

## Friends of South Asia

Spring 2023

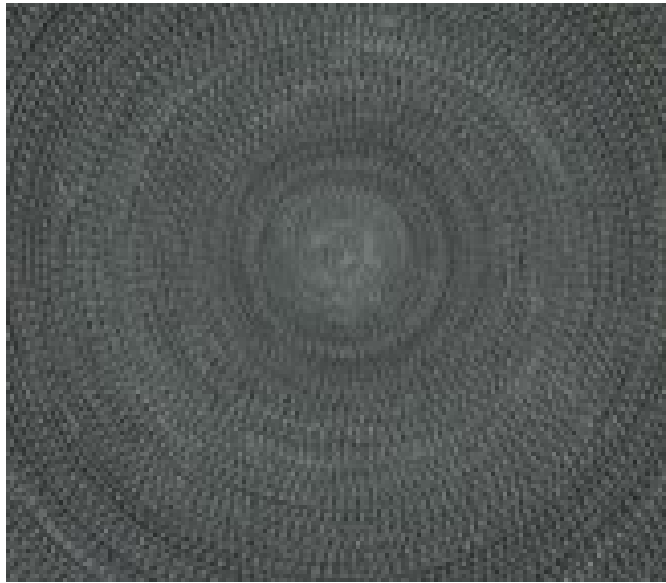


Figure 1 Sahih Galat (Right, Wrong) from the “Descent” series (detail), Tazeen Qayyum, archival ink on acid-free Fabriano paper, Oakville, Canada, 2019, [2022.36.1](#).

### Message from the Chair

Friends of South Asia (FSA) was thrilled by the turnout for our first tour at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection as artist Rajni Perera led us through her exhibition, *Rajni Perera: Futures*. Hearing directly from an artist or curator about what is on the show is always a privilege.

It is why we are excited to announce our next tour with Dr. Fahmida Suleman, curator of Islamic Art and Culture, for *Being and Belonging: Contemporary Women Artists from the Islamic World and Beyond*, which opens at ROM on July 1. Our special tour will take place on Thursday, July 6 at 10 am. Watch your email for more information. And don't forget to support the FSA. The piece shown above by Oakville-based artist Tazeen Qayyum that ROM acquired with financial support from the FSA will be on display! – Piali Roy, Chair

## New Exhibition at ROM: Being and Belonging



Figure 2 Tayeba Begum Lipi (Bangladesh, b. 1969), *Not For Me*, 2018. Stainless steel razor blades, 16 x 22 x 9 cm (each shoe). Collection of Royal Ontario Museum. This acquisition was made possible with the generous support of the Louise Harley Stone Charitable Trust, Peer Review Fund. Photo: ROM.

The image is bold. A pair of stilettos made of stainless-steel razor blades. Bangladeshi artist Tayeba Begum Lipi uses this material to reflect on the scourge of gender-based violence. These shoes are one of the iconic objects on display in [Being and Belonging: Contemporary Women Artists from the Islamic World and Beyond](#), a new ROM exhibition curated by Dr. Fahmida Suleman, ROM Curator of Islamic Art and Culture, opening on July 1.

Suleman, who has always been interested in contemporary art, has brought together the works of 25 women artists from or connected to the broader Islamic world spanning West Africa to South Asia to Southeast Asia or living in diaspora. Her aim? To defy stereotypes of the Islamic world by examining themes of identity, power, sexuality and home from both emerging and well-established artists.

“I have always been interested in women’s voices and the fact that there is a lack of representation in every international museum I have been to. The majority of the voices that I come across are male,” says Suleman, who joined ROM in 2019. “Without people

realizing, we are conditioned to see things in a certain way in a museum. How are women represented? Are their voices heard?”

This exhibition counters those questions with meditations on living at home, migration, freedom, sexuality, the objectification of women’s bodies and more. It even comes with a content advisory: This exhibition features artworks covering topics as varied as violence, war, persecution, survival, innovation, and joy. A few artworks contain nudity. However, Suleman clearly says that audiences shouldn’t just expect pretty calligraphy or mere despair. There is much beauty to be found within the artworks, even if the themes include domestic violence, displacement and homophobia.



Figure 3: Shahzia Sikander (Pakistan/USA, b. 1969), *Arose* (detail), 2020 © Shazia Sikander, Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly, Photo: Adam Reich.

The South Asian content not only includes three pieces by Tayeba Begum Lipi (including *The Baby Frock*, also made of razor blades) and a video installation on transphobia in Bangladesh, but also mosaics by Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander. Also featured is Shamsia Hassani, one of the first women graffiti artists from Kabul who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban regained control, who is coming to ROM to paint around the installation of her work.

Canada is represented by Tazeen Qayyum, including a piece that was acquired by ROM last year with the financial assistance from the FSA, as well as works by Reeta Saeed and Sumaira Tazeen, which were donated last fall by art collector Adil Ali Khan.

