

A dreamlike glimpse of the cosmic and mundane

By Ken Johnson

GLOBE STAFF

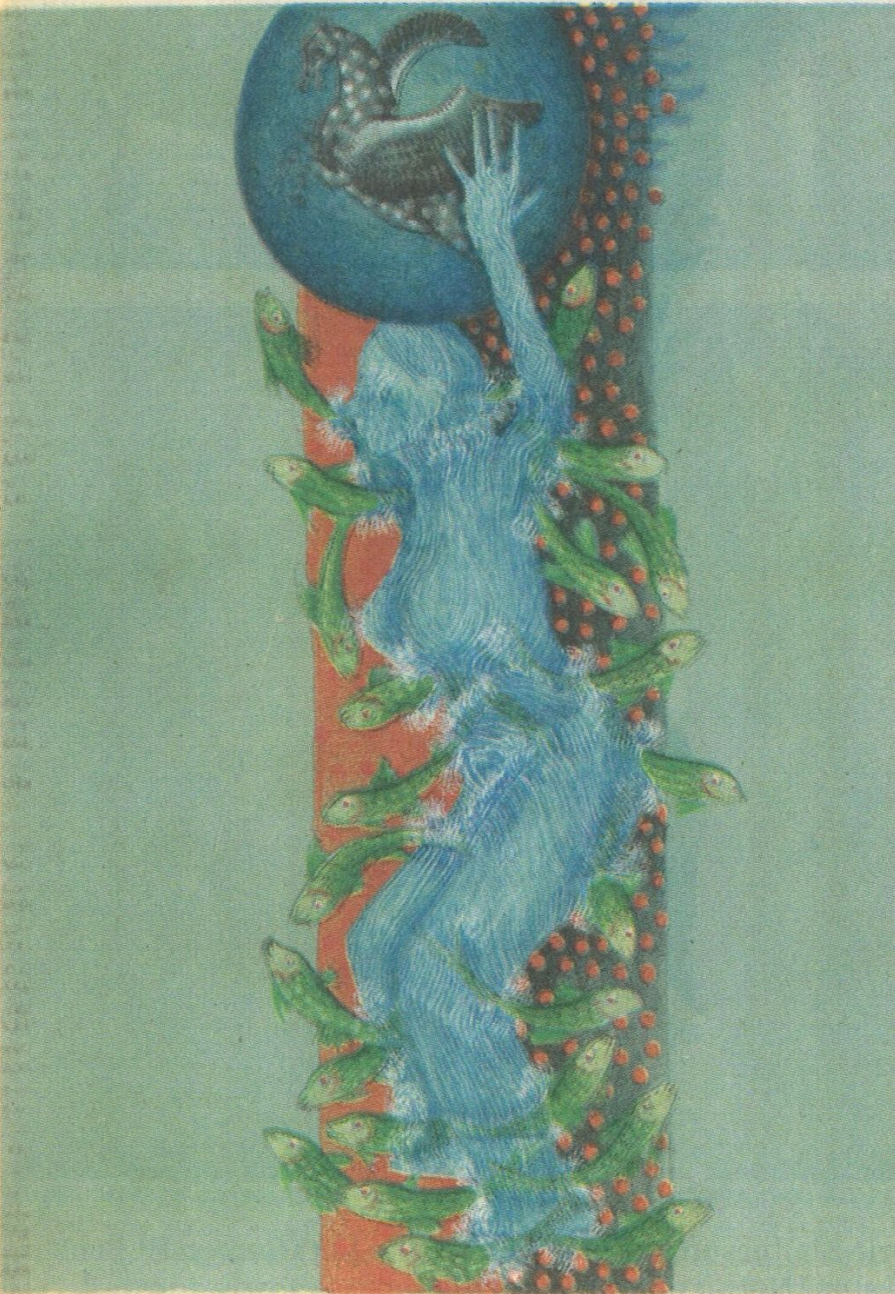
Anyone who has taught graduate-level studio art in North America is familiar with the plight of those foreign students who have received traditional training at home but who, when faced with the freedom of contemporary art in the West, are uncertain what to do with their often enviable skills.

