

Ep. 17 - Shahzia Sikander

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, visual artist Shahzia Sikander.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

My experience was always like, oh, you can't do art, as if art was some other kind of thing out there that was going to, you know, corrupt you or was going to disable you, because how could you make a living out of art? So of course, things have changed a lot, but I still encounter a lot of South Asian younger kids here that still struggle with their families, you know, for getting support to really become artists.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

At the beginning of the 1990s, there was this one piece of art that changed the course of miniature painting. And it came from a student at Pakistan's National College of the Arts. It played on the tradition of Indo-Persian miniatures, the types of works you'd see in ancient manuscripts. There's the same painstaking attention to detail, colourful figures and intricate patterns. But this piece was big. Five feet long. And its subject thoroughly contemporary -- a modern Pakistani woman going through daily life around the house. The piece was called *The Scroll* -- and the student was Shahzia Sikander. *The Scroll* won Pakistan's prestigious Haji Sharif Award -- and was displayed at the country's embassy in Washington, D.C. Today, Shahzia Sikander is widely credited for creating an art movement called "neo-miniaturism." Her work has been recognized with the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the Genius Grant. More than 30 years into her career, Shahzia recently released a children's book about her life, called *Roots and Wings*, and has a major retrospective of her work touring this year. She joined me from New York City, where she now lives. Before we delved into her journey with miniature paintings, I wanted to get a sense of just what a miniature is.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

I would say, miniature painting deals with illuminated manuscripts, with the art of the book. The illustrated folios that may, you know, accompany literary epic poems or even religious texts, the court paintings. So these paintings, these styles, which the ones that I've studied are, say, the Indian and the Persian styles, that in of themselves have many regional schools. So that sort of broad definition of the visual traditions. So say from Central Asia to South Asia. Some of them are really pretty large, too. So they, they are more than two, three feet long as well. And not everything is just a notebook scale page size work either.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Shahzia says an important part of the history of miniature painting is a difficult one -- some of the works you might see on display now were quite literally ripped from their original homes and roots, to be showcased at Western institutions.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

And the history of that is very important to understand because, you know, collectors, especially in recent decades, that they continue to cannibalize, to disperse and dismember so much of this painting, and that's often for profit. How I understand it is that if you imagine any of the medieval Western manuscripts, nobody would even imagine ripping them out one by one, all their pages. And nobody would even dare to do that. And yet, you know, sort of many of these visual traditions from India, Persia, Turkey, they have been torn apart so many times. So for me, it really is a story of plundering and a story of destruction. And that in itself is how, you know, an individual like a student like myself got interested because I wanted to question the types of histories we were learning.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, as you're speaking about this plunder of these traditions, right, the tearing up of books, the auctioning off of these, of these priceless manuscripts, I'm actually hearing my father in what you're saying, because I too heard this growing up at home, bemoaning the way in which our heritage was was commodified. And, you know, I also remember being introduced to miniature painting by my father, who loves and celebrates Mughal art in particular. How did you come to get a better understanding of, of this tradition? And maybe in a way, what made you fall in love with it?

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

Yes. So, you know, my story of, like, coming into visual art is probably, you know, again, it captures the temperature, the moment of of that particular generation of coming of age in the 80s during the military dictatorship when there's diminishing human rights, there's diminishing women's rights in Pakistan at that time, you know I was encouraged to go into the humanities because I wanted to be socially and politically engaged. I wanted to understand, you know, some of the things that were changing and shifting. I grew up in a family where, you know, we were encouraged to speak, to bring topics to the table, to respect however we wanted to be spiritually inclined, you know. There was encouragement for all of the members of the family to participate, including girls and women.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

As a child, Shahzia found herself naturally gravitating towards drawing. She ended up going to the National College of Art in Lahore, and met a professor, Bashir Ahmad, who nudged her towards the tradition of miniature painting -- which wasn't a popular medium at the time.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

At that time it was being discouraged because it wasn't progressive, it wasn't avant garde. It was something that was going to restrict your creative abilities. So I kind of became interested in that dynamic that, what is the sort of twist there and why is it, you know, seen with so much suspicion? And yet if a foreigner came along they would be taken right to the department and being shown oh here is our tradition. So that's where that's how I kind of became interested. And my interests were, you know, more I wanted to study that kind of social dimension of it. But I also knew that the only way to really get familiar was to join Bashir Ahmad's class. And, and that meant really studying it as a studio art.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Shahzia wanted to forge a new relationship with the art of miniature painting -- and to step away from being a traditional artist.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

