



Untitled (from the series *I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips*), 2002, watercolor with white gouache on Wasli paper, 7 x 11 inches, courtesy the artist and Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston.

Ambreen Butt was trained in traditional Persian and Indian miniature painting in her native Pakistan before coming to Boston a decade ago to study art from a contemporary American perspective. Since making that transition, her work has attempted to reconcile an apparent stylistic and narrative gulf between her past and present cultures. While her subject matter (most often self-portraits) is extremely personal at its core and frequently generated by memories of her past, her paintings and drawings intentionally wrestle with broader issues of gender, power, intellectual freedom, human rights, and cultural stereotypes.

"My day-to-day experiences in America resonate in my efforts to give form to many complex issues: risks involved in rejecting conventional social roles; ways of achieving independence and yet guarding the spirit of time-honored traditions; modes of challenging stereotypes that are generally associated with women in Islam. In engaging all these issues in my work, my primary concern remains form. I have worked hard to develop a personal aesthetic that can accommodate the complexity of my experience as a Southeast Asian Muslim woman in America."

Butt attributes aesthetic inspiration and spiritual nourishment to several sources including the works of two Sufi poets—the celebrated Rumi (13th century) and the sentiments of tolerance and peaceful co-existence of the less familiar Bulleh Shah (17th century). She also cites the contemporary Pakistani poet and human rights activist Kishwar Naheed, and the "selfless generosity and compassion" of her grandmother who was widowed at the age of 23 during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Amidst ongoing religious and political tensions in the Middle East and between Western non-Muslims and Islamic societies, there has been noticeably increased interest and support for contemporary art about this region of the world and specifically work by women of Butt's generation who "offer a rarely voiced, behind-the-veil view" of Islamic traditions and paradoxes.² Butt's revisionist miniatures signify a uniquely brave and urgent voice within this important dialogue.³

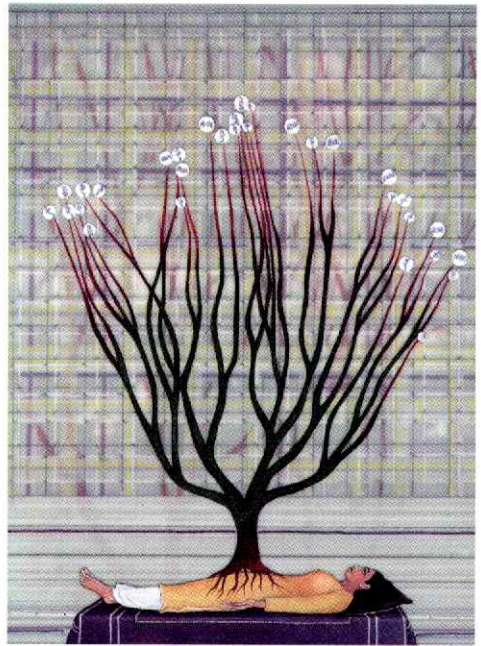
In the consummately crafted and eloquently expressed imagery of three recent series, Butt takes two distinct approaches to traditional miniature techniques and forms. In both *Home and the World* and *Farewell*, Butt constructs her images through layers of paper and translucent Mylar that incorporate elements of collage, watercolor, white gouache, and stitching. This intricately built process formally mirrors the hybrid nature of her personal identity as well as the complexity of the cultural issues the drawings address. It also functions metaphorically in the way one's personal history is constructed over time, resulting in a seamless accumulation of decisions and events that incorporates both shedding and recuperating aspects of our pasts. For what we read in the outermost layer of Butt's image—representing the present—is really a composite, dependent on all the layers and marks that came before.

Like traditional miniatures that marry text and image, Butt oftentimes collages cryptic fragments of delicately handwritten Urdu script along with typed English translations. Words like "humanity," "uncertainty," "self," "mistrust," and "home" emphasize issues raised by the imagery. Isolated passages of exquisitely detailed and stylized figure painting—

usually the image of a contemporary female (Butt) painted with traditional Mughul-style naturalism—hover within fields of Minimalist-inspired hairline stripes and expanses of dotted bands or mandala-like circles.⁴

Images of the dark-haired woman nestled in verdant foliage (often holding a vessel in her lap, hands, or caryatid-like on her head), in poses varying from calm and control to confinement, co-mingle with scenes of abandon and undirected activity—plants flourishing, words cascading, birds swirling and pecking. The quandaries she faces seem paradoxically self-made and compel us to ask, is she in control or at the mercy of her own desires? Butt's autobiographical meditations also seem to ask whether "home" might be less a geographic location than a state of mind (that you can carry with you)—one that guarantees the comfort of living without the fear of losing the freedom to be yourself (intellectually, emotionally, ideologically, physically).

