

# IKON

## Exhibition Guide

**Shahzia Sikander *Intimate Ambivalence***  
**30 July – 14 September 2008**  
**Second Floor Galleries and Tower Room**

This is Shahzia Sikander's first major solo exhibition in the UK and largest to-date in Europe. Born in Pakistan in 1969, now based in New York, the artist's work combines Western and Eastern traditions, signifying an ongoing preoccupation with transformation and fragmented narrative. States of transition are revealed as a theme where layered images allow motifs to 'morph' into one another. For example, repeated shapes of a hair piece or turban might suggest either abstract patterns or swarms of insects, defying the possibility of stable representation. Sikander sustains this sense of flux whether in work on paper or in digital animation, through an artistic proposition that gives rise to countless manifestations of unsettling beauty.

This exhibition is focused primarily on Sikander's output of the last two years, much shown for the first time, including a wall drawing made especially for Ikon. This ambitious new work results from the painstaking tracings of outlines from projections on to the wall that are subsequently filled in with colour. This process is repeated over and over again, building up a dense and richly detailed surface of superimposed shapes. Like two new large gouaches *Sinxay: Narrative as Dissolution #1* and *#2* (2008), the wall drawing acts as a counterpoint to four small paintings displayed in the same room. *Who's Veiled Anyway?*, *Perilous Order*, *Ready to Leave* and *Reinventing the Dislocation* (all 1997), the earliest works in the exhibition, provide an aesthetic and conceptual context for the consideration of recent pieces. Intrigued by the Pakistani genre of miniature painting, and its consequent reduction to kitsch for tourist consumption in the mid 1980s, the artist developed the experimental approach seen here, recasting tradition with present-day subject matter for reinterpretation.

By carefully choosing structural devices such as a circle, a rectangle or a bisecting line – the foundations for Western abstraction – as the basis for more figurative artistic expression, Sikander recalls multiple associations across diverse cultures. A subject such as the turban as seen in *The Illustrated Page* (2005–08) and *Pursuit*

*Curve* (2004) may represent gender, mind, a region, a race of people, a religion, the enemy or it may simply be a graphic type. Using a highly stylised form of drawing, she interconnects disparate human, animal and architectural forms.

Moving through to the second room a suite of intimate portraits resulting from Sikander's recent visits to Laos on display. Here, a series of sixteen, finely detailed graphite drawings, *Monks and Novices – Portrait Series* (2006–08), is installed as a kind of frieze. Sikander's first encounter with her sitters came in 2004 as the result of an invitation to participate in the project *The Quiet in the Land: Art, Spirituality, and Everyday Life, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR*, the third and current project organised by The Quiet in the Land taking place in Luang Prabang, Lao People's Democratic Republic. Luang Prabang, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, was chosen as it remains organised as a series of neighbourhoods surrounding a central temple through which community life revolves. As such it is distinguished by the extent to which the spaces and rituals of everyday life fuse art, spirituality and politics. Subsequent research visits provided Sikander with a focus on these monks and novices as subjects, their way of life slowly but inextricably eroded by tourist attention. For the artist their quiet dignity and the integrity with which they went about their daily routine complimented her contemplation of an ever-changing world where issues of mutability and transformation are crucial.

Other ink, gouache and graphite on paper works developed from this project are a selection of nine pieces from *The Sinxay Series* including *The Kingdom of Flowers, The Land of the Nagas, 7 Beautiful Daughters of Sethi (text in Lao)* (2006). These derive from the Sinxay text, an epic devotional poem of Laos with some estimated 6,000 verses, Sikander being interested in the way the poem had survived through oral tradition and recitation, the act of learning and memorising itself an act of devotion, evolving through each successive generation. For the artist this process suggests a sense of 'freedom' whereby the variety of versions breaks the rigidity of a defined form. The ability of the poem to conjure up pictures, constantly reinvented in the imagination (as never visualised in concrete form), whilst carrying notions of great moral or philosophical significance is remarkable. Sikander's response to the Sinxay text recommends it as still relevant, not lost in translations through time and space, but transformed in order to make sense to us.