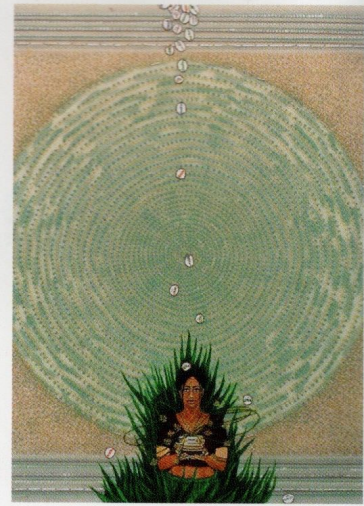




STRANGE ARE THE TIMES!*

Ann Wilson Lloyd



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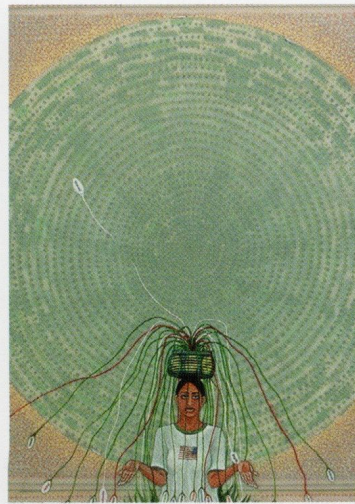
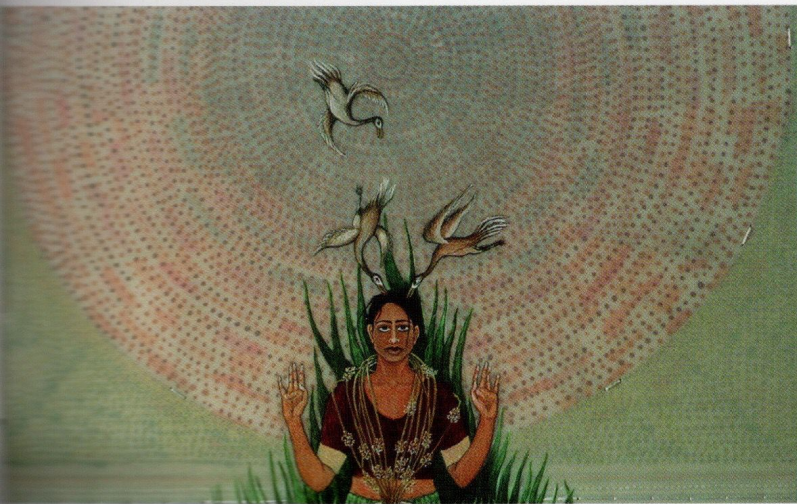
If art has a duty, it is to pose unanswerable questions. Ambreen Butt's delicate paintings do so beautifully, lyrically and passionately. Each is an illustrated koan, gracefully entangling its heroine in arabesques of moral struggle. Just as dragons and demons are often the most lavishly rendered creatures in traditional Persian miniatures, life's devilish conundrums are as lovingly given form in Butt's contemporary versions.

Butt was trained in the centuries-old Persian painting style at the National College of Art in Lahore, in her native Pakistan, the only art institution in the world that awards a degree in that specialty. There she learned all the laborious, near ritualized, methods specific to the practice, such as how to prepare wasli, the special layered paper; to apply gold leaf, and to construct perfectly-balanced brushes using a single tail hair of a squirrel. Her subsequent move to the U.S. in the mid-1990s (where she earned her M.F.A. in painting from Massachusetts College of Art in Boston), plunged her into a complex world soon to get more so. Making her way as a young, single, artist from a moderate Muslim background was challenge enough in the late 1990s, but then came 9-11. Her sequenced paintings from this period can be 'read,' much like the volumes that traditional miniatures were made to illuminate. Rather than personal illustrated diaries, however, they

are the artist's ruminations on the ambiguities, contradictions, and sheer craziness of the times.

