

# Arts & Reviews

GALLERIES

## A pattern of success

Ambreen Butt uses repeated images to draw viewers in

By Cate McQuaid  
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The protagonist in Ambreen Butt's work, a likeness of the artist, soldiers through mythic territory. Like the heroine of a fairy tale, she encounters beasts, is given messages by birds, and performs arduous, magical transformations.

Butt's career is burgeoning. In December she was awarded the Museum of Fine Arts' Maud Morgan Prize, she recently had her first solo show in New York, and this month she'll have work in large group shows in Brooklyn and Islamabad. The artist is Pakistani, and her work — she paints, draws, and stitches on paper — is grounded in Mughal and Persian miniature painting.

For her new, engaging show at Bernard Toale Gallery, she challenged herself by using rough handmade paper in addition to the translucent mylar she favors. Because of the new paper's texture, she couldn't use her tiny brushes; the work is less detailed and intricate, and not layered.

Consequently, it seems, Butt has amped up her attention to pattern. Many of these pieces feature zebras; often the protagonist is part zebra. Pattern can call attention to itself; it can also camouflage. It can toy with the viewer's sense of depth.

In an untitled piece, the woman has zebra legs and stripes up her torso as she bends back over an exercise ball, which winks with dozens of eyes. Tiny black strands echoing the paper's texture and her dark hair bristle around her head. A ribbon of white and gray dots explodes from her torso and circles the frame back toward her face, where the pale dots culminate in a serpent's face, its tongue reaching to hers.

This is the typical dance with danger that Butt's heroines find themselves in; the pattern enhances the psychedelic otherworldliness already in the narrative. One entrancing drawing, "Decapitation" — the only one without the protagonist — features a mandala of zebras against a pattern of dots. Compelling as the heroine is, it's a relief to have her gone, and to have more room in which our own experiences can swirl.

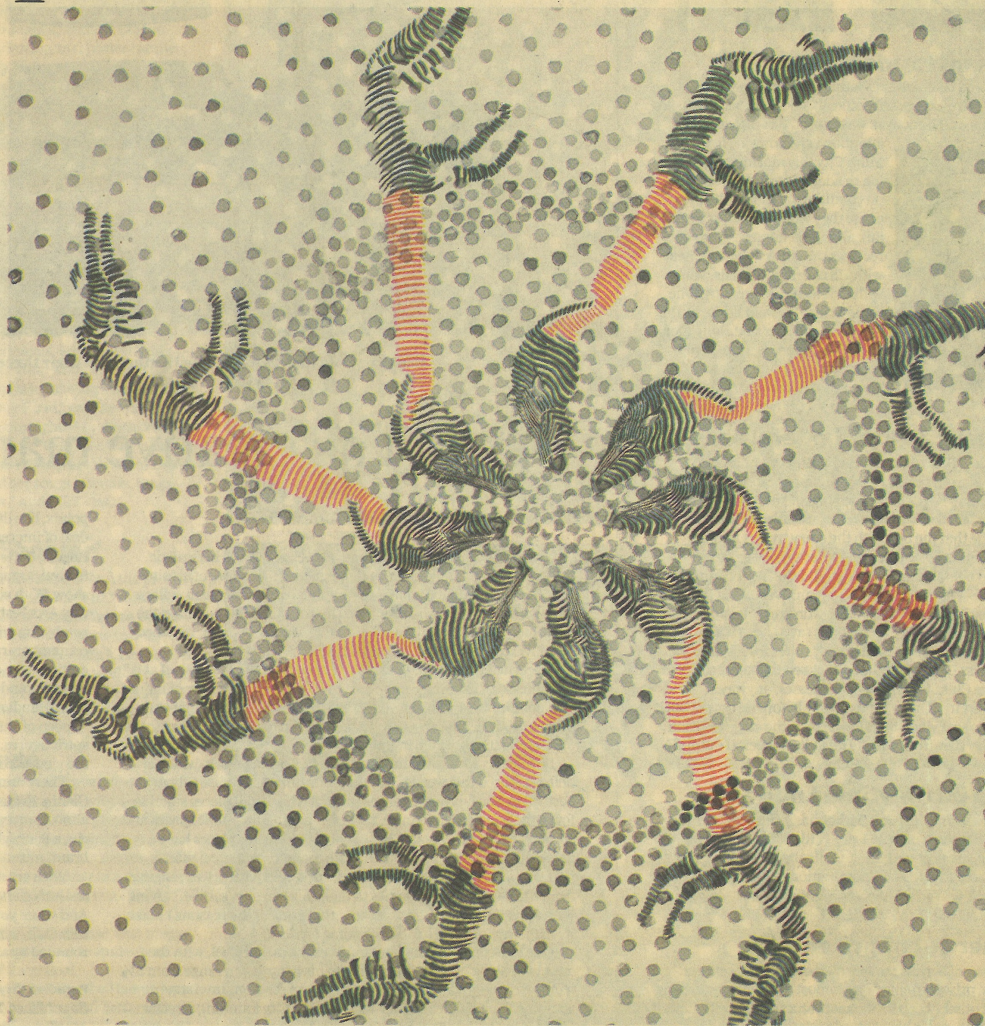
Also at Toale, the young artist David Ording reflects on the weight of art history in his ambitious painting "After" and several smaller works. "After" is a grid of images culled from a standard art-history text; they look more like glossy reproductions than like the originals, although they are deftly crafted. Ranging from Rubens to Caravaggio, they don't follow any particular order, offering up meaty morsels, reheated for the second time. Ording cleverly questions the construction of history, the powers and weaknesses of reproduction, and the commodification of art.