Suleman has high hopes for the exhibition.

“I’m trying to bring people together rather than create divisions,” she says. “I don’t want to reinforce stereotypes either.” – Piali Roy

## Rajni Perera at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection



Figure 4 Rajni Perera speaking to the FSA at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.  
Photo: Sheila Khambla.

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 30 members and guests of the FSA enjoyed a one-hour tour of Rajni Perera's exhibition, *Futures*, on view at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, with the artist herself.

From the onset, Perera suggested that perhaps the title was a misnomer, as many of the themes evoked in her works, in particular racialized female bodies travelling through space and time and confronting and adapting to the impacts of climate change, were not merely futuristic, but in fact, particular to present-day circumstances.

Perera walked us through the wide range of works on display in *Futures*, from her *Traveller* series to parts of her *Dancer* series, sculptural pieces and drawings. With the *Traveller* series, we explored various recurring themes of displacement and reconfiguration of identity with brown female figures attired in multi-hued, multi-patterned fashion, their eyes mutating to evoke the eerie sense of the dystopic dynamics of climate change. As we toured her works, Perera weaved elements of her biography, migrant journey and artistic development. First, we learned about her upbringing in a "dusty" section of Colombo, Sri Lanka, her embrace of the animation series, *Robotech*,

and the start of her own love for science fiction. Perera then recounted the process of migration to the racialized Toronto inner-suburb neighbourhoods of Jane and Finch and later Victoria Park and Eglinton and to the development of her artistic palette and vision via the impressive sartorial multiculturalism of her local Goodwill and Value Village.

The kaleidoscopic visions imagined from those thrift stor(i)es, now emblems of the sharing economy but very much a newcomer/low-income necessity, were grafted onto her passion for science fiction and later, physics. From these various sources, Perera began to think about, draw, paint and use fabrics to assemble figurations and formations that brought together science fiction, physics, and the desire to represent the brown and black bodies of her lived experiences, who were generally absent from the worlds of science fiction.

Throughout the tour, Perera also shared with us her attention to technique and detail, providing a lesson in her craft, from hand-marbled paper to beading to using Japanese acrylic gouache paint for archival-quality work.

For Perera, part of this aesthetic concern connects with her conviction that migrating displaced peoples “have their own beauty, their own opulence no matter what [they] cross the world with.” Indeed, this belief seems to motivate her desire to illustrate the stories of these peoples as part of the ongoing and potentially human condition of present and future climate change, which will, in Perera’s words, force us to mutate. “People will be born differently,” she said, evoking the changing newcomer, immigrant and refugee impacts on the cultural lifeways of cities alongside the dystopian effects of climate change on human lives, with an eye to how we might envision and imagine a (future) world “that is better.” – Nitin Deckha

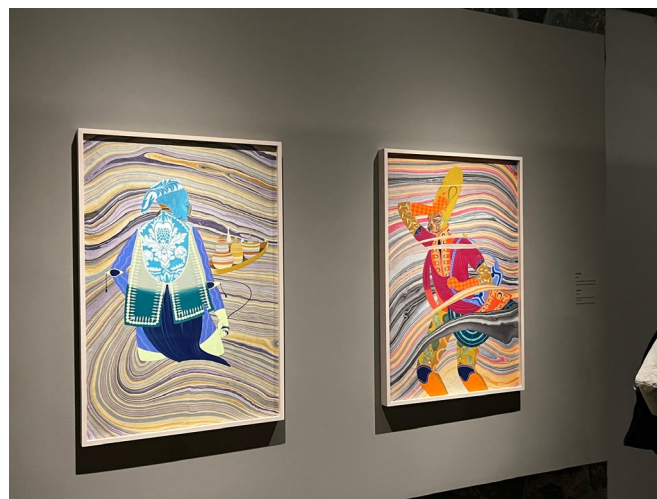


Figure 5 Paintings from the Rajni Perera: Futures. Photo: Sheila Khambla.

## Upcoming Tour of Being and Belonging with Curator Fahmida Suleman



Figure 6 Curator Fahmida Suleman.

Join us on Thursday, July 6, for a free tour of Being and Belonging: Contemporary Women Artists from the Islamic World and Beyond with Dr. Fahmida Suleman, ROM Curator of Islamic Art and Culture. Look out for an email with directions to sign up.



### FSA Membership

Membership in Friends groups at ROM is a fantastic way to financially support the Global South Asian collection at the Museum. A long history of generous benefactors led to the creation of the gallery, an endowed curatorship, innovative programming, and ongoing education about South Asian art, culture, and history.

#### Friends of South Asia

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Contact FSA: [fsa@rom.on.ca](mailto:fsa@rom.on.ca)

[Join FSA](#)

**Friends of South Asia** is organized by ROM's Department of Museum Volunteers to provide support for the Museum. ROM is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

Alternate accessible formats are available upon request.

# ROM