

MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY

ARTIST SHAHZIA SIKANDER RAISES NEW SYMBOLS OF JUSTICE IN MADISON SQUARE PARK AND ATOP NEIGHBORING COURTHOUSE IN MAJOR PUBLIC ART COMMISSION

***Havah...to breathe, air, life* Merges Sikander's Explorations into Sculpture, Video,
and Augmented Reality in an Exhibition That Reconsiders Traditional
Representations of Power**



Shahzia Sikander, *Witness* (left) at Madison Square Park and *NOW* (right) at Courthouse of the Appellate Division, First Department of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, for *Havah...to breathe, air, life*, 2023.
Photos: Yasunori Matsui

New York, NY | Updated January 17, 2022—Significant new works on the theme of justice by artist Shahzia Sikander debut in a major multimedia exhibition commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy and presented simultaneously in the park and at the adjacent Courthouse of the Appellate Division, First Department of the Supreme Court of the State of New York. The exhibition *Havah...to breathe, air, life* features two new large-scale sculptures by Sikander—one within the park that can be animated through augmented reality and another atop the courthouse rooftop, the first female figure to adorn one of its ten plinths—as well as a recent video animation that visually links the distinct elements. The exhibition is a culmination of Sikander's exploration of female representation in monuments and marks her first major, site-specific outdoor exhibition in sculptural form. *Havah...to breathe, air, life* is co-commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy and Public Art of the University of Houston System (Public Art UHS). The exhibition is on view in New York through June 4, 2023, and will then travel to Houston.

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"Through luminous allegorical female figures, Shahzia's project asks who is historically represented and who wields power in the justice system, both symbolically and actually," said Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Artistic Director and Martin Friedman Chief Curator of Madison Square Park Conservancy. "Shahzia continues to innovate artistic forms, and *Havah*, meaning 'air' or 'atmosphere' in Urdu and 'Eve' in Arabic and Hebrew, is a transformative project. The work conceptually and physically unites the park and the courthouse through dialogue amongst monumental sculptures, video animation, and AR."

"With *Havah...to breathe, air, life*, Shahzia demonstrates how justice is conceptually and actively vibrant across cultures and genders," said Dr. Maria C. Gaztambide, Executive Director and Chief Curator of Public Art UHS. "And yet, while the necessity of justice is universal, it is often blindly applied. Shahzia brings to the fore the imbalances of gender and race through this exceptional work. We are proud to join forces with Madison Square Park in bringing it to fruition, while amplifying its reach beyond New York City."

Widely regarded for renewing international interest in the Indo-Persian miniature form and for leading the field by innovating a feminist neo-miniature movement, Sikander was inspired to work in sculpture while she served on the New York Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers in 2017.

In the park, Sikander places a monumental female figure that teems with symbolic imagery, titled *Witness*. Standing eighteen feet high and wearing a hoop skirt inspired by the courtroom's stained-glass ceiling dome and detailed with mosaic, the figure's arms and lower legs swirl into a decorative motif suggesting tree roots, a reference to what the artist has called the "self-rootedness of the female form; it can carry its roots wherever it goes." The figure's hair is braided to resemble a ram's horns, identified in Eastern and Western traditions as a symbol of strength. Snap AR technology, accessible via visitors' smartphones, brings the figure to life with cascading, intricate floral adornments. In an adjacent lawn, from 5 PM to 10 PM daily, visitors can view Sikander's *Reckoning* (2020), a video animation that unites the multiple elements in the exhibition with lush and vibrant depictions of a flowering landscape.

Atop the historic courthouse at 27 Madison Avenue, *NOW*, an eight-foot-high female figure—similar in form to the sculpture in the park, but without the embellished skirt—arises from a colorful lotus, a symbol of wisdom. The work's connection with the courthouse is imbued with meaning as the building's rooftop is crowned by plinths inhabited by statues of nine historic and religious male legislators, including Confucius, Justinian, Lycurgus, Moses, and Zoroaster—but without a single woman represented atop a plinth until Sikander's installation. Sikander's work both physically and symbolically elevates the female figure, putting her on level plane with the traditionally patriarchal embodiments of justice and power. This installation is part of recent efforts by the Court of the Appellate Division to add new artworks from diverse contemporary artists to its courthouse, adding modern perspectives on justice to the existing murals and statuary that decorate the building.

"While our existing art is beautiful and meaningful, it has remained static," said the Court's Presiding Justice, Rolando T. Acosta. "Theories of justice have gradually expanded to include previously marginalized groups, and we want to invite voices from such groups into our courthouse to gather new perspectives on our system of justice."

