

Temporary Art Exhibit at the University of Houston

FAQ from Public Art UH System

What is the controversy?

Two sculptures by internationally acclaimed Pakistan-born American artist Shahzia Sikander, *Now* (2023) and *Witness* (2023), were co-commissioned for temporary display by Madison Square Park Conservancy and Public Art of the University of Houston System to be displayed at the University of Houston after a six-month run at Madison Square Park in 2023. *Now* was installed in New York and is not traveling to Houston. Some individuals have been offended by *Witness*, currently on view at the University of Houston.

The exhibit will remain in place through October 2024.

Context from artist Shahzia Sikander:

What is the significance of the braids in the sculpture?

In the sculpture *Witness*, the female figure wears her hair in braids that resemble two ram's horns, universal symbols of strength and wisdom and a recurring motif in the NY Appellate Courthouse, which was a point of reference for *Witness*. The ram and its horn decorate the arms of the iconic judge's bench chairs in the courtroom. The rams also appear on the frieze of the façade of the courthouse. The braided hair draws on the syncretic visual histories of Africa and Asia, citing early 20th Century Nigerian Crest Masks, and the spiraling snail-shell hair curls that often adorn the Buddha's head.

What is the significance of the steel skirt?

The steel skirt is a direct reference to the architectural armature from the Maitland Armstrong stained glass ceiling dome of the New York Appellate Courtroom. The metal frame hoists the body skyward, embodying the "glass ceiling" that the feminine form breaks through.

What is the significance of the mosaic?

Mapped with glass tesserae and in a calligraphic format on the surface of the steel skirt is the Urdu word "havah", meaning "air" in Urdu and meaning "Eve" in Arabic, Hebrew, and other languages. The mosaic also takes reference from the stained-glass dome of the New York Appellate Courtroom.

What is the significance of the rooted limbs?

The sculpture's appendages suggest self-rootedness, something the artist has likened to women's resilience and autonomy. It is not in reference to nature, or tree-roots, where an absolute location or earth is required as a host. Women's sovereignty that enables questioning the fallacy of assimilation versus foreignness is grounded in the work.

What is the significance of the decorative collar?

The lace jabot on the sculpture is a nod to the feminization of the black judicial robe popularized by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and first introduced by Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court.

What is the timeline for installation?

Installation is complete. *Witness* (2023) has been installed and minor conservation work must be completed on site. Installation of *Reckoning* (2023) is completed and currently on view.

How long will this exhibit last?

Eight months. The exhibit formally opened 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 to encourage engagement 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.

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

- 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. She also exhibited at the Project Row Houses in 1996 and recently at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2022.
- Sikander is a 2006 MacArthur Foundation Fellow and received the United States Medal of Arts in 2012. Sikander reimagines pre-modern and classical Central and South-Asian visual and art history traditions through a broad range of materials and methods, including painting, animation, mosaic, and sculpture. Initially transforming the traditional form of miniature painting, she pioneered what is now recognized as the Neo-Miniature movement, and over the past 20 years has sought to diversify a predominant Eurocentricity in contemporary art. Her work interweaves historical and contemporary ideas about narrative, gender, trade, empire and diaspora while centering on women's lives.

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Editor's Disclosure: *The document was updated March 20, 2024 to include additional information on the the timeline for installation and inclusion of the artist's context of the sculpture Witness (2023).*