniature painting. Lastly, I would like to thank the artist herself, Shahzia Sikander, for allowing me to contact her for this research project and providing valuable feedback for the trajectory and organization of this thesis.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Relevance

Islam is currently the second largest religion in the world, with 1.6 billion followers. This statistic translates to one thing: There are 1.6 billion different *Islams* in existence.<sup>1</sup> How and what an individual chooses to believe is an intricate developmental process with social, emotional, intellectual and psychological factors. In modern times, Muslims are not only geographically widespread, but also in close contact with a very heterogeneous world. This dispersal and contact with different ideas and perspectives has given shape to numerous Muslim identities. Unfortunately, Islamic art is frequently portrayed as antiquated, with heavy influence on historical decorative items and calligraphy. This portrayal, as historically accurate as it may be, does not adequately capture the complex and diverse nature of the current Muslim community. This project will analyze the work of Pakistani artist Shahzia Sikander and examine her works in order to understand how her identities and concept of identity play into her work. How much of her work focuses on one facet of her identity (Pakistani, Muslim, woman, etc.)? Or does she transcend these boundaries and create work based on a single, homogenous identity that is composed of all her identities?

The relevance of this project is two part. On one hand, research on contemporary Muslim artists is not well documented or the information that is available, is not widespread. Thus, the information on contemporary Muslim artists is essentially hidden and nowhere near the prominence of other sectors of art. Since this is a field of art not well documented, this project aims to not only synthesize information but also create new knowledge. Secondly, this project

has social relevance. Muslim countries and Muslims have become of great interest to the world, especially the United States, after the events of 9/11. However, the image of Muslims and Muslim countries is commonly confused, distorted and one-sided. Behind the curtain of violence and chaos that is commonly portrayed, these are countries and people with rich histories and great creative abilities.<sup>2</sup> For example, Sikander's homeland of Pakistan is portrayed as terror-stricken and destitute; however, this view and representation seems to have negated the achievements that have come out of this nation (such as Sikander's works) in the minds of people. By studying the works of contemporary Muslim artists, an entirely new view of the Muslim world will be presented which will aid in understanding not only the artists who created the works but also the world from which they arose.

### **Identity as seen by Sikander**

Choosing Shahzia Sikander and her work for the purposes for this project has provided a very large platform on which to understand and articulate the concept of identity. Sikander was chosen for this project because of her status as a "Muslim" artist working in the contemporary art world. As the project matured and understanding of Sikander's work grew, the newly acquired knowledge showed the inadequacy of essentialized labels such as "Muslim." Resistance to reduced and essentialist labels is a core component to Sikander's work. For example, a characteristic of Sikander's work is her use of highly charged images and symbols. The images included the hairdo of Gopi women, the Chillava (griffin), Hindu gods and goddesses, Venus, and a multitude of other symbols. Sikander places these images in contexts that are radically disengaged from their "original" context. By deconstructing the associations and connotations of symbols, images and ideas, Sikander engages her audience to question why and how these

images and/or ideas gained their “understood” meanings. Through this technique, Sikander underscores the idea that meaning is created through context and that ideas and images are not inherently rigid in meaning. This thesis extends the idea of a flexible, porous entity that is heavily influenced by context to identity.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

#### **Choosing Sikander**

This thesis began as an exploration of the tension that can exist between seemingly contradictory or opposed identity groups. “Muslim artists” were chosen because, yes, there is little discussion being generated around this group of artists, but also because of the tension that comes along with being a Muslim in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (especially in post-9/11 America).<sup>2</sup> At the onset of the project, a handful of Muslim artists were surveyed, including Shirin Neeshat, Aisha Khalid and Imran Qureshi. Shahzia Sikander was chosen to explore the tensions associated with Muslim identity for two reasons. Firstly, in naivety and ignorance, Sikander was chosen because she was a “Muslim” artist working in America, and the original hypothesis believed “Muslim” artists would address “Muslim” issues in their works. Secondly, from the preliminary information gathered, Sikander seemed to have a porous and fluid understanding of identity which seemed worth exploring.