Appropriate to her training, Butt has an affinity for the literary—she finds inspiration in poetry, ancient and modern, and her pictorial narratives are mostly spun into dream-like, Kafka-esque traps of elegant absurdity. Her series, always executed in groups of diptychs and triptychs, usually begin with two or three paintings with specific and personal subject matter, then expand, essaylike, into the general. Nearly all of them have finely drawn figures—almost always women, often with creatures, and now and then a few men—against geometrically designed backgrounds that echo traditional miniature folio borders. Butt plays with the contrast between abstraction and figure, just as traditional miniature painters sometimes played with the hashia, or margin line, allowing the action to spill out of decorative borders. Butt's figures may appear resolute or serene, but to trace their actions along the convoluted compositional lines and subtle ironies of narrative is to concede that the protagonists are often implicated in both cause and effect.

In the 1999 series *Bed of My Own Making*, her unwitting heroines are caught in meta-loops of pending disaster. One stands on the back of a large swimming fish, using her exceptionally long



braid as line to hook and upend the very creature that supports her. Another is shown taking shears to those long tresses, oblivious to the fact that her swirling, about-to-be-severed, locks have penetrated the ground and become her own nourishing roots. These images were inspired by Butt's own situation at the time, she has said, but they are also universal in scope—"about making choices and living with them for better or for worse."

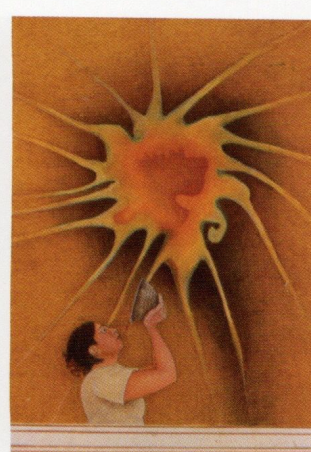
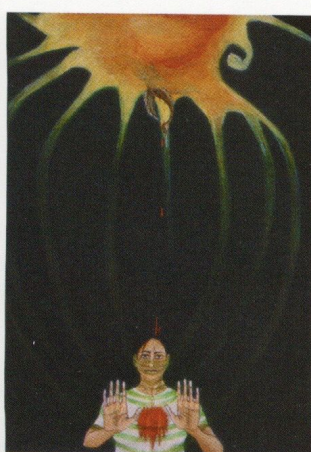
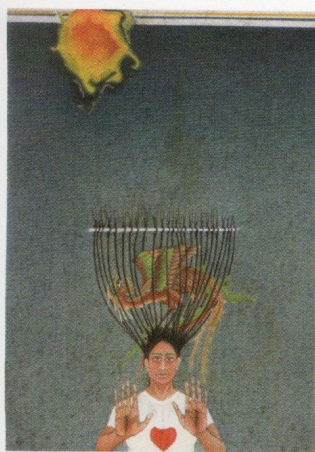
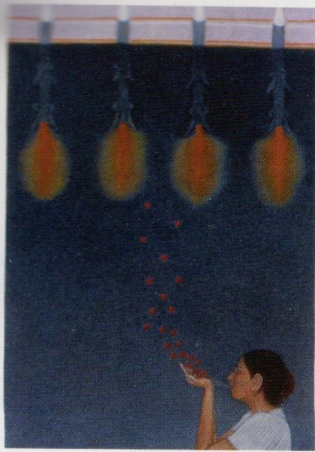
Butt's 2001 series *Home and the World* might be read as an interlude of shock and contemplation during world crisis. Here, for the first time, the heroine is no longer an insular character locked in a private drama; rather, she gazes outward, directly at the viewer. The series was in progress before the terrorist attacks, and finished shortly after. September 11th, 2001, Butt said, is the day "the personal became political. These were the last pieces I was working on, and then I couldn't work for two weeks. Whatever they meant before 9-11, they meant something different after."

Up until then, there had been an overt fictional quality in her works. Her female subjects had been loosely based on mythical figures; she thought of them as contemporary feminist, empowered versions of the stylized *nayika*, or seductive heroine who leads the viewer into the action of traditional Persian painting. Now, she deliberately began modeling the young women on

herself, and meant the figures to be seen as real and specific. In them, a bemused young woman—no longer unaware—stares out directly at the viewer. Small thought bubbles drift around the picture plane, and within them, written in tiny script, are politically potent words like "nationalism," "language," "religion," and "culture."

