



Shahzia Sikander (American, b. Pakistan 1969)

*Havah... to breathe, air, life, 2023*

### Artist Statement

The image of justice as a woman has been present for centuries, but women only gained juridical voice in the last one. Despite years of women's struggle for legal socio-economic and political equality, gender bias still continues to create barriers for many women, whether it is health and education rights, equal economic opportunities, gender-based violence and race, or class discrimination.

The essential role of visual representations of justice and ethics in judiciary spaces is one of many aspects in the relationship between art and the law, or how the image and law relate to one another. In particular, many authors have explored the blindness of justice, the development of the blindfolded allegorical figure with which we are all familiar, and the visualizations that depart from this well-known type. The intertwined concepts of law, art, and identity are explored in books such as *Law and the Image: The Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law* edited by Costas Dounizas and Lynda Nead, and the comprehensive survey of representations of justice from the Renaissance to the present, by Judith Resnick and Dennis Curtis.

I define my practice as that of a thinker. I think through my hand. Thinking collectively with the mind and hand creates an armature of research, clarification of ideas and connects thought to gesture, to action, to practice. Critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are the three tenets on which I have built my entire understanding of being an artist. How culture, society, and economy intersect, and how communities coalesce plays a role in how art functions in overlapping spaces. I like to believe that the function of art is to allow multiple meanings and possibilities, to open up space for a more just world. How we experience art, how we respond to it and how we interpret it is an open-ended premise. As an artist, it is my intent to create something wondrous and with many possible associations--something that can generate thought and produce difference.

I have always had an affinity for the anti-monument in my practice. My work engages the past without glorifying it. It doesn't lay claim to grandiosity. It is often ephemeral. There are works on paper, murals, installation and animations, which rarely get seen through the lens of the anti-monument. To remedy that I thought, "All I need to do is make the drawing into a sculpture." Drawing implies movement in time and across formats and mediums. It is a means of imagining and bringing forms to life. Space, velocity, magnitude, direction—all essential elements inherent in the process of drawing—become active in different ways through thought and action, through animation, music and sculpture.

In 2017, I was on the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers in New York, and being exposed to tension-ridden situations around public monuments, their complicated histories, historical reckoning, and conflicts between competing visions of history was informative. These discussions spoke to me as my work had similar ethos, engaging with colonial and orientalist histories and their often reductive representations of the other.

This project is one of the most profound and meaningful opportunities I have ever had. I have lived in New York City since 1997 and I am inspired daily by its multifaceted histories and communities and it is

with much heart and gratitude that I engage in this partnership with Madison Square Park Conservancy (MSPC).

My artistic process starts with reading and research, engagement with community, and careful listening. Working across genres, fields and media, I often cull stories that center women; what is women's sense of self versus someone else's idea of us?

I came across the figurative sculptures at the Appellate Division Courthouse in Manhattan in the course of my research. When MSPC invited me to submit a proposal, I thought immediately of the courthouse's proximity to the park and began sketching ideas about a possible relationship between the two locations.

The body is a powerful tool that carries its social construction. It can also function as a site of resistance. The feminine is at the center of the two sculptures, **NOW** and **Witness**. The form of the figure is stylized and enigmatic. It is female and fluid. Part of the body loops out and into itself, in place of arms and feet, offering a non-fixed idea to the notion of the body—something amorphous, like the self. It refuses to be fixed, grounded, or stereotyped. The self-rooted body represents the resilience of women, who can carry their roots wherever they go, suggesting the paradox of rootedness, questioning the fallacy of assimilation versus foreignness. The sculptures are temporary and not a fixed point in the landscape, nor symbolic of any fixed ideas or of a specific community. No one person or a human occupant on a plinth can represent multiple histories, ideologies, or experiences.

The sculpture **Witness**, at 18 feet in height, will sit in the Madison Square Park near the entrance 25th street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Taking inspiration from the spectacular stained glass ceiling dome of the Appellate courtroom, its translucency and defined architectural properties, I thought of re-imaging the dome as house, a space demarcating a site of renewal. The inverted dome transformed into the metal frame (hoop skirt) of **Witness**, surrounding the body and functioning as its armor and support. The longitudinal and latitudinal lines of the ceiling dome are echoed in the skirt, becoming the imaginary 'party' lines coming together across east, west, north, south. Mapped on the surface of this metal structure is the word 'havah' which means air, atmosphere, to breathe. It also means Eve. The designed letters are created with un-grouted glass tesserae. The mosaic will be further animated via an AR lens.

In **Witness**, the feminine form is buoyant and afloat, supported by the armature of the skirt at the waist, its presence become a critical part of the natural environment of the Madison Square Park.