#### **(Utilization of) Sources**

The vast amount information gathered for this research project was sourced from books, print interviews, art reviews, curator reviews, dissertations, theses, manuscripts database articles and news articles. Additionally, media sources such as documentaries, video interviews and other related video sources were used as well. Most sources focused directly on Sikander and her work. One of the most helpful sources for this project was Dr. Shamaila Khan’s dissertation on



Sikander's work; this dissertation not only served as a great introduction to Sikander's various works, but also served as a starting point to think about how to approach analysis of identity in Sikander's works. This dissertation exposed the how crucial it was to understand certain topics in the fields of psychology, history and philosophy. The majority of this project functioned as a survey of Sikander's work in order to simply see what work had been produced by Sikander and to comprehend techniques and patters that could be used in discussing identity. Despite this project being mainly a survey, the importance of language and the construction of reality through language became very evident mid-project. Therefore, research was conducted on Jacques Derrida and deconstruction in order to further the discourse around Sikander and her works. Lastly, Shahzia Sikander clarified a few points about herself about her work via e-mail contact.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### Overview

Knowledge on Sikander, her works and the presentation of identity in her works was very limited at the onset of this project. Therefore, a survey of Sikander's works as well as the discussion surrounding her works was the first critical step for understanding and addressing identity. In fact, this project can be best classified as a survey of Sikander's works. Nonetheless, from this introductory survey of Sikander's works, certain techniques and motifs for discussing identity became evident. Specifically, the two main techniques employed for discussing identity were dissociation and recreation (of meaning) as well as the process of transformation. The first subsection of the results section will describe the process of dissociation and recreation of meaning. In varied and various works, Sikander dissociates the meanings and connotations that are pre-assigned to visual images and either recreates meanings or scrutinizes the assumptions surrounding an image. Four works will be discussed and serve as the platforms for the discussion of the processes of dissociation and recreation. Lastly, the idea of dissociation and recreation will be expanded to identity by discussing identity signifiers through a post-structuralism approach, with an emphasis on Jacques Derrida's concept of "deconstruction." Subsection two will explore the process of transformation in Sikander's work. Specifically, the visual motif of "the hairdo of the Gopi woman" (explained in detail in subsection two) will be addressed in order to understand the process of transformation. The second subsection will also address transformation through the perspective of "simultaneity," a concept central to Persian miniature paintings that contrasts

the notion of linear time and space. The presence of simultaneity in Sikander's miniature painting *The Scroll* will be used to discuss the possible non-linear nature of identity.

### **Dissociation/Recreation (of meaning)**

As mentioned in the Abstract, Sikander began her training in miniature painting at the National College of Arts, Lahore.<sup>3</sup> Sikander took on this laborious and time intensive painting practice wanting to question the relevance of the miniature painting tradition and see if it had a place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> This spirit of questioning and exploring led Sikander's portfolio to expand from miniature paintings to installations, murals, digital animations, videos, banners and even collaborative performance art pieces. The following works capture the diversity in Sikander's portfolio and all include elements of dissociation/recreation whether in regards to subject matter, meaning or the relationship of visual images.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1. *The Scroll* (1992)

*The Scroll* is an early example of Sikander's work and is a miniature painting. Opposed to the standard dimensions of a miniature painting, this work measures 13 1/8" X 63 7/8," clearly demonstrating Sikander's earlier stages of experimenting with the form of miniature painting (Figure 1). This work shows the layout of a multi-chambered and multi-layered house opened up to the viewer. The multiple spatial layers make no attempt at hiding or concealing the actions of the figures or activities within the household. Despite the many figures and multiple layers in the painting, the viewer's gaze is directed to one figure in particular, that of a long-haired woman wearing a long, white *shalwar kamiz* (traditional garb worn in South Asian countries).<sup>5</sup> The woman's figure recurs throughout the work and is not fixed at one spatial location, unlike other figures depicted in the painting and engages in multiple activities throughout the household. In

