

**Projects 70 : Janine Antoni, Shahzia
Sikander, Kara Walker : the Museum of
Modern Art, New York, November 22,
2000-March 13, 2001**

[Fereshteh Daftari]

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70

janine antoni
shahzia sikander
kara walker

projects

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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MoMA
1980

Janine Antoni, Shahzia Sikander, and Kara Walker conclude Projects 70, the exhibition series of banners created especially for The Museum of Modern Art. The first cycle, based on different calligraphic traditions, featured Shirin Neshat, Simon Patterson, and Xu Bing. The second brought together craft-oriented artists Jim Hodges, Beatriz Milhazes, and Faith Ringgold. Antoni, Sikander, and Walker are young artists but seasoned infiltrators who have carved their ways into set traditions. In their hands, the banners that customarily announce the Museum's presence brandish subversive messages and promote provocative agendas.

Janine Antoni

A woman has been here. On 53rd Street Janine Antoni's intervention has left its mark. Her work often shows the evidence of an action and points to habits, rituals, accessories, and behavior associated with women. With her long hair soaked in "Loving Care" hair dye, for instance, she mopped the floor of the exhibition spaces where she performed—the metaphorical arena of male action painting. In *Gnaw*, currently on view in *Open Ends*, she chewed the edges of perfect Minimalist cubes, one made of lard, the other of chocolate, and recycled the discarded materials into lipsticks and heart shaped chocolate boxes, respectively. Through her repeated actions she compulsively nibbled away any reference to cold industrial appearance and removed all anonymity by orienting the attention to the maker: a female agent. Eroded with repeated bites, the cube is reduced to the residue of gluttonous appetite and the Minimalist order transformed into an eating disorder.



left: Close-up view of *Manifesto*, the MoMA banner unstitched by Janine Antoni. Photo: Larry Lamay, courtesy Luhring Augustine

below: Janine Antoni unstitching the letters from the MoMA banner, 2000

Thus availing herself of art movements traditionally associated with masculine production, whether Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist in reference, Antoni brands whatever she touches as female. In her path, marked as feminine and feminist, she acknowledges her artistic legacy, which includes Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, and Carolee Schneemann, as well as Sherrie Levine and Jenny Holzer, to name just a few.

Operating in the space between genders, Antoni defines herself both in dialogue with past artistic traditions and in relation to her parents, the ur-models of feminine and masculine. For instance, in a 1995 photograph titled *Momme* (1995), Antoni hides under her mother's skirt. In *Wean* (1989–90), as the title indicates, the urge to separate triumphs. In *Mom and Dad*, a 1994 photograph, she breaks down the boundaries between man and woman by remaking her parents in the image of one another. Her new composite characters suggest the malleability of identity as well as the imprint of the absent daughter, the stylist and choreographer of the family portrait.

Ultimately, Antoni is in charge. She decides on the dose of gender she wishes to impart. For this *Projects* series she unstitched all the letters from the MoMA banner until all that remained were the letters that read "MoM." With the visibility she gives to absence, her performative action, not unlike Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing by de Kooning, echoes a kind of victory over an obliterated adversary, a symbolic father/authority figure. "MoM," Antoni's manifesto, over-

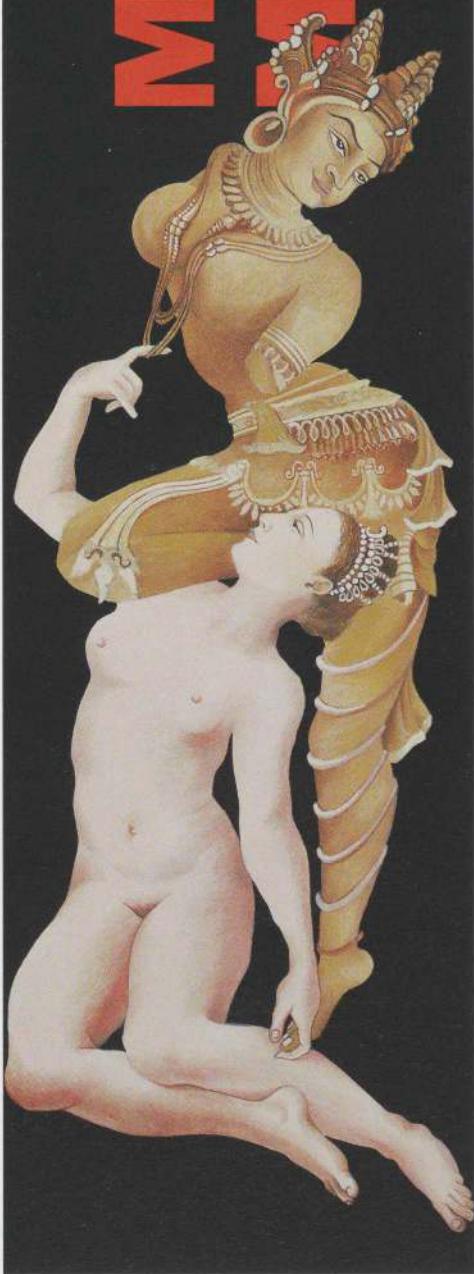
shadows and removes the patriarchal aura of the institution and advertises a new identity, an alma mater, a maternal kind of a museum.

