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TWO LEADING FEMALE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS FEATURED IN FIRST-EVER EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
Concurrent Solo Exhibitions Focus on Work of Dayanita Singh and Nilima Sheikh

In the coming weeks, the Art Institute will present two solo exhibitions devoted to the illuminating work of two contemporary women artists from India: Dayanita Singh and Nilima Sheikh. Though pursuing radically different projects—the life of eunuch Mona Ahmed in Delhi and the contested valley of Kashmir—these artists represent the vitality and diversity of contemporary art in India. The work of photographer Dayanita Singh will be on view in Gallery 292 through June 1, 2014, and Nilima Sheikh: Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams will be presented from March 8 through May 18, 2014 in Galleries 182–184.

Dayanita Singh
On view through June 1, 2014

Although she began her career in photojournalism, Delhi-based artist Dayanita Singh (b. 1961) now considers herself "a bookmaker working with photography." For over 30 years she has worked on interconnected projects that take their form as artist’s books, photographic series, and most recently, freestanding sculptures. The Art Institute’s exhibition presents one of Singh’s earliest series, Myself Mona Ahmed (1989-2001), newly acquired by the museum, paired with a recent related work, Museum of Chance (2013).
Singh first met the outcast eunuch Mona Ahmed while on a magazine assignment in 1989. The two remain very close to this day and together consider what it means to be truly unique in the world: “She wanted to tell the story,” writes Singh, “of being neither here nor there, neither male nor female, and finally, neither a eunuch nor someone like me.” Although the project culminated in a book published in 2001, Singh continues to photograph Mona Ahmed, and images of her appear frequently in recent projects, including Museum of Chance—one of several large, wooden structures that she began making last year. Each Museum structure contains a group of photographs that spans Singh’s artistic career, and can be opened and placed in various configurations so that at any given time only a portion of the photographs is on view, while others wait their turn within the structure. Seen together, Museum of Chance and Myself Mona Ahmed offer insight into three decades of Dayanita Singh’s evolving and inventive artistic career.

Dayanita Singh studied Visual Communication at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad and Documentary Photography at the International Center of Photography in New York. She has published twelve artist books, and in 2008 she held a Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. She has had solo exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery, London (2013); Frith Street Gallery (2012 and 2008); Nature Morte, New Delhi (2012); King’s India Institute, KCL, London (2012); Museum voor Fotografie, Amsterdam and Mapfre Foundation, Madrid (2010); the Isabella Steward Gardner Museum, Boston (2005); and Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2003). This is her first exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Dayanita Singh is made possible by the generous support of an anonymous donor, Elizabeth and Harvey Plotnick, and Janet and Richard Horwood. The exhibition is curated by Michal Raz-Russo, assistant curator, Department of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Nilima Sheikh: Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams
On view through May 18, 2014

The rich history and contentious present of Kashmir are woven into the intricate, complex scroll paintings of Vadodara-based artist Nilima Sheikh (b. 1945). Eight paintings, created between 2003 and 2010 and previously dispersed among collections across India and Southeast Asia, are now reunited for the first time since their original presentation, and they are joined by two new banners created especially for the Art Institute of Chicago. Together, they comprise the series Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams, a title derived from a poem by Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali that initially inspired Sheikh’s interest in the contested region of Kashmir;
Sheikh’s scrolls combine Ali’s poems with excerpts from many rich sources, ranging from medieval poetry to Salman Rushdie’s books.

The visual language of the pieces draws on widespread references—miniatures, wall paintings, magical Kashmiri folktales—and are both beautiful and haunting, recalling the complex culture of the Kashmir Valley, once described as a paradise on earth. Sheikh’s multifaceted series focuses on the vibrant cosmopolitan culture of the ancient Silk Road but pulses with reminders of the simmering present-day tension on both sides of the Line of Control that divides the valley between India and Pakistan. The ten works, referencing the past and present, encourage viewers to “keep Kashmir present”—both its rich history and uncertain future.

**Nilima Sheikh** studied history at Delhi University and painting at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Sheikh was the Roman J. Witt Resident Artist and Penny W. Stamp Lecturer at the University of Michigan in 2004 and artist in residence at the Montalvo Artists Studios in California in 2005. She is married to the artist Gulammohammed Sheikh and lives in Vadodara and New Delhi, India. Her body of work includes works on paper, installations, large scrolls and screens, paintings, illustrations for children’s books, and theater set designs.

Major funding for *Nilima Sheikh: Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams* has been provided by Anita and Prabhakant Sinha and Barbara Levy Kipper. Additional support has been generously contributed by the Boston Foundation, Erika E. Erich, Victoria Lautman, Barbara Ruben, Betty and Richard Seid, and Penelope and Robert Steiner. The exhibition was co-curated by Madhuvanti Ghose, Alsdorf Associate Curator of Indian, Southeast Asian, Himalayan, and Islamic Art; and James Rondeau, Dittmer Chair and Curator, Department of Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago.


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