addition, there seems to be very little interaction of the woman with the other human figures. Sikander also, at times, paints the woman figure in a very transparent manner, making the figure appear ghost like, her presence haunting the entirety of the household. The detachment of the figure from the other figures in painting, along with the ghost like presence of the figure, the lady in the white *shalwar kamiz* exhibits a high level of dissociation from the main activities of the household.<sup>3</sup> Dissociation of the main figure from her physical and relational environment is the main form of dissociation presented in *The Scroll*, as opposed to dissociation of symbols and images which are central to Sikander's later work. The level of detachment exhibited by the female figure makes it difficult to peg her identity down. Not only because her face is never revealed to the audience, but also because her figure is almost always on the move in the miniature, engaging in multiple activities. The figure is reminiscent of a figure that appears in some of Sikander's miniatures: The griffin or *Chillava*. Much like the Greek griffin, a *Chillava* is a hybrid creature and, according to Dr. Shamaila Khan, is used to describe something or someone who is moving too fast to be characterized.<sup>3</sup> Much like the *Chillava*, the *shalwar kamiz* clad figure in *The Scroll* evades being described or assigned meaning. Thus, the female figure is highly representative of Sikander questioning meanings assigned to figures and the challenge her audience has of attempting to associate a meaning to her works.

## 2. *Pleasure Pillars* (2001)

*Pleasure Pillars* is a miniature painting that contains images taken from various cultural and artistic traditions (Figure 2). Figures present in the miniature include animals from Persian miniature hunting scenes, the goddess Venus, Indian (Mughal) Kathak dancers, a yakshi figure, a staircase referencing Degas and a Kinari (a Buddhist, Hindu and Jain symbol).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the images presented carry with them many connotations, meanings and histories. However, the

interest here lies not in what the figures HAVE meant, but rather what the figures CAN come to represent. This work seems to be lacking narration, but narration does in fact arise from the relationship of the images to each other. Driving the narration with this work are the meanings that each image takes on from being transformed by its relationship to the other figures in the composition. Therefore, *Pleasure Pillars* is a superb example of how Sikander's works dissociate pre-assigned meanings, in turn recreating new meanings, and underscore the fluid nature of meaning.

### 3. *SpiNN* (2003)

Sikander's *SpiNN* is a 6.38 minute long digital animation that begins with a backdrop of a Mughal court. The Mughal emperor's empty throne is placed in the middle of the screen; however, the throne is not surrounded by his usual set of courtiers, but by Gopi women, devout followers and consorts of the Hindu god Krishna (Figure 3).<sup>6</sup> The first level of dissociation of meaning occurs in this work with the merging of images from Hindu artistic tradition with those associated with the Muslim, Mughal court. An interior space associated with the Mughal court is inhabited by Hindu figures who flock not around their lord, Krishna, but around a Mughal emperor's empty throne. Sikander continues to play with the decontextualizing of these images even further. As the digital animation proceeds, the Gopi women increase in number and then start to fade, but only their bodies fade from the screen, leaving behind a symbol Sikander continuously uses in her works, the image of the Gopi women's hairdos (more on "Gopi hairdo" in subsection two).<sup>3</sup> When the Gopi fade from the screen, leaving behind their hair, the hairdos take on the role of swarming birds inside the Mughal court. The very clear, physical dissociation of the Gopi's hairdo from their bodies serves as a catalyst for removing explicit and implicit associations the image of the hairdos have with the Gopi. Lastly, Sikander continues to bring in

images from various artistic traditions as the animation comes to a close. Once the “birds” fade from the Mughal court, angels appear followed closely by demons. Symbols of angels and demons bring in images from a “Western” canon of art, but also nod to Safavid era Persian miniature painting which incorporated Christian imagery heavily into its content.<sup>7</sup> With this gesture, the hybrid nature and origins of the miniature painting are highlighted. Much like *Pleasure Pillars*, meaning is dissociated from the images’ original context and recreated through the interaction the images have with each other. In addition, the message of dissociation is made visibly clear through the disengagement of the hairdo of the Gopi from their owners’ bodies. Sikander’s shift from stationary art forms (miniatures, installations) to those that are animated underscores the fluidity of meaning and facilitates the process of morphing meaning from one context to another.