Ambreen Butt, winner of this year's Maud Morgan Prize — given by the Museum of Fine Arts to a female artist who lives in Massachusetts — was one of those students. She studied the Indian tradition of miniature painting at the National College of Art in her home country, Pakistan, before entering the Massachusetts College of Art's MFA program in 1993. In Boston she tried her hand at Western-style modernism and she came close to giving up on painting altogether. But eventually she went back to her roots. Like the painter Shazia Sikander, a classmate in Pakistan, Butt began to combine the traditional style and tech-

nique of Indian miniature painting with contemporary ideas, methods, and materials.

This new path has served Butt well. In 1999 the Institute of Contemporary Art gave her its award for excellence for a Boston artist, and in recent years she has been in group shows in Los Angeles and Berlin. Last year she had her first solo exhibition in New York. And now her adroit blending of Eastern tradition and Western innovation is on display in a show of 12 small-scale works on paper and fabric, presented by the MFA in recognition of the Morgan Prize.

In most of Butt's works, a young woman resembling the artist appears multiple times in some kind of fantastic narrative. Painted in jewel tones with finely pointed watercolor brushes, this figure pops out of each mouth of a fierce, five-headed giant serpent; she slays a wild-haired blue demon with a sword; she straddles a submissive lion and swallows his tail.



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

“Untitled” from Ambreen Butt’s series “I Need a Hero.”

She grapples with grand struggles on a smaller scale

► EXHIBITION

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Two paintings from a series called "I Need a Hero" focus on a more generalized female figure made of water. Green fish swim inside her or leap out of her fluid body. One of these water goddesses holds up a transparent globe with a delicately painted winged horse inside.

At the same time as she develops these imaginary visions, Butt also affirms the physical aspect of her works. She uses needle and thread to draw parts of some pic-

Ambreen Butt: 2006 Maud Morgan Prize Exhibition

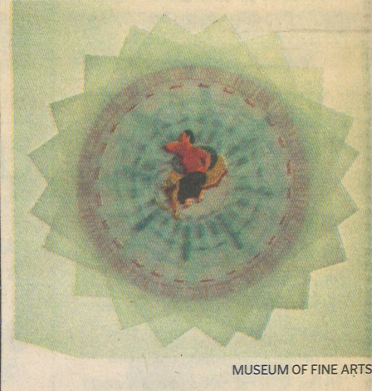
At: Museum of Fine Arts through Dec. 10. 617-267-9300, mfa.org

tures, and she paints in abstract, decorative, and figurative styles under and overlaid sheets of semitransparent paper. Three paintings are made on squares of frosted Mylar that are neatly layered to create 20-point stars.

The effect of all this is to evoke not a harmonic integration of opposites but a sense of struggle to contain contradictory pressures. Butt repeatedly pictures herself as a sort of woman warrior dominating dragons and demons of Eastern mythology. But this female figure is also implicitly an idealized image of contemporary self-empowerment able to triumph over warring claims in modern art and life: those of East and West; old and new; the mythic and the mundane.

Butt's updated miniature painting is like lucid dreaming: Almost anything can happen there. Unfortunately, the show is too small to reveal the full range of Butt's imagination, and the slice of psychic life in each picture is relatively narrow. I wish the paintings were wilder and crazier — less restrained and reasonable — and I find myself wondering about what's missing. Why are there no men in her pictures? Or children? What about modern objects like cars and computers? Or versions of her self other than the always-in-control warrior-heroine? The possibilities for developing and elaborating the terms of her struggle on both cosmic and terrestrial planes are as exciting to contemplate as what she has already achieved.

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From Ambreen Butt's series "What is Past, or Passing or to Come."