Images rather than words convey the even more overt political content in a series done in 2003, at the start of the Iraq war. Titled with a line of Sufi poetry, "I must utter what comes to my lips," the works prominently feature flags, guns, rocket blasts, fireballs and dripping blood. All, along with the mostly female figures, are delicately rendered in brilliant color and fine detail on traditional book-scaled *wasli*—the ancient process of layering fine cotton rag paper with gesso and burnishing to create a stiff but absorbent painting surface. Though Butt also frequently uses her own contemporary version of *wasli*—larger, layered, painted constructions of intricately stitched together sheets of mylar—returning to tradition was the right choice for these issue-based paintings. Topicality and controversial imagery are heightened by intimate scale, with its frisson of forbidding secrecy. Viewers must draw close, individually, to ponder layered elements that are strange, confusing, and lushly violent.

ALL IMAGES:
*Untitled from the series
 "Home and the World"*
 {2001}
 Watercolor, white gouache,
 collage and stitching on
 layers of mylar, 14 x 11 inches
 COLLECTION OF,
 FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
 BLAKE KOH
 CATHY ENGLAND
 FRANK WILLIAMS



For her solo 2003 show at Worcester Art Museum, Butt installed these works in groupings of two to four, like pages in a book, and, as she always does in galleries, surrounded each group by precisely executed, concentric borders painted in pastels, directly on the walls around them. This formally exquisite installation reduces large blank white walls to suitable scale for displaying small, jewel-like paintings, and it also mimics the illuminated borders and frames painted around miniatures in their original manuscripts. About this technique, Butt has said: "My works are not manuscript illustrations any more, we've taken them out of that context. I want to keep that intimacy of leafing through a book. I treat the wall as an open page, so that the space will engage the viewer the way a book may have done." About the 2003 series itself, she added: "The crazier the world was getting, the more complex my imagery was getting. It was becoming more illustrative, but my language had to be clear, I couldn't make an abstract, conceptual piece about what was happening."

"I must utter..." is a pivotal series, containing a pivotal painting—one in which two nearly identical female figures, modeled on the artist, stand back to back at the bottom of the frame. Each is blindfolded—one with the U.S. flag; the other with a green cloth upon which are visible bits of script from an Arabic prayer. Each brandishes a

dueling pistol. Above them hangs a lifeless-looking bird, with two wounds in its neck. *The image directly addresses a very personal struggle between dueling cultures and dueling identities.* Other images in other works depict rockets blasts and more birds, often in harms way. In one particularly arresting composition, a chimerical bird with brilliant plumage is entrapped in the figure's cage-like coif. It was inspired by a famous poem, "The Conference of the Birds," by the 12th century Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar, in which a gathering of birds search for the divine and find it in the composite mythical creature, the simurgh.

The idea of individual culpability continually emerges in Butt's works. "I was listening to songs of another Sufi poet, Bullel Shah," she said. "He is Punjabi, from the 17th century. The series is named after his poem of the same title. It's about fighting evil, but advises that before you go out into the world to do so, to look within yourself, and fight the evil there." Not specifically a response to the Iraq war, the series is about inherent moral complicity: "In some of the images, she's trying to stop her own evil, in others she's become part of it."

For another 2003 series, Butt returned to painting on layers of stitched-together mylar, adding some paintings on Japanese paper. "What is past

OPPOSITE PAGE:

*Untitled from the series
"I must utter what
comes to my lips"*
{2002}

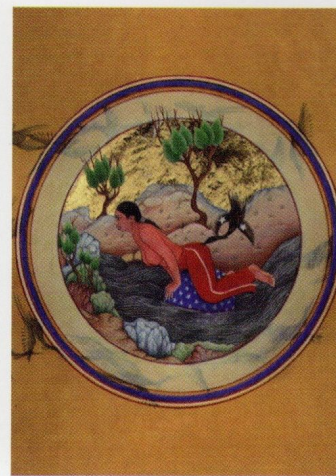
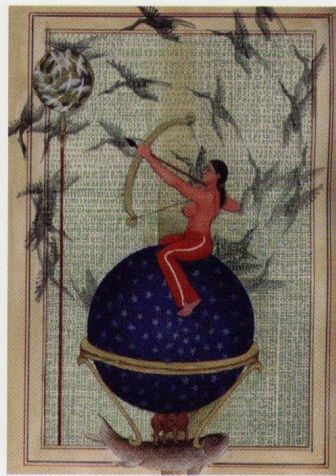
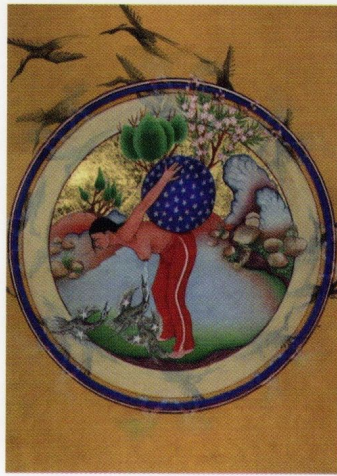
Watercolor, tea, coffee
and white gouache on
wasli paper, 7 x 11 inches
COLLECTION OF IQBAL AHMED