#### 4. *51 Ways of Looking* (2003)

Drawing serves as the basis for all of Sikander’s works, and *51 Ways of Looking* not only celebrates this artistic technique but also examines the power of drawing and the act of creation. In the book covering this series of drawings, Sikander invites the audience to “leave behind any cultural or personal assumptions,” and instead focus on the “bring as many ideas about the genesis of the rectangle and circle” to the works.<sup>8</sup> With *51 Ways of Looking*, the audience is asked to meditate on drawing, the act of creating and the relationship of intricate figures to simpler, geometric ones. The dissociation factors into this work through this meditative process. The drawings presented in this work recall the act of drawing which starts with the simplest of all forms, a simple point which transforms into a line (Figure 4). From the line emerge shapes, simple, geometric ones and then later elaborate representative figures. This thought process is able to examine the origins of the forms presented in Sikander’s drawings, and by abandoning

preconceived notions about the represented forms, the beauty and power of drawing can be fully appreciated. This approach to *51 Ways of Looking* does nonetheless give valuable insight into meanings and assumptions that latch themselves onto representative images. If one uses this series of drawing in order to comprehend and examine the act of drawing, then it becomes clear that *meaning* plays absolutely no role in the formation of these images. The images are a combination of points, lines and shapes (and lots of imagination on the part of Sikander) with no added baggage.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the exercise of examining *51 Ways of Looking* points out the socially constructed nature of meanings that are attached to images. Beyond dissociation, *51 Ways of Looking* does not even allow for associations to be formed about the images presented in the series.

## **Transformation**

### The Gopi hairdo motif

The second common technique employed in Sikander's work that can aid in better understanding identity is transformation. Now, as evidenced from the previous section, it is clear that meanings assigned to visual images are questioned and morph in the works of Sikander, which represents a certain type of transformation. However, Sikander toys with the idea of transformation on a larger time scale. She explores the motif of the "Gopi hairdo" in which the ties of this image from all of its previous meanings is severed through a process of continual dissociation, rather than in a handful of works.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this same process is highly representative of miniature painting as well as other artistic traditions, in which a certain visual language no longer holds any of its previous limitations and is available for the use of any individual.<sup>4</sup>

In Hinduism, the Gopi (cowherd girls or milkmaidens) were the female consorts of the god Krishna. Devout followers of Krishna, the Gopi were also involved sexually with the deity.<sup>6</sup> The basis of this relationship is very Krishna-centric, thus the dynamics of the relationship contain power and gender hierarchies. One, Krishna's presence defines not only the relationship but the Gopi are only acknowledged due to the deity's presence. Additionally, there is one Krishna amongst a multitude of female Gopis, setting the state for gender inequality. True, this is only one view of the relationship between Krishna and the Gopis, but the possible problematic dynamics of this relationship make the Gopi a very strong symbol associated with Hinduism, Krishna and unequal gender relations.<sup>3</sup>

The "Gopi hairdo" refers to the specific hairstyle of the Gopi women (Figure 3). The Gopi make an appearance in Sikander's earlier works such as *SpiNN* and *The Gopi Crisis* (not pictured). In these works, the body of the Gopi is missing, leaving only the hairdo of the Gopi.<sup>3</sup> Through this technique, Sikander very clearly dissociates a symbol, the hairdo, from a physical anchor (the Gopi's body) which ties the symbol to all of its previous and pre-assigned meanings. Sikander takes this process even further by continuously representing the Gopi hair motif throughout her work, slowly eroding the ties the hairdo motif has with its Gopi origins. Thus, when Sikander presents this motif in her more recent works, such as *Parallax* (Figure 5), the symbol can still be identified verbally as "Gopi hair," but the connotations of Hinduism, Krishna, and Gopi have eroded. With these severed ties, the Gopi hairdo is able to take on the role of whatever image it is being represented as, whether that be to be represented as birds, bats or oil droplets.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Gopi hairdo motif underscores the fluidity of meaning and the idea that meaning is context-derived, not inherent.