**NOW**, an 8-foot sculpture on the roof of the courthouse, uses the same feminine form as in **Witness**, but instead of the skirt raising the body, the body emerges out of the seat of a lotus. The lotus, with its plethora of meanings and abstract ideas, is symbolic of a deeper truth beyond its form, alluding to perception as illusion. Popular in images in many cultures, it also expresses intangible ideas of humility, awakening, and clarity. The invisible roots of the lotus that lie below the depth of the water are echoed in the roots of the feminine figure. Its form, a circular bloom, with its petals within petals formation, refers to the microcosm and macrocosm in its arabesque, iconographical value. The female body has a face with its hair braided into spiraling 'horns.' The horns mimic the movement of the arms and are there as a symbol of the figure's sovereignty, and its autonomy. Women in my work are always complex, proactive, confident, intelligent and in their playful stances connected to the past in imaginative ways without being tied to a heteronormative lineage or conventional representations of diaspora and nation.

Femininity to me is the tension between women and power. How society perceives such a dynamic and how erasure is enacted by the social forces that shape women's lives. Throughout literature, the notion of the female has been in conversation with the visible /invisible divide, the feminine as the monstrous, the abject, the fecund, the immense, and the vulnerable. Intimacy, selfhood, valor, resistance, and femininity's intersections with race and war are markers of the fear that lurks when boundaries melt.

The recent focus on reproductive rights in the US after the Supreme Court overturned the landmark 1973 decision that guaranteed the constitutional right to abortion in the US, comes to the forefront. In the process, it is the dismissal, too, of the indefatigable spirit of the women, who have been collectively fighting for their right to their own bodies over generations. However, the enduring power lies with the people who step into and remain in the fight for equality. That spirit and grit is what I want to capture in both the sculptures.

In recent opinion, the public regards the court as partisan and political in how it exerts power. The luminous figure is also a nod to RBG – as seen in the detail adorning her collar. With Ginsburg's death and the reversal of Roe, there was a setback to women's constitutional progress.

On the roof of the Courthouse are nine male statues of ancient lawgivers, representing the world's great legal systems, each created by a different artist. There is Chinese law, Hebraic law, Persian law, Anglo Saxon law, Spartan law, Athenian law, King

Louis IV of France, Manu, the mythical author of Hindu laws of Manu with an image of Brahma perched on his right forearm, and Roman law, represented by Justinian.

When the Courthouse was opened, a statue of Mohammed representing Islamic Law stood on the westernmost point of the roof facing 25<sup>th</sup> street, where Zoroaster is now positioned. In 1955, at the request of the governments of Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia, the statue was removed and destroyed, since images of Mohammed are prohibited under Muslim Law. The statues that previously had stood to his left were each moved over one place, leaving an empty pedestal on the easternmost point.

While the lawgivers represented are all men, the allegorical representations of women abound in the murals and sculptures throughout the courthouse. Lady Justice is flanked by her female aides Peace and Plenty. Wisdom attended by Learning, Experience, Humility and Love, and by Faith, Patience, Doubt, and Inspiration, are all women. Equity, a woman with an evenly balanced scale; Tradition, a woman with an endless chain; State, a woman with a red cloak holding a book of statutes, with Force and Liberty on her sides. Truth, a kneeling woman with a mirror, Knowledge with a torch and book and Prudence throned holding a compass.

In the triangular pediment on the façade of the Courthouse is "Triumph of Law", in which the central figure is a woman seated who has two tablets, one says 'Lex scripta' (written or statutory law and the other 'Lex tradita (related or common law). Further in the back of the composition one can see a ram (authority) and owl perched on a crescent moon (wisdom and enlightenment).

Many of the symbols and images present in the courthouse iconographies are carried from historical times, visually reproduced in juridical contexts and some continue to shape ideas and arguments. The blindfold as ubiquitous to justice appears as a paradox against the abundance of these visual iconographies.

Art and juridical norms are constantly being re-evaluated and interpreted in the world. Both embody a dynamic which is alive and tethered to its present moment. Such a dance opens the animation **Reckoning**, which will be in the Madison Square Park, where two forms, mimicking warriors are entangled in joust. The animation alludes to the interstices, the transitory, the mythos of the migrant and the citizen, women, and power, the colonized, the artist, and all those that are caught between worlds, artistic vocabularies, cultures, practices, and histories.

Art lives, survives, inspires. It is messy, it is complicated, it is very much like life. For me, it is about knowledge construction. How we reckon with our otherness in a shifting world, how we approximate, reproduce, and re-enact our culture and history. Whatever we make, consume, and give back, it has resonance and consequence beyond our immediate lives. History itself is effectively an account of the movement of objects and bodies. Trade, slavery, migration, colonial occupation — these are underlying currents, the root axes of modernity. How history is told, and who gets to tell it, exposes the hierarchies of power in our world. I am interested in history, in politics and equally in the dynamism of form. Form as something alive and in conversation with its time, space and language.