

ART

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Bernard Toale Gallery/Boston

Ambreen Butt: Works on Paper

Ambreen Butt's delicate autobiographical meditations feel in tune with the current sensibility. This Pakistani-born artist uses the decorative style and iconography of the Mogul miniature and combines this ancient tradition with elements derived from Western abstraction to capture a simultaneous sense of cultural dislocation and connection. Her work does not fit the "nomad" label often slapped on today's uprooted artists who seem to wander the globe effortlessly, at home in any cosmopolitan center. Butt's work is too aware of traditions lost and too ironic in spirit for the artist ever to seem comfortable with her journey. If the nomad's spirit is to make a home of the hotel room, Butt seems caught between two worlds.

In the current show she works with watercolor, gouache, thread, and collage on translucent sheets of mylar, a technique that res-

onates both with her native manuscript tradition and modernist abstraction. The untitled works, belonging to a series called *A Bed of My Own Making*, always feature the artist herself in Pakistani garb, apparently enacting some kind of ritual with both personal and cultural meanings. In one image she uses her hair as a fishing line, which she uses to snare the large creature that also serves as the platform on which she stands. Such paradoxical and self-defeating acts are typical. In another image she cuts her long hair that swirls around her like a mystical mandala. A closer inspection reveals the hair to be a fine network of capillaries, making the act of cutting seem more decisive and threatening, as if she is severing a connection to some life-giving force.

Sexual politics is parodied in an image that has the artist using her hair to pull a ball on which sits a man dressed like a self-satisfied little Mogul lord. Carrying a candle—perhaps a symbol of hope—she also serves as a beast of burden tethered to the past.

The flat, decorative pattern of Mogul art blends seamlessly with the grids of dots and dashes that form the visual and spacial matrix in which these rituals take place. These grids recall Agnes Martin's ethereal abstractions but also resemble cancelled text, like the pages of some intimate diary from which all the words have been erased. Fragments of Urdu text collaged to the surface also hint at an irrecoverable or obliterated past.

This is an engaging show, sweet and filled with a gently ironic wit. But the various stylistic elements, however comfortably they sit on the surface, in the future need to be drawn together into a more imaginative synthesis. Her self-portraits come close to caricature; she is a stock figure put into a variety of situations. Somehow, the figure itself, diligently borrowed from another world, needs to come alive, to unbend, to feel vulnerable and energized by those traditions it comes in contact with.

—Miles Unger



Ambreen Butt—**Untitled** (detail), mixed media on mylar, 1999, courtesy of Bernard Toale Gallery.