## Using Simultaneity to understand transformation

The rise of the Persian miniature in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century began as Islamic artists (and their patrons) became increasingly interested in historical styles of painting.<sup>10</sup> The thought processes and ideas present in Persian miniature were influenced greatly by ideas prevalent during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. These ideas were imbedded in the Persian miniature and carried over to Indian miniature painting traditions, including Mughal miniature painting. One of the most interesting and influential of these ideas was the concept of simultaneity in time and space. Simultaneity challenges the notion that time is linear and progressive, and instead view time as a circular loop. In addition, space is not reduced down to one specific space but is seen as part of a larger “space”—hence the simultaneous presence of space.<sup>11</sup>

Sikander uses the idea of simultaneity adeptly in her works, especially her miniature paintings. Take for example, *Pleasure Pillars*, in which images from different historical time periods, geographies and artistic movements are placed simultaneously in the same composition in order to create meaning.<sup>3</sup> An excellent work for understanding simultaneity as a non-linear mode of transformation and being is Sikander’s *The Scroll*. As discussed in subsection one, *The Scroll* portrays a large, multi-chambered home that is opened up to the viewer. The viewer has an omnipresence over the actions and activities portrayed in the work, thus time and space are not taken in discrete units, but simultaneously.

Additionally, the aforementioned figure of the woman in the white *shalwar kamiz* serves as an epitome of simultaneous transformation and identity. The figure is seen engaging in multiple tasks that would help establish her identity, either as an artist, as someone getting ready to travel, as a female, and a woman living in a typical Pakistani household. However, these categories are not portrayed as stagnant, but dynamic. In addition, the “categories for

identification” are not presented discretely but simultaneously. The constant dynamism of the figure presents the figure as continually switching between activities and therefore switching between identities. In addition, since the narrative of the work is not linear, there are no bounds as to what trajectory the figure takes in this continual process of change. Therefore, the idea of transformation is demonstrated by Sikander to not be fixed in a linear manner, but rather unconstrained by time and space, never losing fluidity.

### **Deconstructing Identity Signifiers with Post-Structuralism**

With Sikander’s work, there is much attention paid to resisting essentialist and reductive modes of thinking. As evidenced by the last two subsections, the idea of constant change is ever present in the works of Shahzia Sikander. With this constant change, meaning cannot be easily pinned down. Even where meaning seems to be recreated in some of Sikander’s works, the process of change is never ending.

This project began with an interest in examining the tension that exists between various identity groups. Words used to capture the essence of identity (noted as identity signifiers) are the most common and evident form for articulating and describing identification. However, language fails to describe the richness, dynamism and complexity that encompasses an individual’s identity. Simple adjectives such as “Muslim” or “Pakistani” are inadequate for describing the reality that these words attempt to describe for an individual. Much like Sikander’s breaking down process of images and their supposed fixed and unmovable meanings, post-structuralist theorists break down systems, including language, to expose their inherent contradictions. The following section uses key ideas found in the works of Jacques Derrida to examine the limited scope of identity signifiers in attempting to express the realities of identity. The ideas expressed by Derrida expose the inadequacies of the process of “boxing in”

individuals into clean and precise categories of identification, the same stifling process which was naively and ignorantly used to select Shahzia Sikander (as a “Pakistani Muslim”) for this project.