In the related series, *Farewell*, Butt creates haunting symbols of growth, knowledge, and desire set amidst forces of suppression, separation, and doubt that have both external and internal sources (and consequences). How one reconciles them seems central to the images' meanings. In one drawing, she is bound by serpents at her wrists and ankles to the trunk of a leafless tree whose branches have yielded not fruit but words—"desire," "pleasure," "lust," "love," "temptation," "home," "security," "shelter"—universal sentiments and needs that can be empowering



Untitled (from the series *Farewell*), detail, 2002, collage, watercolor, white gouache, stitching and text on Mylar, 17 x 14 inches, courtesy the artist and Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston.

or debilitating depending on one's actions (or inaction). In another, she gives birth to a tree, this time growing up from her belly only to bear the repeated word "home" at the ends of branches that are well in her sight but just as clearly out of her reach.



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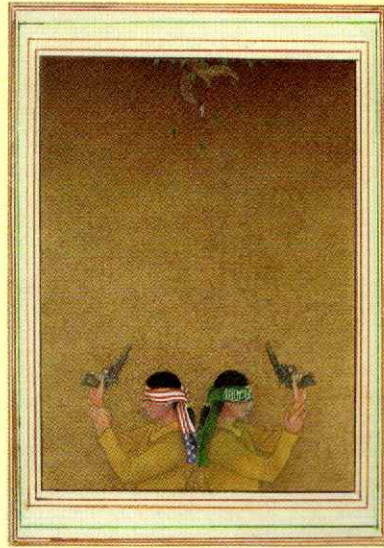
While the Mylar self-portraits subtly trace the complicated layers of a personal history, a new body of works titled *I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips* are direct responses to current world events and the uncontrollable nature of their impact on individual lives. Painted on *wasli* (a handmade traditional paper), the images are jarringly deliberate, colorfully spectacular, and narratively hyper-real by comparison. Echoing the brilliant miniature style developed centuries ago in the Islamic courts of India that often resulted in a "stunning and violent realism," Butt's naturalistic details—trees, birds, and fish as well as flags, guns, and missiles— are painted in rich, saturated colors amidst spatially complex, dreamlike settings within traditionally embellished frames.⁵ While the historic miniatures typically glorified the heroic adventures and accomplishments of the Mughul rulers, Butt's narratives offer neither heroes nor clear outcomes. Rather, they are dedicated to ordinary women and men who find themselves in the midst of the harsh reality of contemporary events.

In several images from this series, Butt's female tries to find a balance for herself despite being pulled in different directions. She continually must consider the cost of acting alone or letting events overtake her. She is frequently in the company of birds whose characters play opposite her as protagonists or victims. In one image she is at the mercy of several lifting her upside-down by her legs; else-

where they fly squadron-like overhead with camouflaged and star-embazoned wings; in another, Butt's female entraps a powerful phoenix (like the magical Simurgh of Persian mythology) in a cage resourcefully made of strands of her hair. In one of the most unequivocal images from the series, a slender bird bleeding from its neck falls from the sky, an innocent victim to guns shot by two females, each acting in the name of the symbol on the scarf (an American flag and a Muslim prayer) that blindfolds her.

This heightened explicitness is reinforced by the opacity of the painting and the firmness of Butt's mark making—its confidence, clarity, and fluidity—as if to emulate an individual's decision-making process, choices one makes “for defense, for survival, for escape.”⁶ With the brush as her “weapon” and beauty as a foil for fear or anger, Butt protests against silence and indecision and with these intimate images, in her very own way, declares a “war against the madness around her.”⁷

Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art



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Notes:

1. Artist statement, 2000.
2. Reena Jana, “Behind the Veil,” *Tema Celeste*, July/August 2002, 18.
3. Notable among her peers with ties to the Middle East are Shirin Neshat and Shirana Shahbazi (Iran), Irit Batsry and Michal Rovner (Israel), and Shahzia Sikander (Pakistan).
4. Butt has said she intends for the horizontal and vertical lines of paint to “suggest prison bars” but also to function as “boundaries for protection.”
5. Toby Falk, “Rothschild Collection of Mughal Miniatures,” *Persian and Mughal Art* (London: P & D Colnaghi & Co Ltd, 1976), 167-8.
6. Unpublished artist statement, 2002.
7. *Ibid.*

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About the Artist

Ambreen Butt was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1969. She received a B.F.A. in 1993 from the National College of Arts in Lahore and a M.F.A. in 1997 from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. Since then she has exhibited in solo exhibitions at the Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions including those at George Adams Gallery, New York City; the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA; India Center for Art and Culture, New York City; Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Staten Island, NY; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Recent honors include Artist-in-Residence, McColl Center for Visual Arts, Charlotte, NC; Artist-in-Residence, Central Michigan State University, Mt. Pleasant, MI; Artist-in-Residence, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston; ICA Artist Prize, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. She is represented by the Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston.



Untitled (from the series *I Home and the World*), detail, 2001, collage, watercolor, white gouache, stitching on Mylar, 14 x 11 inches, Private Collection, New York.