

*Ambreen Butt creates layers of knowledge and assumption and lore that add up to the component of identity.*

# Painted layers reveal a rich self-portrait

**Ambreen Butt:  
Home and the World**

At: Bernard Toale Gallery,  
450 Harrison Ave., through Nov. 24

**By Cate McQuaid**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Pakistani artist Ambreen Butt has been living in Boston for seven years, and as her work evolves, the Western influence **Galleries** grows.

Butt trained as a painter of Persian miniatures, and brings that degree of precision to her work. In "Home and the World," her new show of mixed-media works at the Bernard Toale Gallery, the small self-portraits that have always anchored Butt's pieces come alive. Text, which she used to bury among the many layers of Mylar upon which she builds her art, bubbles delightfully to the surface.

For all that, this body of work is the most explicitly autobiographical Butt has produced, without being so intimate as to push the viewer away. She wrestles with her own rich, sometimes fractured identity. Often, she explores the connection and gulf between men and women — not a surprise, as her husband still lives in Pakistan.

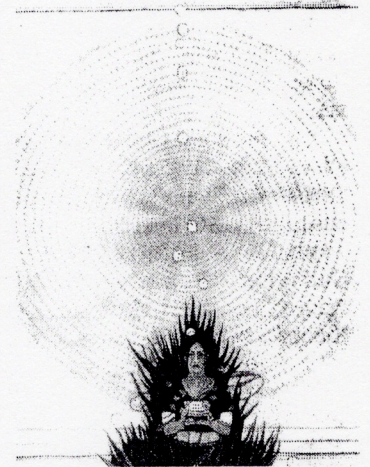
She draws patterns, and often a central mandala, on veils of Mylar. This rich ground refers to enculturation: all the layers of knowledge and assumption and lore that add up to the component of identity. It hovers above the characters as reliably as the sun. The characters that draw the viewer's eye in each work Butt paints with watercolor on the surface, which stands in for the present moment.

They rise from the bottom of each piece, nested in greenery. In one untitled piece, the small painting shows the artist in an American flag T-shirt, holding her palms up in a gesture of doubt. A basket on her head — the vessel that rep-

resents home, which she carries with her — blossoms with ribbons of green, red, and white. Each strand has a tiny tag of paper at its end, printed with a word in Urdu or English: identity, loyalty, and humanity.

An untitled triptych has Butt on one of the end panels facing outward, holding a red flower to her face. At the other end, a man in a turban does the same. Text runs along a red thread that ties the two flowers together: passion, desire, love. But along the middle panel, which features one of her veiled mandalas, the text changes: barrier, obstacle, right, wrong. Culture and history can be roadblocks to love. They can also be the earth from which love blossoms.

There are no easy answers in Butt's works: she paints and draws the questions. Yet for all her American-style personal revelation, her work remains exquisitely crafted and grounded in the traditions of Pakistan.



An untitled 2001 work from Ambreen Butt's "Home and the World."

## Portraits of the artist

Painter Ambreen Butt uses her training in Persian miniatures to examine identity, and the connection between men and women in her new exhibit of intimate mixed-media works, 'Home and the World.' Galleries