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Justice Dianne T. Renwick, Chair of the Court's Committee that leads this effort, added, "As we seek to broaden the visibility of less-often-recognized contributors to law and justice in our society, what better way to start than with the figure of a woman? Women are foundations of our society. Throughout history we have been champions for freedom, equal rights, and justice. For the first time since the Court's historic opening well over 100 years ago, the figure of a woman finally and rightfully will stand on equal footing with the male philosophers and lawgivers who line the other pedestals. This type of collaboration is unprecedented in New York State and we are very excited about this endeavor and the possibilities for other courts."

For the exhibition, Sikander and the Conservancy are working closely with appropriate City agencies, Thornton Tomasetti engineers, and the Court's Presiding Justice to establish a model that inspires future collaborative works amongst artists, nonprofits, and American courthouses. Courthouse tours and public conversations with the Justices and Sikander are planned in conjunction with the exhibition. On February 6, the Conservancy will host a discussion with Sikander and human rights attorney Becca Heller, moderated by Justice Judith Gische, about the state of justice today, how the legal field has advanced or failed women in juridical positions, and how works of art guide transformation on central questions upholding entrenched systems. Details on these and other public programs, including artist talks and a concert by a solo musician will be announced soon at madisonsquarepark.org.

"The Conservancy strives to spark new perspectives on our public spaces," said the Conservancy's Executive Director Holly Leicht. "Shahzia Sikander's exhibition achieves this by not only physically expanding our programming into the surrounding community, but also by creating a rich dialogue about justice, particularly in connection to women. We are excited to pioneer new partnerships with our neighboring New York State Appellate Courthouse and Public Art UHS to bring to life this timely installation."

Havah...to breathe, air, life is organized by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Artistic Director and Martin Friedman Chief Curator; Tom Reidy, Deputy Director, Finance and Special Projects; and Truth Murray-Cole, Curatorial Manager. Holly Leicht is the Conservancy's Executive Director. Dr. Maria C. Gaztambide, Executive Director and Chief Curator of Public Art UHS, leads the Houston presentation, which will be on view from October 2023 through June 2024.

About the Artist

Shahzia Sikander (American, b. Pakistan 1969) 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, migration through feminist perspectives, colonial, and imperial power structures through her far-reaching practice.

Sikander's innovative work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. Her traveling exhibition on the first 15 years of her art practice, *Extraordinary Realities*, opened at The Morgan Library in New York in 2021 and traveled to the RISD Museum and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. *Shahzia Sikander: Unbound*, opened in 2021 at Jesus College, University of Cambridge, and explored the artist's innovative use of manuscripts.

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Sikander is a 2006 MacArthur Foundation Fellow and received the United States Medal of Arts in 2012. In 2023, she received the Pollock Prize for Creativity, honoring her exhibition *Havah...to breathe, air, life*, co-commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy and Public Art of the University of Houston System. The artist became a Fukuoka Laureate in 2022 as a recipient of the Arts and Culture Prize from Fukuoka City, Japan. She earned her B.F.A. from National College of Arts in Lahore, an M.F.A. from Rhode Island School of Design, and participated in Glassell School of Art's CORE Program at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Exhibition Support

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The augmented reality experience is provided by Snap and built by AR studio MousePack.

Shahzia Sikander's *Havah...to breathe, air, life* was co-commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy and Public Art of the University of Houston System.

Leadership support for the art program is provided by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council. Major support for the art program is provided by Sasha C. Bass, Bunny and Charles Burson, Ronald A. Pizzuti, Thornton Tomasetti, Tiffany & Co., and Anonymous.

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Madison Square Park Conservancy is a public/private partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.

About Madison Square Park Conservancy

Since 2004, Madison Square Park Conservancy has commissioned and presented premier installations by visionary artists ranging in practice and media. The program has exhibited works by artists including Diana Al-Hadid, Tony Cragg, Abigail DeVille, Leonardo Drew, Teresita Fernández, Cristina Iglesias, Hugh Hayden, Maya Lin, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Josiah McElheny, Giuseppe Penone, Martin Puryear, Erwin Redl, Alison Saar, Arlene Shechet, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Krzysztof Wodiczko. *Havah...to breathe, air, life* will be the 44th public art project commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy.

In 2019, the Conservancy served as the commissioning institution for the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, marking the first time that an organization whose visual art program focuses exclusively on public art has received this honor. With Rapaport serving as Commissioner and Curator, the Conservancy presented new work by Martin Puryear.

Madison Square Park Conservancy is the not-for-profit organization whose mission is to protect, nurture, and enhance Madison Square Park, a dynamic seven-acre public green space, to create an environment that fosters moments of inspiration. The Conservancy is committed to engaging the community through its public art program, beautiful gardens, inviting amenities, and programming. Madison Square Park Conservancy is licensed by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to manage Madison Square Park and is responsible for raising 100% of the funds necessary to operate the park, including the brilliant horticulture, maintenance, sanitation, security, and free cultural programs for park visitors of all ages.

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