Yeah, the experimenting happened fairly soon, like I kind of intuitively understood that there was a lot of potential. And at the same time, I knew that I had to really go through the rigors of learning the technique because I wasn't really just making large scale, you know, paintings that would refer to the tradition. I was actually going to learn the actual techniques that related to making the miniatures. So that's where I went along and worked with Bashir. And, at times, you know, I was often working there for more than 12, 14 hours daily. And Bashir was this very -- you know, he's a very dedicated teacher and he was so dedicated to this tradition that he was always available. He literally lived at that school. He was there 24/7 in his small little space there. And so I think that also helped shape and develop my understanding that, you know, I could simultaneously learn the technique and kind of share it with Bashir and show that I was progressing and kept working hard at it so that he could share, you know, the next level of technique. And then simultaneously battle with him around ideas and how I could, how I could, like, create new things and that. My enthusiasm was always -- of course, was encouraging for the teacher, for him. And so when I ended up choosing, I was like, I don't want to do the thesis as a series of um, a theme, on which I do a series of small four or five miniatures. I want to do a large-scale miniature. So I did like a five foot piece which took me whatever a year or more.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

That piece was *The Scroll*, an ambitious painting that launched Shahzia into the public eye. Compared to some of her later work, it looks pretty conservative. But it was a big break from the tradition that she had been studying. Not just because of its size, but also because of its subject matter.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

It didn't have a theme. It wasn't going to depict contemporary weddings or, you know, Basant Bahar or Spring. Like that for me was like, no. I'm going to like think of how I can inform my work with this urgency that I'm feeling as a young artist, as a female, you know, how could I put that sort of feeling, the emotional nature of what we were going through culturally, politically in Pakistan at that time. So I wanted my painting to capture that.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

What you see in the painting is a house, opened so that you can see inside. The figure of a woman dressed in white appears throughout -- walking, observing, sitting, painting. In some places, she's translucent, almost ghost-like. What you don't see is what's going on outside the house -- a country living under military rule, with controversial laws, like The Hudood Ordinances, that carried severe punishments for things like adultery.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

So it's a young girl. And, it was never meant to be a self-portrait. But that idea of this young adult female protagonist is that the body, sort of the figure, defies bodily restrictions. It becomes very transparent. It's very elastic. So it's almost like a ghost. And that is where I think for me, it's like the emotion, the defining emotion of the piece where I'm claiming the freedom of the body. And this is at a time when, you know, the Hudood ordinances are looming in the culture, where you couldn't as a female just roam around in the city. You had to have a male guardian and it had to be, you know, somebody from your family, because you could be stopped and asked for a marriage certificate. Like these were real things that were happening in our culture, in our society. So this is when, you know, I chose to then engage with, I knew that I was going to be mostly at home, like I'm going to look at the armature, the domestic nature of the house and use the house as a case study of sorts. So that's how I think that *The Scroll* becomes a kind of a dialog about the social dimensions of the home as well.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

The work was met with acclaim. It won a major award in Pakistan and was shown at the Pakistani embassy in Washington, D.C. Afterwards, Shahzia got into an MFA program at the Rhode Island School of Design. Since then, she's spent most of her life in the United States. Shahzia's work continued to evolve over the years, remaining engaged with the miniature tradition, but pushing the boundaries further and further. She started to include more abstraction and patterns.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

I was always interested in math, in patterns, in, in kind of breaking things apart and reorganizing them.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Her work also became more surreal -- incorporating fantastic beasts, monsters and floating body parts.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

So there's a series called *The House*, which is basically about the constraints of escaping and imprisoning representation. You know, in there there's this cage-like form, which has a door. There's like a pink heart that's lurking inside, but I think that painting tapped into my anxiety of being boxed into a stereotype on behalf of a culture or a religion.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

And though her work has kept a toe in that miniature tradition, some of her pieces are gigantic. Like *Gopi-Contagion*, a 2016 project where she projected dark shapes across billboards in New York City's Times Square. The shapes look something like bats or the birds from Alfred Hitchcock's movie, giving me that same feeling: mesmerizing with a slight sense of dread. Projects like these redefined the practice of miniatures. And in 2006, her contributions were recognized by the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the Genius Grant. It's a large cash prize with no strings attached, given to people who have shown extraordinary originality in creative pursuits, as well as a high degree of self direction. But for a long time, she had no idea that she'd gotten it.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

Oh, yeah. It's a it's a funny story because I oh, my usually, my voicemail is always full. It's so much easier to deal with email or with a, you know, a text message. So this is a long time ago and I remember I saw missed calls, but I couldn't recognize what the number was, so I ignored them. And then I was told that I was one of the hardest person to get a hold of. It took them three weeks to tell me that I had won the MacArthur [laughs].

