



AMBREEN BUTT
mark my
words

National Museum of Women in the Arts
December 7, 2018–April 14, 2019

Lyrical and evocative works by Ambreen Butt (b. 1969) grapple with freedom of expression and the role of art as social commentary. Butt combines her training in traditional Persian and Indian miniature painting, an art form seen in historical illustrated manuscripts, with the conceptualism and minimalism she encountered after relocating from Pakistan to the United States in 1993. Her works on paper comprise exquisite handwork and fine details that—upon close looking—reveal complex layers of meaning.



Left and cover detail:
The Great Hunt I (from the series "Dirty Pretty"), 2008; Water-based pigments, white gouache, text, thread, and gold leaf on Mylar and tea-stained paper, 45 x 30 in.; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of the Massachusetts State Committee of NMWA; Photo by Lee Stalworth

Opposite: *Untitled 2* (from the series "Dirty Pretty"), 2008; Water-based pigments, white gouache, thread, and gold leaf on Mylar and tea-stained paper, 28 x 20 in.; Sara M. and Michelle Vance Waddell Collection; Photo by John Horner

All images © Ambreen Butt

Modern-Day Heroines

Butt's work interrogates the relationships between past and present, beauty and violence, and strength and vulnerability, particularly through her female protagonists. The women in her series "Dirty Pretty" (2008)—Pakistani lawyers who demonstrated alongside their male peers against then-President Pervez Musharraf's suspension of the Chief Justice in 2007—grimace and shout. Their faces are contorted as they resist law enforcement to make their voices heard. Butt renders them alongside representations of the *nayika*, or heroine, from traditional illustrated manuscript imagery. Instead of passive, seductive muses, the contemporary group appears as intrepid activists.

In "Dirty Pretty," Butt drew, painted, and collaged on thin sheets of clear Mylar. The series' female figures are rendered in vermillion red stitching, which simultaneously sutures the layers of Mylar to the tea-stained paper beneath. The transparency of the Mylar allows the bottom layers to peek through like ghost images, obscuring a straightforward narrative and merging the historical imagery to the plights of present-day women.



The title of Butt's series "Daughters of the East" (2008) references the 1988 autobiography of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the first woman leader of a Muslim-majority country in modern history. The suite of prints is based on press images of teenage female students influenced by the conservative teachings of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad. These young women protested the siege of their mosque by the government, and many were killed. Butt portrays the young women in their black veils standing together in unity. At the end of the series, she features an individual woman, resilient yet exposed to danger. Her symbol of resistance—the bamboo stick—is chipped away by a woodpecker. Butt describes her representation of these assertive women:

"My protagonist is not an idealized character; she is a mirror in which a million women see their faces."

Labor of Love

Butt's art is deeply personal. She describes the physical process of her practice as the "bearer of the clarity of my mind." She prepares her base for drawings by drizzling drops of tea onto paper and slowly grazing her fingers over the surface in spontaneous, yet controlled, movements. Butt also works with shredded text, collaging one scrap of paper at a time with a small pointed tool. Through the repetitive, measured experience of building up the paper's surface, she contemplates and navigates her often difficult subject matter.

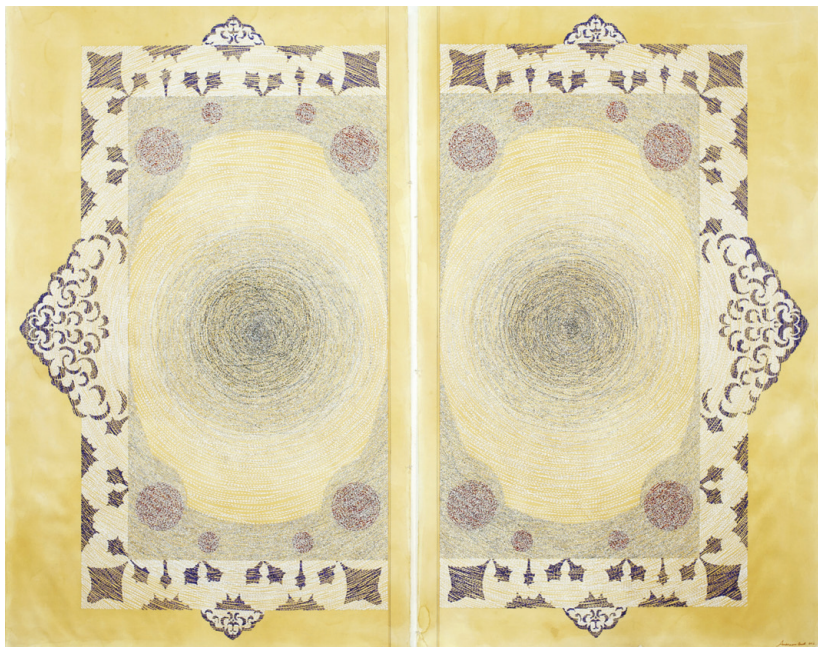
Butt achieves an element of discovery by layering and veiling her surfaces with systematic mark-making. Working with a master printer, she embarked on a labor-intensive process to create her "Daughters of the East" series. These color etchings required printing with multiple copper plates. For example, Butt drew on numerous plates to create the swarm of ladybugs in the backgrounds of the prints. Each plate built another layer of intricate detail and shading into the final print.



Ladybugs (from the series "Daughters of the East"), 2008; Etching, aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint, and hand coloring on paper, 25 x 19 in.; Courtesy of the artist; Photo by Stephen Petegorsky

Word and Image

Butt's art reveals a consciousness about the world, examining not only political events specific to Pakistan, but also complex global relationships. Text is increasingly important in the visual vocabulary of her most recent work. The diptych *Pages of Deception* (2012) evokes the pages of a *muraqqa*, an Islamic album traditionally containing specimens of miniature paintings and calligraphy. Butt addresses the intersection of religious ideology and political power through the subject of the 2012 Boston trial of Tarek Mehanna, an Egyptian-American man convicted of supporting Al Qaeda and disseminating fundamentalist propaganda. Each panel is composed of swirling shreds of typewritten legal documents from the prosecution and defense, which appear as incomprehensible reflections of one another. Butt compels the viewer to treat the written word as an image that is open to interpretation.



Pages of Deception (and detail, opposite), 2012; Diptych drawing with torn and collaged text on tea-stained paper, each 70 ½ x 45 in.; Courtesy of the artist; Photos by Tony Luong

The artist's recent and ongoing series "Say My Name" (2017–) is dedicated to forgotten youth casualties of American drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Each work displays myriad shredded pieces of paper in varied patterns; the scraps repeat the name and age of a single victim. In *Mohammed Yunus (16)* (2018), blood-thirsty mosquitos feed on fragments of the name of a sixteen-year-old victim, who will never reach adulthood. Butt forms a dichotomy between the appealing beauty of the undulating, jewel-toned image and the ugly reality of political violence.

Ambreen Butt's work speaks to her experiences as a South Asian Muslim woman artist living in America. In establishing her aesthetic and visual lexicon, she stamps her own mark on the cultural landscape.

Orin Zahra is the assistant curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.





Mohammed Yunus (16) (from the series "Say My Name") (detail), 2018; Text, collage, and watercolor with white gouache on tea-stained paper, 29 x 21 in.; Courtesy of the artist; Photo by Kevin Todora

Ambreen Butt—*Mark My Words*, presented in the Teresa Lozano Long Gallery of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, is organized by the museum and made possible through the generous support of the Belinda de Gaudemar Curatorial Fund. Additional funding is provided by the members of NMWA.

**NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS**

1250 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C.
nmwa.org | Two blocks north of Metro Center