Firstly, post-structuralism as a movement does not believe in the notion of an absolute “Truth,” meaning there is no universal, unified truth.<sup>12</sup> This idea is expanded to include many fields, including language. Additionally, structures (ie institutions, language, religions, etc) are fictitious constructs that are upheld by certain power system which the structures help support. Therefore, structures cannot be trusted to generate meaning or give order. Central to structuralism is the idea of centered structures, in which a structure of some sort derives its existence from one sole source.<sup>13</sup> An example would be a God-centered structure where everything in the given structure derives its meaning and being from God. Post-structuralism aims to deconstruct these centered structures and question the validity of its claims. Since language, as a human construct, is one of these structured institutions, it is only reliable for expressing humanly constructed reality, which will thus contain inherent contradictions and fallacies.<sup>12</sup> Applying the post-structuralist view of language and signifiers to identity, it quickly becomes evident that identity labels (signifiers) are completely inadequate in capturing the realities of identity. Since single words used to represent an identity label focus on one aspect of identity, they carry a very heavy centered bias. For example, an identity signifier for religion is centered on the said religion which has its own presumed associations, connotations, and expectations. If some of the qualities of the center are actually attributable to humans (difficult in the case of religion given that the center is defined by a super-human/non-human deity), only a very limited amount of individuals are able to identify with all of the centered attributes. Those individuals on the periphery are ignored and the identity signifier fails to capture their identity.

Thus, viewing identity in terms of a collection of identity signifiers (attributes) is extremely inadequate at describing identity. Much like Sikander's work, post-structuralism works to break down and question the meanings and importance that are attached to language, whether verbal, written or visual.<sup>12,13</sup>

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite being an integral part of human existence, identity is nonetheless a difficult concept to understand. Worsening the matter, is the desire to compartmentalize identity into various cookie-cutter molds of identity signifiers. This phenomena of labeling identity groups and attempting to mold one's self to mirror these labels is a consequence of language. As a social construct based on given assumptions, language is exclusionary to certain aspects of one's identity. Therefore, it is necessary to question, problematize and deconstruct the essentialist and reductive nature of language. In her art, Shahzia Sikander questions, examines and deconstructs such notions by dissociating/recreating meaning and exploring the process of transformation. Within her works, meaning is continually broken down, questioned and recreated. Sikander's methods are similar in nature to the work of post-structuralist theorists who constantly question the validity of structural systems. Using post-structuralism as a medium, Sikander's themes of deconstructing and challenging meaning can be expanded to discourse on language and identity signifiers. Therefore, with Sikander, identity cannot exist as a collection of attributes, but rather it must be understood as a continuous process of change. Viewing identity as a process in constant flux removes the tension that may exist between seemingly contradictory identity groups by exposing the fallacious nature of identity signifiers.

