

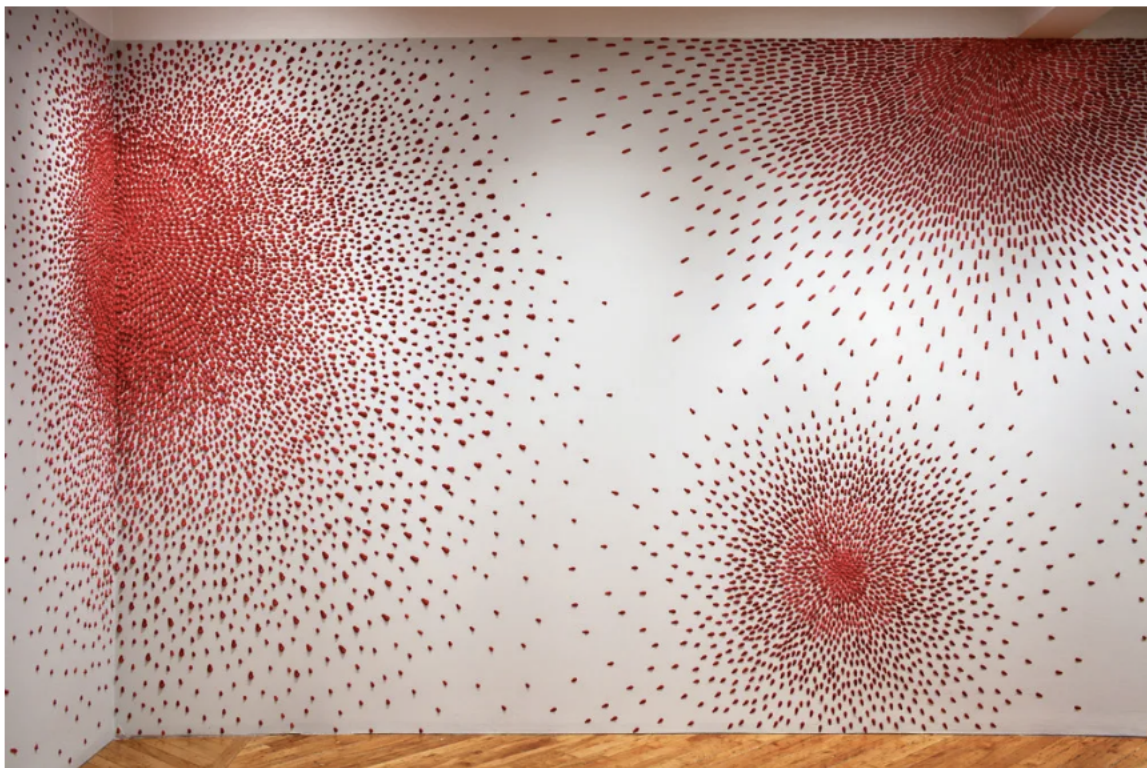
Art in America



\$10 MARCH 2013 100 YEARS COVER BY JOSH SMITH

Ambreen Butt

By *Francine Koslow Miller*  March 5, 2013 11:40am



Since Pakistani artist Ambreen Butt adopted Boston as her home in the 1990s, she has received considerable recognition for labor-intensive, painted self-portraits, which combine feminist and political polemics with techniques of traditional Persian miniatures. For her second exhibition at Carroll and Sons, Butt left behind her signature tiny figures to produce larger, more conceptually driven works that employ collage, pencil on paper and hand-cast sculpture. Exploring an overarching, cross-cultural theme of extremism, the Muslim artist showed how ostensibly polar conditions like innocence and guilt, terror and seduction are often interdependent. Her work inhabits a dubious yet alluring conceptual space, as signified by the show's lengthy title, "Beyond the Ideas of Rightness and Wrongness There Is a Field: I'll Meet You There," which she borrowed from the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi.

The most esthetically and symbolically rich work was *I Am My Lost Diamond* (2011), which filled two immense gallery walls with six radiating red configurations that from a distance suggest exploding fireworks or delicate flower blossoms. Close up, their more than 25,000 components are revealed to be sculpted fingers and toes cast in resin, the work having originated with a friend's tale of narrow escape from a brutal suicide bombing in a bazaar near Butt's hometown of Lahore.

Beyond the Ideas of Rightness and Wrongness (2012) consists of 11 male heads drawn in pencil and hung in a row in black oval frames. At the far left is a portrait of Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab who was murdered in 2011 in Islamabad for his well-publicized opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy law. On the far right is a depiction of young Mumtaz Qadri, his assassin. From one end to the other, their images—the former subject clean-shaven, bespectacled and with a straight face, the latter bearded, stocking-capped and smiling—progressively morph into each other, the centermost portrait offering a merged visage with age lines, facial hair, forced grin and a large mound of hair. This physical blending reflects a real-life ambiguity concerning which party could be called guilty and which innocent. Taseer, a high-profile member of the Pakistan People's Party, had angered many for his defense of a Christian woman who was being jailed for blasphemy against Mohammed, while Qadri was lauded as a religious hero and showered with rose petals for his killing of Taseer.

For the collage *Call Me a Blasphemy* (2011), Butt cut up computer printouts of an article from the 45-page Pakistani blasphemy law and pasted the over 40,000 resultant tilelike pieces on tea-stained paper. The original article details punishments ranging from fines and imprisonment to death, for crimes including defiling a place of worship, insulting religious feelings and desecrating a copy of the Koran. In Butt's work, dozens of swirling lines of letters and jumbled words become abstract skeins of printed matter, without beginning or end. By rendering these strict, dated rules illegible, the artist seems to suggest that words used to rationalize religious violence make no logical sense.

Butt's new works are simultaneously menacing and appealing, timeless and topical. Veiled in the intricate spirals, circles and decorative patterns is a message that there are multiple sides to every story, and that the truth cannot be gleaned without taking them all into account.

Photo: Partial view of Ambreen Butt's I Am My Lost Diamond, 2011, resin and pins, 40 feet long overall; at Carroll and Sons.