Unstitching, like unweaving for Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*—a reference Antoni invites—is an ongoing process of undoing, tearing down, and remaking.¹ With her humorous action, simple yet time consuming, Antoni unravels a matrilineal lineage for a museum whose founders, after all, were three women, or "The Ladies," as Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Miss Lillie P. Bliss, and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan came to be known.

Shahzia Sikander

If Antoni rewrites history with gender on her mind, Shahzia Sikander reviews it from the post-colonial viewpoint. Her banner brings together images plucked from art history: the central protagonist in Bronzino's High Mannerist painting *Allegory of Venus* serves as a pedestal for a twelfth-century Indian sculpture of a celestial dancing figure. The relationship is convoluted. The light-skinned Venus and the darker Devata flirtatiously twist and turn and sinuously intertwine in an intimate configuration. In their mannerist posture they deviate from the simplicity of the classical norm. Outcasts of the canon, eccentrics, or simply different, they embrace not

MALIGNED MONSTERS



in a dangerous liaison, but rather as accomplice witnesses of a one-sided history.

Emphatically, "Maligned Monsters" appears on the banner. While this inscription winks at "MoMA" in its red letters, it specifically refers to the title of a book by Partha Mitter, who discusses the ethnocentric reactions of Western scholars to Indian art.² In their opinion, the tendency of this art toward excess and ornament equates it with decadence and makes it incompatible with classical Greek art characterized by "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur"—Johann Joachim Winckelmann's doctrine-turned-Victorian-dogma. Following that argument, Sikander extends its logic to include Mannerism, the anti-classical impulse within the Western tradition. In a complex union, Sikander links one supposed digression with another and highlights the condition of being different through these much maligned monsters of time.

Not unlike her native country, Pakistan, Sikander's entire body of work is founded on the notion of difference, but one that is sensitive to all shades. She scans all gradations not to exclude but to merge, mix, and layer. These intentions are evident in her choice of miniatures as a medium: a category of painting that is anachronistic in Pakistan and an alien outsider to modernism. In *Perilous Order* (1997), for instance, multiple references coexist. They range from the Islamic (Mughal miniatures) and the Hindu (Basohli painting) to the Western (Minimalist grid). They crisscross and converge with the uniquely personal, the image of a self-nourishing, uprooted female figure. Like her, Sikander refuses to belong, to be fixed, to be grounded, to be stereotyped. With great agility she moves from miniatures to mural paintings, from precision and figuration to abstraction, from tradition to invention, from the norm to its transgression. Forever deracinated, she hovers neither here nor there, but freely in-between, all over, and beyond it all. Sikander inscribes this ever-evolving hybrid condition on her banner. Embodiments and inhabitants of two mediums—painting and sculpture—and two mythologies—Greco-Roman and Indian—her figures meet to celebrate otherness wherever it may be and in whatever guise it may come.

left: Shahzia Sikander. *Maligned Monsters*. 2000. Maquette for banner

above: Shahzia Sikander. *Perilous Order*. 1997. Vegetable pigment, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea water on paper, $10\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{16}$ " (26.4 x 20.8 cm). Collection Whitney Museum of American Art. Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee. Photo: © 2000 Whitney Museum of American Art



