

Temporary Art Exhibit at the University of Houston

What is the controversy?

Two art pieces by Shahzia Sikander, an internationally acclaimed artist with Houston connections, were commissioned for temporary display at the University of Houston as a part of the University of Houston System's Public Art program. Ms. Sikander's piece *Now* (2023) has been in the news lately drawing criticism and controversy. *Now* was installed in New York and remains as a site-specific exhibit in New York. Two art pieces on display at the University of Houston, entitled *Witness* (2023) and *Reckoning* (2020), are by the same artist. Critics point out that while *Now* is not on display at UH, many similarities between *Now* and *Witness* exist and are offensive to some people.

How long will this exhibit last?

Eight months. The exhibit will formally open on February 28, 2024, and will be removed in October 2024.

How was it funded?

Temporary art exhibits are funded through private philanthropy, specifically given for the purpose of public art.

Is the exhibit open to the public?

All public art at the University of Houston System campuses, including temporary exhibits, are open to the public. We invite and encourage the public to experience art.

What is temporary art?

The University of Houston System (UHS) is home to one of the largest university-owned public art collections in the nation. More than 750 pieces are in this collection and over one hundred of them are on display at various campuses throughout the System. The Temporary Public Art Program of Public Art UHS periodically commissions art pieces for temporary display with the aim of generating student interest in the arts and honing their skills to independently review, debate and analyze artwork. Displaying a temporary work from an artist is never meant to be a celebration of the artist or his/her work but to simply provide a platform for artistic expression that encourages critical reflection and exploration of important issues. A part of student education is to understand that art can evoke diverse interpretations and emotions and that we must find ways to engage in constructive dialogue.

How was Sikander's work selected for temporary exhibition?

The University of Houston System Public Art Committee (UHSPAC), consisting of experts from within and outside the system, periodically invites proposals from artists to further the mission of the system. Several criteria guide the committee's decision including but not limited to mission congruency, high visibility, unique approach, and ease of installation. In this case, the committee began the selection process in 2018 and received a total of seven proposals.

Shahzia Sikander's proposal was found to be relevant by the committee for a number of reasons:

- The artwork gives representation to **diversity of the University and the city**. Sikander's purpose is to give visibility to groups that have gone unnoticed and to bring forth multiple interpretations of symbols in different cultures. The artist stated in her proposal, "I like to believe that the function of art is to allow multiple meanings and possibilities, to open up space for a more just world. How we experience art, how we respond to it and how we interpret it is an open-ended premise. As an artist, it is my intent to create something wondrous and with many possible associations — something that can generate thought and produce difference."
- Sikander has **strong ties with Houston**. She was a fellow of the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in the mid-1990s where she first experimented with layering and overlapping narratives. Here, she created the foundation of her current work with the repertoire of symbols, including the fragmented female figure, which appears in her work.
- The artist was deeply involved with **Project Row Houses in Third Ward** during her time in Houston. For her, the arts organization was a "shining example the local artists and collectives operating outside of the traditional spaces of power and narrative, where the everyday functioned as sites of transformation."
- Shahzia Sikander is a 2006 MacArthur Foundation Fellow and received the **United States Medal of Arts in 2012**. She expands and subverts pre-modern and classical Central and South-Asian painting traditions through a broad range of materials and methods, including miniature painting, works on paper, video, mosaic, and sculpture. Distinguished for launching the neo-miniature movement, Sikander investigates conceptual premises in language, trade, empire and migration through feminist perspectives, colonial, and imperial power structures through her far-reaching practice.

What is the artist's context of her art pieces at UH?

"Erasure. Lack of visibility. These things are at the core of my relationship with art," [Sikander explained](#), adding that for the public art commission, she was drawn to expanding the idea of "what monuments could stand for." The imagery in the exhibition at UH references intersecting religious beliefs, cultural traditions and languages, as Sikander demonstrates the interconnectedness of our world.

Cultural Interconnectedness

- The allegorical female form's arms and legs resemble intertwined tree roots. According to the artist, the form is self-rooted and "can carry its roots wherever it goes," making it able to have roots across cultures, places and times. It also explores issues of being part of a diaspora, having to move around from place to place and how that can affect one's identity.
- The sculpture has braids shaped like ram horns, representing the unification of disparate strands. Ram horns have significance in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as Central and South Asian beliefs, often associated with power and valor. The artist has said the braids link to one of her paintings that represents the courage, fluidity and resilience of the feminine.
- The lines on the skirt are a symbol of the longitude and latitude lines on a globe, demonstrating the figure's power in the world and relationship to numerous peoples.
- The mosaic glass skirt represents the glass ceiling that the feminine form can break through as well as the multiple linguistic relationships at the core of human language.