### Objectified view

Kirsten Stoltmann also takes commodification as her central theme in a provocative but uneven show at Allston Skirt. She lampoons our tendency to romanticize and objectify the Southwest with kitschy folk art. The largest piece is a chrome tumbleweed, sitting on its packing box; it's like trying to bottle the wind.

Nearby hangs "Christmas 2006: Snapshots of Parents' Interior," a triptych of photos of her mother's knickknacks and doodads, from drab Modernist sculpture to a folk-art crèche and little elves with cotton-ball beards. In one photo, Stoltmann stands beside a cutesy statue of a little girl looking down into her underwear; the artist unzips her jeans and mimics the statue. Nearby hangs a photo of a woman's pubic area, spray-painted red.

The transition from the objectification of the Southwest, and perhaps its indigenous population, to the objectification of women, while not unfair, is abrupt and confusing. Stoltmann aims to explore the original wildness behind what we tame and make cute. Wildness is by nature shocking, but it has much more going on — like passion and spontaneity — and this artist is only peeling back the outer layers. The reference to her parents' house makes the work look like adolescent acting-out. She needs to leave Mom and Dad behind to get to the beating heart of the wild.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALLSTON SKIRT GALLERY (BELOW LEFT), CATHERINE KERNAN (BE)

Ambreen Butt's "Decapitation" (above) features a mandala of zebras. Kirsten Stoltmann's show at Allston Skirt Gallery includes "Tumbleweed on Top of Southwestern Rug" (below left). Catherine Kernan's "Lyric Fragments #19" stresses form and warmth.



Also at Allston Skirt, don't miss B. Wurtz's light-hearted and surprisingly elegant sculptures and collages made out of old plastic bags, wire hangers, and other throwaways. They make a good aesthetic fit with Christopher Knowl's rugged, bold, outsider-style drawings, but Wurtz is the standout.



### Arts and craftsmanship

Print shows abound this month, thanks to the Boston Printmakers North American Print Biennial at Boston University. Soprafina has a satisfying group show featuring work by Peggy Badenhausen, Nona Hershey, Donald Kelley, Catherine Kernan, and Lori Warner. Looking at Hershey's subtle black-and-white cloud monotypes, hung in a series, can be like lying on the grass and watching the sky. Kelley's etchings and his monoprint feverishly bundle human forms like so many sticks; they're bold and disturbing.

Kernan and Badenhausen's monoprints are warm, understated, and all about form. Warner makes intriguing monotypes by cutting up two separate prints and weaving them together, creating a grid in which images blink into and out of clarity. Aside from Kelley's work, which has edge, this exhibit is a little too easy to please, but the craftsmanship is stellar.

**Ambreen Butt: Cirque**  
and **David Ording:**

At: Bernard Toale Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave.  
March 31. 617-482-2477, bernardtoale.com

**Kirsten Stoltmann: Rough Bush: Artifacts and Christopher Knowl:**

At: Allston Skirt Gallery, 65 Harrison Ave.  
through March 31. 617-482-2477

**Prints Show: New by Five Fabulous Prints**

At: Soprafina Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave.  
through March 31. 617-728-0777