Kara Walker

Another face of history, this time seen through the black-and-white filter of race, informs Kara Walker's banner. Her source is a nineteenth-century engraving of a black woman slave who is seen attempting suicide by leaping into the void from the second story window of a tavern. As Walker explains, the woman did not succeed in killing herself. The original image was captioned: "—but I did not want to go..." and was intended to rally concern for the plight of slaves in America. Walker has "always loved the image for its surprising grace. The drawing itself is clunky. The perspective is off. There is no expression in either gesture or tone which hints to the drama of the scene. Without the facts," she says, "it is very hard to tell just what is supposed to be happening. I love the flat ambiguity of the image. I imagine the woman to be hovering. Hovering between reality and perception, between a passive act and an aggressive one. I have riffed off this image several times and this time it's less about that formal ambiguity and more about an accident of freedom." With biting humor Walker adds, "The joke is she breaks the chain of bondage, then her arm breaks in the process of falling into an undetermined space. Whoops. The Other joke is that the black woman is rendered white, defined by a black ground."³



A world drained of color except for that of race—two dimensional, part fiction, part history—Kara Walker's narratives are set as much in what she calls her "inner plantation" as in the antebellum South. In this dark, unfairylike tale, her cast of characters replicates old stereotypes, which makes her work controversial. Walker animates her protagonists with unbridled instincts. The accessories of genteel, bourgeois society—a hoop skirt here, a top hat there, the tradition of the cut-out silhouette itself—highlight all the more the uncivility of manners. Shadowy actors, they gallop on white grounds and speak for humanity in all its permutations: master or slave, young and old, male or female, all caught in a senseless delirium. This is a world where victim and abuser exchange clothes and color, and carefree violence is the rule. (Several other works by Walker are currently on view in *The Path of Resistance*, one of the *Open Ends* exhibitions.)

Walker's scenarios are like Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* recast in the image of America's corrupted dream. Her version, however, is not a sermon. It is the testimony of a shameless, uncensored imagination.⁴ Her work stems from the lingering aftertaste of race conflicts, suppressed but still lurking. There is no happy ending to this history, at least not yet. In the banner, anger turns inward. Unshackled at last, the slave woman seeks release in her self-destruction. A negative of herself, frozen like a silent scream, slowly she floats not unlike a feather, an angel, or a ghost. Yet she is mutilated like a broken doll and will come crashing down. In her death lies her freedom.

In this final installment of banners, three women have laid siege to the facade of an historical institution. Antoni invokes it directly as a mother. Sikander seductively but obliquely teases its attention toward cultural

left: Kara Walker. *Miss Obedience*. 2000. Maquette for banner

above: Alexander Rider, after Alexander Lawson (1773–1846). "—but I did not want to go...." 1822. Engraving, in Jesse Torrey, *American Slave Trade* (London). Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress

diversity. With Walker, the building itself is implicated as the site of an impending tragedy. All have raised their banners with history on their minds. Armed with a razor, a pencil, and a pair of scissors they have unwoven earlier versions, redrawn and rehabilitated defamed archetypes, and reopened old wounds and new chapters. They have nudged history in their directions.

—Fereshteh Daftari

footnotes

- 1 See Nancy Spector, "Slumber: A Fairytale," in *Janine Antoni* (Küschnacht, Switzerland: Ink Tree Edition, and Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000), pp. 10–20.
- 2 Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 3 E-mail from Kara Walker to the author, October 6, 2000.
- 4 On Kara Walker and shame, see Hamza Walker, "Kara Walker: Cut It Out," *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, nos. 11–12 (fall–winter 2000): 110–11.

biographies

Janine Antoni

Born 1964 in Freeport, Bahamas. Lives in New York

- 1997 "On Life, Beauty, Translation and Other Difficulties,"
The 5th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul
- 1999 *Regarding Beauty*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Exh. cat.
- 1999 *Imbed*, Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York
- Monograph: *Janine Antoni*. Texts by Nancy Spector, Dan Cameron, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, et al. Küschnacht, Switzerland: Ink Tree Edition, and Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000.

Shahzia Sikander

Born 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan. Lives in New York

- 1997 Deitch Projects, New York
- 1998 The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago. Exh. cat., with text by Faisal Devji; interview with Homi Bhabha
- 1999 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Exh. bro., with text by Valerie Fletcher
- 2000 Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. Exh. bro., with text by Debra Singer

Kara Walker

Born 1969 in Stockton, California. Lives in Providence, Rhode Island

- 1997 The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago. Exh. cat., with text by Kara Walker
- 1997 *Kara Walker: Upon My Many Masters—An Outline*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Exh. cat., with text by Gary Garrels and interview by Alexander Alberro
- 1999 Brent Sikkema, New York
- 1999–2000 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh. Exh. cat., with text by Madeleine Grynsztejn

acknowledgments

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The banners are in the collections of the artists. Brochure © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York