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

After living for so long in the United States, doing this work that bridges worlds -- east and west, old and new, big and small -- I wondered how Shahzia saw her place in the art world.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

Now, I see myself as all of it. What can I say, right? All of these categories are part and parcel of, of me in this moment in time. So, you know, especially right now, I think as an Asian-American, I'm like, I am reengaging and trying to understand, okay, given what's unfolding in the U.S. right now, what does it mean to be an Asian-American? And, you know, that is a very large, broad category in which so many different identities and representations and histories of Asia have to coexist of sorts, right. I also think of definitely the Muslim-American identity, as well

as the Pakistani-American identity, the South Asian, the diasporic, all of it, because all of those have over these last 20, 30 years, been applied in different ways onto me. If not by me, by others. So, you know, it's the more the more categories, the merrier I guess. That's what I'm trying to say [laughs].

AMIRALI ALIBHAI:

Hi, I'm Amirali Alibhai, Head of Performing Arts at the Aga Khan Museum. From Qawwali, to Iranian classical music, and from Arab jazz to flamenco, there is something for everyone at our museum without walls. Our live arts programming is central in our mission to connect cultures and people through the arts. Discover something new or enjoy a familiar performance. Go to agakhanmuseum.org/muesumwithoutwalls or find us on Youtube. Now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Shahzia has been in the art world for over 30 years now. A major retrospective of her work is wrapping up at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City. It will be opening in November at her alma mater -- The Rhode Island School of Design. The show is called *Extraordinary Realities*. But there's another career milestone that shows how influential she's really become: In May, she released a children's book about her life. It's called *Roots and Wings: How Shahzia Sikander Became an Artist*.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

That book is for a very young audience. So that was, again, an interesting learning experience that it's -- it looks simple, but it's not that simple to write for a, for a younger audience, right. I was sharing all these different experiences I had as a young child growing up in Lahore, in my grandparents' house, with multiple cousins and uncles and aunts. And you know, very much where we ran around, I kept with my older cousins. We kept pigeons. We slept on the on those *charpais*. What do you call them? The jute, right?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I mean, we we I mean, when you say charpai, it's like so evocative, because all of our childhoods from the subcontinent are on these basically like how would you say, like like jute mattress frames, right...

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

Right!

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

That we would sleep on.

SHAHZIA SIKANDER:

And and of course it would be in the it would be hot, so in the summer all our charpais would be outside and we were very close to my grandmother so, you know, all the cousins are sleeping

with the grandmother outside. And at that, in those times, you know, you could actually see the sky so you could see stars. You know, Lahore is very polluted now. So explaining that, this idea of the freedom, you know, and the sort of like always looking at the horizon and the stars and the kite flying, I learned how to fly a kite with my grandfather. I remember we -- I don't know, the *jamun* tree. I still don't know how you, what you call them in English.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, I, I don't know, I don't know either, Shahzia. It's one of those mysterious fruits that only seems to be found in my, in my, in my childhood visits to Pakistan.

Shahzia Sikander:

Did you ever -- you remember the *jamun* trees? Because so many of those I --

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Of course. My *nana* had a *jamun* tree in his in his backyard.

Shahzia Sikander:

We had two or three *jamun* trees and we had mango trees. But I remember the *jamun* tree was such a big deal in my childhood because even my mother would climb it and to shake the, the branches and we would catch it in bedsheets. So I was like, I was obsessing, I was like, I want that image in the book. But what is always so exciting was also that you can encourage younger students and children about the importance of creativity and the importance of like, you know, how art is, as I say in the book, a ticket to life. That's a very important kind of lesson to share I think in general, with the youth, with younger people, because my experience was always like, oh, you can't do art, as if art was some other kind of thing out there that was going to, you know, corrupt you or was going to disable you, because how could you make a living out of art? So of course, things have changed a lot, but I still encounter a lot of South Asian younger kids here that still struggle with their families, you know, for getting support to really become artists.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Shahzia Sikander, what does this being human mean to you?

Shahzia Sikander:

In my heart, I think it's anchored to the human's drive for truth. And that even the pursuit of that is a very transformative act and being human is really about transforming, transforming yourself and the society.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Shahzia Sikander, this has been such a pleasure. Thank you for making the time to speak to me on *This Being Human*.

Shahzia Sikander:

Thank you so much. Thank you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our Senior Producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Nicole Edwards. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to www.agakhanmuseum.org. The Museum wishes to thank Nadir and Shabin Mohamed for their philanthropic support to develop and produce *This Being Human*.