THIS PAGE:

*Untitled from the series
"I must utter what
comes to my lips"*
{2002}

Watercolor, tea, coffee
and white gouache on
wasli paper, 7 x 11 inches

COLLECTION OF,
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
MARYELLEN AND J. DAVID SAKURA
SUZANNE JOYNER
THE ARTIST AND
BERNARD TOALE GALLERY
BONNI BENRUBI



or passing or to come,” takes its name from the last line of Yeats’ poem “Sailing to Byzantium,” and in the series, Butt also returns her heroines to their internal dramas, engaging them in intimate, puzzling actions. In what might be construed as metaphors for contemporary love stories, their poses and bodies are more closely modeled on the alluring nayika, the seductress who captures the viewer’s attention, though here she is caught again in an arabesque of struggle, betrayed, perhaps by her own desires.

Butt returned in 2004 to more dramatic uses of her traditional training. Continuing the series “I must utter what comes to my lips,” and returning to wasli, Butt placed her heroines within glowing, elegantly painted, gold-leaf-enhanced Persian landscapes. These were inspired, Butt said, by looking at the masterful landscapes of Sultan Muhammad Tabrizi, the leading painter of the Safavid manuscript workshop in Tabriz in the 1500s. Butt’s figures within these archaic pastorals, however, are straight out of today. Cavorting topless, wearing only red jogging pants, they have been given a top-of-the-world status traditionally accorded to Mughal kings. Shooting birds with a bow and arrow, riding astride a globe, these adventuresses seem strong and daring despite those swirls of militant birds behind them. One brazen bird with star insignia even pecks our heroine on the behind.

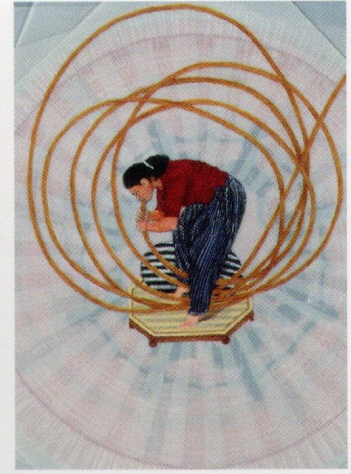
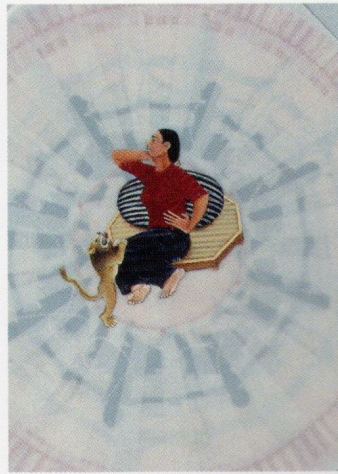
If Butt’s stylized birds have begun to resemble a siege of jets, the enemies get even fiercer in her 2005 groupings on wasli titled “I need a hero.” The heroines here, all clad in tee shirt and jogging pants, do valiant battle against blue demons, spotted dragons, wild dogs and devilish monkeys. Lushly decorative, the gold-leaf, jewel-like colors, intricate detail and layers of fantasy in these lovely works demonstrate Butt’s deftness with traditional Persian painting skills, but a large of measure of their delight is the humor she weaves throughout. These small dramas have the same unsolvable battles between good and evil, but there is no ambiguity about where Butt’s painting interests lies. Demons and dragons are obviously the most fun to paint.

