

# Delicate balance

Ambreen Butt demonstrates her art of diplomacy at Carroll and Sons

Ambreen Butt has always made political art. Early in her career, the Pakistani-born artist now based in the Boston area investigated the tug of two cultures in mixed-media paintings and drawings. These led Butt to make larger pieces, often painstakingly crafted from many tiny parts, exploring themes such as free speech and violence.

Her current installation at Carroll and Sons, "I Am All What Is Left of Me," was inspired by a commission from the State Department's Art in Embassies program for the new US Embassy in Islamabad. This work won't go to Islamabad but it prompted a similar project that will.

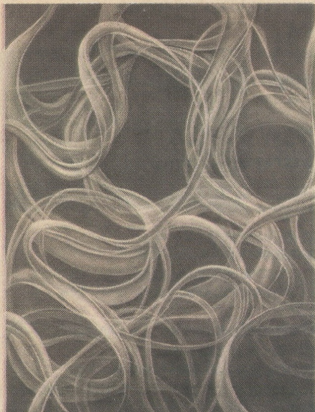
Butt's previous art has been challenging, but diplomatic: It asks questions rather than taking sides. Still, creating work for an embassy may compel her to be especially politic. This is less gritty than her usual efforts.

This installation comprises three mural-size pieces, each based on Multani tile patterns: lovely, symmetrical ceramic designs found in public buildings and mosques in South Asia, featuring saturated hues and botanical motifs.

From a distance, the works are crisp, bright, and pleasant; punchy colors and dancing patterns activate the gallery space. Indeed, this installation folds playfully around corners. In an American art gallery, the works don't fade into the background; in a public building in Islamabad, where Multani tiles proliferate, they might.

Up close, Butt introduces a new, mildly subversive motif. Over the paint she has affixed an intricate design in small cast resin pieces — keys, padlocks, and combination locks. They make up the vines and flowers spinning over the surface, quietly noting that embassies are gateways, murmuring about freedom and repression, about trust and safety, about mysteries yet unlocked.

Rather than keys and locks, the works that will go to Islamabad have designs dominated by abstractions of the Urdu and Arabic alphabets (a small version is on view now, although it hadn't arrived when I visited the gallery). More versatile visually, and hon-



MARK SHEINKMAN

oring the languages and the written word, Butt's new approach should better convey the fragmentation of meaning that's rich in much of her art, if in a more subdued approach than we're used to.

### Sheinkman's tangled elegance

Mark Sheinkman, who has a show up at Steven Zevitas Gallery, is technically a painter, but erasure is his main gambit. He covers his linen ground in a mixture of white oil paint and alkyd, a resin medium. Then he adds a layer of graphite, which he removes with various tools.

Many of the paintings on view have an all-over quality reminiscent of a Pollock; there's no beginning or end, no background or foreground, just an impossibly dense tangle of lines. They're not as beguilingly varied as a good Pollock painting, and consequently look overwrought.

A compelling exception among Sheinkman's denser paintings, "Sumner" sets countless ethereal ribbons undulating. There's respiration and pulse to all the movement, a constant, soothing rhythm that makes the piece as restful as it is lively.

The sparer paintings, though, have calligraphic elegance. Despite all the labor you can see went into them, these pieces read like X-rays or black-and-white film negatives — a flash of an image, not a constructed one. "Barnell" could be a gracefully choreo-

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AMBREEN BUTT

**AMBREEN BUTT: I Am All What Is Left of Me**  
At: Carroll and Sons, 450 Harrison Ave., through May 16.  
617-482-2477. [www.carrollandsons.net](http://www.carrollandsons.net)

**MARK SHEINKMAN: Recent Paintings**  
At: Steven Zevitas Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., through May 9.  
617-778-5265. [www.stevenzevitasgallery.com](http://www.stevenzevitasgallery.com)

**MICHAEL DAVID: Miscellanies 1980-2015**  
At: Laconia Gallery, 433 Harrison Ave., through May 10.  
[www.laconiagallery.com](http://www.laconiagallery.com)

Above: an untitled work from Ambreen Butt at Carroll and Sons. Above left: Mark Sheinkman's "Sullivan" at Steven Zevitas Gallery.