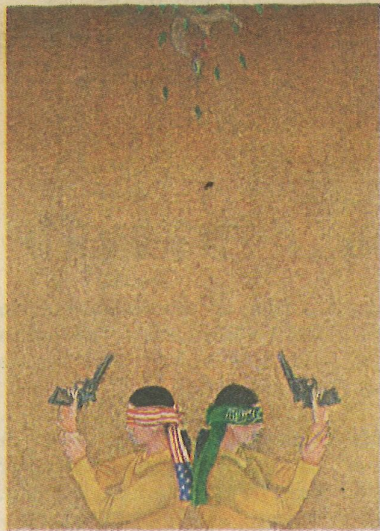




A woman of many worlds

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A woman of many worlds



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO (ABOVE)/DAVID L. RYAN

In her series “I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips” (details above), painter Ambreen Butt (top) searches for truth in a context of politics, war, and culture.

In art, Ambreen Butt grapples with the clash of Western, Islamic values

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — The title of Ambreen Butt’s solo show at the Worcester Art Museum speaks not only of her paintings, but of the 33-year-old artist herself. It is called “I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips.” The phrase, which is also the title of her most recent series of paintings, comes from a work by the 18th-century Sufi poet Bulleh Shah. Butt cites these lines:

*Speaking the truth creates chaos.
Telling a lie saves one scarce.
I am afraid of both these;
Afraid I am both here and there.
I must utter what comes to my lips.*

The Pakistani-born Butt is petite and soft-spoken, and when she speaks, she seems to be

seeking the truth. She knows this can be a slippery thing, especially when the subjects are politics, war, and culture. Even so, she keeps trying.

“Certain things are right and wrong,” the Cambridge-based painter says as she walks through the Worcester exhibition. “I need to express that. It’s my role as an artist and as a human being. For instance, I don’t understand when bombs are dropping from the sky and at the same time food is dropping from the sky. I don’t want to hear about the politics of it. I just don’t understand how that could happen.”

Wrestling with such questions and contradictions is what drives her to make her art. It’s an endless and daunting cycle of loss, learning, and

AMBREEN BUTT, Page C26

Ambreen Butt seeks to paint the truth

► **AMBREEN BUTT**
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renewal. Butt knows about being lost and found. A Muslim, she came to Boston to get her master's degree at the Massachusetts College of Art nearly a decade ago and stayed on. She hasn't returned to Pakistan in seven years. A woman of many worlds, Butt says she's not exactly at home in any of them.

"There's no place you can say that is home," she says. "Really, home is within yourself."

Butt studied Persian and Indian miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore. She grounds her paintings in the precise technique, saturated colors, and storytelling tradition of Mughal miniature painting.

Her works also embrace themes of contemporary Western art. The winner of the first Institute of Contemporary Art Artist Prize in 1999, Butt makes herself the protagonist of most of her paintings, but she sees the woman in the paintings as a stand-in for everyone. She uses the self-portraits to wrestle with questions about relationships, identity, and desire. In "I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips," she focuses on the clash between Western values and those of Islam, and on the responsibility every man and woman has to speak the truth.

"I think she's very brave," says Susan L. Stoops, curator of contemporary art at the Worcester Art Museum. "She's asking questions, and she's willing to put them out in public when they're still questions, when the outcome isn't realized. The content is not about resolution. It encourages us to keep asking questions."

"People want the story to have an ending. Ambreen raises the bar. She doesn't make it easy. She doesn't say there's one answer to the question."

Butt's paintings, sometimes as large as 17 by 14 inches, are bigger than traditional miniatures. That's because she wants her viewers to see the expressions on her

protagonist's face. Still, the works are rooted in a centuries-old technique that was dying when Butt happened upon it in the early '90s. Lately, it's had a resurgence.

The brushes she uses, which she brought from Pakistan, are made from squirrel fur, lodged into the shaft of a pigeon feather, which in turn is installed in a bamboo stick.

"You make the paper, the brush, the pigment," she says. "It's such an engaging process. You work many hours a day, many days a week, and you don't see much happen. You must be persistent and patient."

The new exhibition features three bodies of work. The paintings in the "Home and the World" and the "Farewell" series are done on numerous layers of transparent Mylar, suggesting the many levels of the artist's identity, memories, and feelings that go into each painting. Those in the series "I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips" are painted on paper created for miniatures, called wasli, made of multiple layers of fine cotton and silk pulp and burnished with a conch shell.

She painted the final series over the past year at artist-in-residence programs in Michigan and North Carolina. "I was isolated, living by myself in the middle of the woods. There were bears," Butt recalls.

Yet the world crashes into "I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips." Missiles explode. Planes fly into skyscrapers as the protagonist walks a tightrope in the foreground. She's attacked by birds with stars on their wings, dragged up by her hair by a phoenix, blindfolded and armed with a pistol.

One painting depicts a woman on her back, being hauled up by her feet by a flock of birds. Her

hair has grown tree roots, from which a tree sprouts. The woman clings to the branches as she's dragged away.

"She's a victim," Butt says. "Growing the tree was a little selfish act. She's grown something for herself, the tree from her hair. Now she must let go. It's the human psyche: Today she's the victim. Tomorrow, she's the oppressor."

For a viewer besieged by television images and radio reports of the war in Iraq, Butt's exhibition is a balm. It doesn't explain the war or accept it. But through its beauty and its unwillingness to offer pat answers, it opens a pathway for the viewer to begin to understand his or her own feelings about war, violence, and oppression.

"When the art makes you think, that's when I feel I've succeeded," Butt says. "The poetry has to be there, even if it's difficult. The message has to be foiled in beauty to get it across."

In a later e-mail, Butt described her experience working on one of the paintings, which portrays a woman who has constructed a cage from her long hair. She has captured a phoenix in it. As she painted, the artist says, she listened to a recording of poetry by Shah, sung by Pakistani folk singer Abida Parveen.

"In one verse, Bulleh Shah questions that you go outside to search and fight the devil, but have you ever looked into your own self?" Butt explains. "Have you ever fought with your own conscience?"

"This was exactly what I was thinking when I was making that painting. The image suggests that there is no need to go out to fight the evil. If only we can control the evil within our own self, everything would fall in its right place."

■
**"Ambreen Butt:
I Must Utter What
Comes to My Lips"
is on display at
the Worcester Art
Museum, 55
Salisbury St.,
Worcester, through
May 11. 508-799-
4406 or [www.
woorcesterart.org](http://www.worcesterart.org).**