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# APPENDIX



**Figure 1:** *The Scroll* by Shahzia Sikander

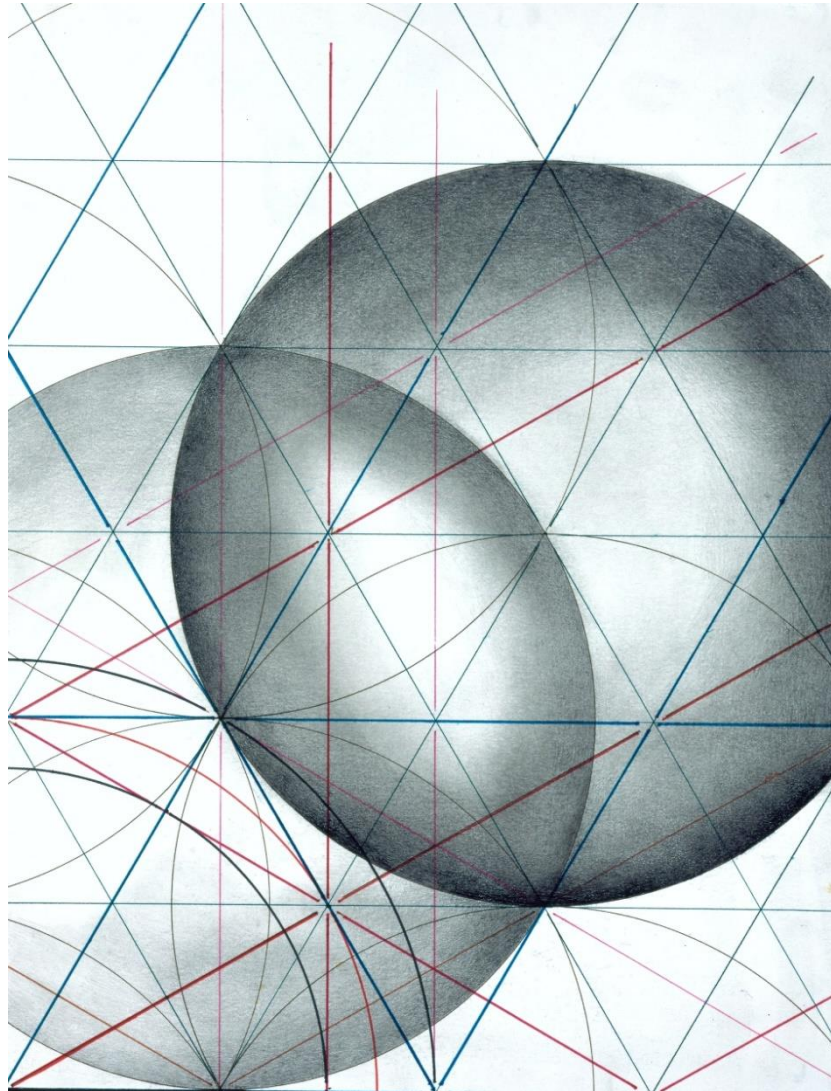


**Figure 2:** *Pleasure Pillars* by Shahzia Sikander



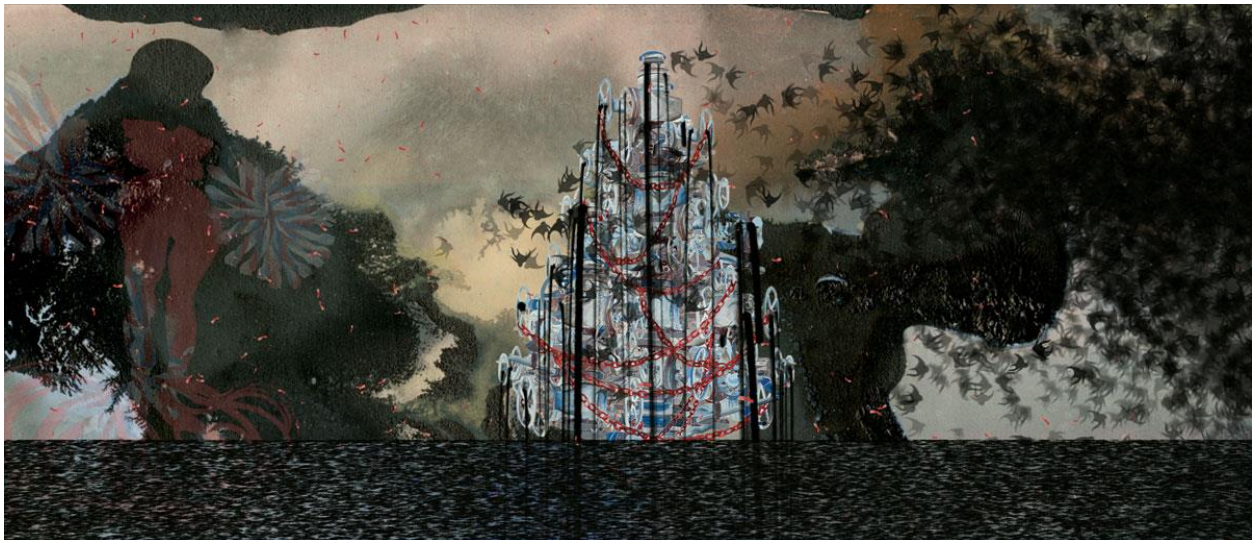


**Figure 3:** *SpiNN* by Shahzia Sikander



**Figure 4:** *4 from 51 Ways of Looking* by Shahzia Sikander





**Figure 5:** *Parallax* by Shahzia Sikander