

# PARALLAX Shahzia Sikander

## Tufts

© 2018 Trustees of Tufts College

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher.

Tufts University Art Gallery  
The Shirley and Alex Aidekman Arts Center  
40 Talbot Avenue  
Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155

ISBN: 978-1-88-0593

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schlegel, Amy Ingrid, curator. | Tufts University. Art Gallery, host institution, publisher.

Title: Shahzia Sikander : Parallax / curated by Amy Ingrid Schlegel, Ph.D.

Description: Medford, MA : The Tufts University Art Gallery, 2016. |

"Published on the occasion of the Tufts University Art Gallery's exhibition from September 10-December 6, 2015." | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016045821 | ISBN 9781880593141

Subjects: LCSH: Sikander, Shahzia, 1969- | Art, Pakistani--Exhibitions. | Women artists--Pakistan.

Classification: LCC N7310.73.S57 A4 2016 | DDC 709.2--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016045821>

- Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota October 5–November 3, 2017  
Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu, Hawaii March 16–July 30, 2017  
MAXXI | Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome, Italy June 22, 2016–January 15, 2017  
The Shanghai 21st Century Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, China April 4–July 31, 2016  
Asia Society Hong Kong Center, Hong Kong March 16–July 9, 2016  
Hong Kong Maritime Museum, Hong Kong March 16–June 5, 2016  
Times Square Midnight Moment, New York, New York October 1–31, 2015  
6th Moscow Biennale, Moscow, Russia September 16–October 4, 2015  
Tufts University Art Gallery, Medford, Massachusetts September 10–December 6, 2015  
Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain July 16–November 22, 2015  
SPACE Gallery, Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio, Texas October 8, 2014–March 7, 2015  
Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden March 30–May 18, 2014  
Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, Denmark June 14–July 31, 2014  
National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea April 29–July 13, 2014  
Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka, Bangladesh February 7–9, 2014  
5th Auckland Triennial, Auckland, New Zealand May 10–August 11, 2013  
Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, UAE March 13–May 13, 2013  
Pilar Corrias, London, United Kingdom February 22–March 28, 2013

Cover:

*The Cypress despite its Freedom Is Held Captive to the Garden*, 2012–13

Endpapers:

Video still from *Parallax*, 2013

Frontispiece:

Installation view, MAXXI | Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome, Italy, 2016–17

Unless otherwise indicated, all images are copyright and courtesy of the artist, Pilar Corrias, London, and Sean Kelly, New York.

Video stills are from *Parallax*, 2013, three-channel, single-image HD video animation with 5.1 surround sound, 15:26 minutes.

Music by Du Yun. Animation by Patrick O'Rourke and David Adams

Edited by Lucy Flint. Designed by Jeanne V. Koles. Printed by Grossman Marketing, Somerville, MA

# PARTICLES AND INTERACTIONS

Tasneem Zehra Husain

Sara and Leo are characters from the popular science novel *Only the Longest Threads*. Sara, a theoretical physics graduate student, was both a muse and a sounding board for writer Leo while he worked on a fictional reimagining of the history of physics a couple of years ago.

From: Sara Byrne <breaking.symmetries@gmail.com>

Sent: Thursday, October 15, 2015 8:41 PM

To: Leonardo.Santorini@gmail.com

Subject: Parallax

Dear Leo,

Ideas are tumbling over themselves in my head in a rush to be expressed, and the only way I can keep from calling and waking you up in the middle of the night is to write this e-mail instead. I just got back from Tufts, and I have to say, even though I had been looking forward to this exhibition, I was taken completely unaware by my own reaction to it. From what I have seen and heard about Shahzia Sikander, I expected *Parallax* to be a beautiful and intriguing piece of art, but since the outward themes—desert, oil, migration—don't really strike a chord with me, I did not anticipate feeling such a strong personal connection with the work.



is observed from different angles—a phenomenon known as parallax. Not having set foot in a lab for decades, I had almost forgotten the word until I saw the banner outside the Aidekman Arts Center tonight, when the memory came flooding back.

My first conscious thought was that in order for parallax to even be possible, a work should have the potential of being viewed from multiple angles. I tried to shake off the expectation, preparing myself for the fact that an artist would probably interpret the word differently. But when the panoramic animation unfolded in that darkened room, I released a breath I was hardly aware of holding; even in the physics textbook sense, the usage was justified.

The multisensory nature of the installation could in itself excuse the title: layers of sound waft through the gallery while lush images drift across the screen. But, much to my delight, the title is not merely excused—it is earned. Quite early on, you hear a rumbling in the depths, you sense motion bubbling behind the closest, most vivid forms. Slowly the awareness dawns that what you witness is unfolding on multiple planes of variable transparency, and that occasionally you catch glimpses of worlds beyond the immediate.

*Mirror Plane*, 2012  
Color direct gravure  
36 1/8 x 29 1/2 inches (91.8 x 74.9 centimeters)  
Courtesy of the artist and Crown Point Press



Even as the deep sunset scatters into jewel-toned petals that fill your field of vision, you are aware of the desert floating just behind it, with arid sands that render flowers impossible. A veritable forest of trees made from pumps and valves wafts in, only to be obscured by rivulets of oil, dripping down a plane nearer to us. The pattern and precision of the rigidly structured steel trees recedes behind an organically growing thick liquid curtain, until only a faint imprint remains. For a fleeting instant, the image reminded me of gauge theories and how even a broken symmetry can leave traces, but I dismissed the thought.

For the most part, it appears that the layers in the animation are independent of each other, parallel in the true sense of the word, but then something that happens on one of the strata triggers a reaction on the next; they are autonomous, but not oblivious of each other. I couldn't quite identify the cause, but suddenly the visual veneer fractures into shards, like broken glass. As if by a sharp desert wind, splinters are whipped clean across the screen, and the penultimate plane is revealed.

Cartographic images, tiled and tessellated, fade into human figures that seem to float on an inky sea. Dark waters pulsate and move apart, revealing pinpricks of light, and for a moment you wonder if the sea is really a sky, resplendent with twinkling stars. By this stage, I was fascinated by the interplay between the various layers, and how they interact without intersecting. Immediately, that phrase triggered the image that—for me—will always be entangled with it: a stack of parallel D-branes, with open strings stretching between them. Fond as I am of exploring that system, I found the association slightly arbitrary in this context, so I brushed it off and focused more closely on the installation.