“Portraying evil is so much pleasure,” she confirmed. About her approach to painting in general, she added, “It’s almost like you’re writing a story right on the surface. The figures are modeled, and the painting compositions comes out as you do it, it’s not preplanned.” These tales in particular are based on a traditional story cycle, the Hamzanama. Commissioned in the 16th century by the Mughal Emperor Akbar, the episodes chronicle the heroic adventures of Amir Hamza, an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad and fearless warrior who traveled the world battling demons, dragons and other evils in the name of Islam. Butt had in mind a female, contemporary

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THIS PAGE:
*Untitled from the series
 “I must utter what
 comes to my lips”*
 {2004}
 Watercolor, white
 gouache, and gold leaf
 on wasli paper,
 11 x 8 inches
 COLLECTION OF DAVIS MUSEUM
 AND CULTURAL CENTER,
 WELLESLEY COLLEGE,
 WELLESLEY, MA

OPPOSITE PAGE:
*Untitled from the series
 “What is past or
 passing or to come”*
 {2003}
 Watercolor, white
 gouache, graphite and
 stitching on multiple
 layers of mylar,
 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches
 COLLECTION OF JACK TILTON



version. A model presented itself in the real life person of Mukhtaran Mai, the Pakistani village woman who in 2002, was sentenced by her village council to gang rape as punishment for her younger brother's alleged affair. The outcry from rights' groups both in Pakistan and abroad resulted in Mai, an illiterate, being brought to the U.S. and awarded Glamour magazine's "Woman of the Year." Using the prize money and donations, Mai established a school in her village, enrolled hundreds of girls and began attending it herself. In April 2006, Mai came to Boston, where she spoke at a conference on Pakistani women, to which Butt was also invited.

"She became an international hero, then she comes to Boston and I met her. This whole thing was happening right in front of my eyes. It was amazing," Butt said. "I wanted to bring another woman, not only myself, into the work—a person defining her identity as a woman who can do bigger things. It's an ideal," she added. "These images are not specifically Mukhtaran Mai."

The first few paintings from Butt's latest series, "Cirque du Monde," 2006, may be less idealistic, but are just as witty. Now married, with a young daughter, and increasingly in demand as an artist, Butt expresses a desire common among working mothers: a proficiency in acrobatics and the ability to clone oneself. Men, or cloned

versions of one specific man, perhaps, are making a strong return. Several motifs from the past also recur, such as the arabesque of vining hair, a tangle of figurative action, gridded backgrounds, and layering of images, like outlined jet planes. Similar also to her other series, she starts again by making art for herself, working outward, toward art about the world.

Like her paintings, Butt's diverse worlds continue to blend and expand, starting local, aiming global. From her student days in Pakistan, enthralled by the beauty of Persian miniatures, she determined that the manuscript-based tradition could make sense as a form of contemporary expression in today's art venues, and she has more than succeeded. Whether they are her influences or not, plenty of western art—the works of Francisco Goya, Edouard Manet, Frida Kahlo, Nancy Spero, even today's graphic novels—relate in interesting ways to her work. In her microcosms of style and passion, one can find all the probing complexity, absurdity, and eternal, springing hope of the improbable human condition, eloquently spoken in a voice and from a quarter that's been too long unheard. *JB*

**This is the first line from another poem by 17th century Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah, in which, amazingly, the following verse appears: "The Iraqis are despised; While the donkeys are prized...." See the web site www.apnaorg.com for more Bulleh Shah poetry, and the web site www.poetry-chaikhana.com for information on Farid ud-Din Attar.*

*All essay quotes by Amreen Butt are from conversations between the artist and author. Other sources on the history of miniature painting include the exhibition catalogues *Pages of Perfection, Islamic Paintings and Calligraphy from the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg*, Yuri A. Petrosyan, ed., ARCH Foundation, Electa, Milan, 1995; *From Mind, Heart and Hand, Persian, Turkish, and Indian Drawings from the Stuart Cary Welch Collection*, Stuart Cary Welch and Kimberly Masteller, Harvard University Art Museums, Yale University Press, 2004; and *Domains of Wonder, Selected Masterworks of Indian Painting*, B.N. Goswamy and Caron Smith, San Diego Museum of Art, 2005.*