

Galleries



A detail of one of the untitled works by Ambreen Butt shows birds alternately liberating and restraining a woman.

Miniature paintings convey great power

By Cate McQuaid

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For all the painstaking work it takes Ambreen Butt to make one painting, she sure is prodigious. The Pakistani-born Butt has followed up her major exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum last spring with a show of new work at the Bernard Toale Gallery, this one smaller but no less bracing than the Worcester show.

Specializing in the centuries-old technique of Mughal miniature painting, Butt uses a brush made from a pigeon quill and hairs from a squirrel's tail to paint over layers of mylar, which she then sews together. The top layer presents a female protagonist engaged in an allegory. Pictures and patterns on the layers beneath whisper through the veils of mylar like memories, feelings, and knowledge supporting the protagonist on her journey.

Like the work in Worcester, these paintings meditate on power: what it is, how we claim it, and how it turns on us. Each small series represents a cycle of desire, struggle, and awakening. The woman grapples with power in the form of a lion, and freedom in

Ambreen Butt: New Work and Greg Menco: Sculpture

At: Bernard Toale Gallery,
450 Harrison Ave., through Nov. 8.
617-482-2477.

www.bernardtoalegallery.com

Jo Ann Rothschild: A Retrospective

At: MPG Contemporary, 450 Harrison Ave., through Nov. 2. 617-357-8881.

Julie Levesque: Trespass and Gregory Grenon: Ball, Bat, and Glove

At: Clark Gallery, 145 Lincoln Road, Lincoln, through Oct. 30. 781-259-8303. www.clarkgallery.com.

one of Boston's finest painters of large abstract canvases. She has a small retrospective up at MPG Contemporary; it amounts to a show of recent work with a handful of older paintings and prints for context.

The oldest work, a tiny 1974 etching called "Deer Rhythms," features spare, fluid lines that describe a deer's movement. There's a greater kinship between that early work and what she's doing now. In between came bold ab-

the form of a flock of birds. The lion perennially escapes, although the woman tears his tail from his body. The birds alternately liberate and entrap the woman. Brilliant as the colors are in Butt's paintings, the narratives excel in their shades of gray: As soon as we grow lax in our understanding of power or freedom, they elude us.

These are not the romances or the heroics of traditional Persian miniature painting. Butt uses those devices to pose questions both contemporary and timeless. She also introduces another ancient narrative element. In many Mughal paintings, women hovered in the background, watching the action. Here, she stylizes the women into a ring of figures, hovering beneath a layer of mylar. As witnesses, they represent a level consciousness that watches but does not judge or blame.

That's what the artist does. Butt accepts and examines striving, pain, and growth without condemning or celebrating them. That makes room for each viewer to see his or her own struggles in her paintings. Coming from such a specific tradition, these works offer a more universal solace.

Also at Toale, Greg Mencoﬀ has crafted serene minimalist sculptures that offer a harmony of plane, shape, shadow, and color. Each hangs on the wall, wood fluted and creased and undulated, then coated in one pale tone. A slot or slice in the center houses handmade paper, suggesting a cycle of wood and pulp, or softness squeezed in the middle of something hard. The monochrome makes a canvas for the play of light and shadow over a sculpture and the wall. One untitled piece opens up like a book. Its surface rises and falls in small, soft waves, casting subtle shadows in crisscrosses.

Although made of different shapes and colors, and despite having a Zen-like simplicity, Mencoﬀ's sculptures all recall the grace of a butterfly, slowly opening its wings.

Compare and contrast

Jo Ann Rothschild has been painting for more than three decades. The winner in 1993 of the Museum of Fine Arts' first Maud Morgan prize, given to women artists in midcareer, Rothschild is

low in between came sold abstract expressionism, on a large scale, like 1983's "Execution in Queretaro," after a Manet painting. A lunging central form moves against a back wall: It's all strong lines and sharp tones, a reveling in gesture and in the materiality of paint.

Rothschild still works large, but there's more delicacy both to her gestures and to her paint application. "Rocio's Gift" (2002) features a yellow ground across a grid. Black splatters trace a treasure-map path over the surface; occasional squares step out of the grid's frame in different colors. There's less bravado in "Rocio's Gift" than in the earlier work and more sensitivity to the interplay of surface and depth. Other new paintings, like "XIV" (2003) bristle with brushwork; they're dense with small gestures but light with tone. Although this is an ample show, with more than 20 works, it feels like just a taste of where Rothschild has been and where she's going.

Over the fence

A child walked into the Clark Gallery, saw the giant fence that Julie Levesque has erected there, and asked if it was OK to go in the gallery. Fences are full of meaning: Stay in, stay out, this is my territory, and that's yours. Levesque's installation is a 6-foot-tall picket fence, stirring up memories of a pristine suburbia.

Levesque's fence represents the family it might surround. Each picket has its own personality: One crumples in the middle; another offers a periscope that turns out to be focused on the peering viewer; another hides the artist's journal entries. It's daunting but inviting. It protects, but it also reveals. I wanted more. Its sheer size, effective in making the viewer child-size, gets in the way of all the riches it might offer.

The folks at the Clark had no idea the Red Sox would have a postseason when they invited Gregory Grenon to show his ball-player paintings, made in reverse on glass and lodged in found frames and other objects. Bright, gaudy, and quirky, these old-time players (many of them Red Sox) have a peanuts-and-Cracker Jack appeal to fans, but also a subversive twist for art lovers.