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Beauty and Danger in the Art of Ambreen Butt

The Pakistan-born, Texas-based artist creates energetic works underpinned by a pervasive sense of threat.



Bridget Quinn December 12, 2023



Ambreen Butt, "Arsenal of Ambiguity" (2023), tea, coffee, watercolor, and collage on tea-stained paper, 44 x 30 inches (all images courtesy Gallery Wendi Norris)

HYPERALLERGIC

SAN FRANCISCO — *Ambreen Butt: Lay Bare My Arms* at Gallery Wendi Norris combines collage and text with traditional South Asian miniature painting to create energetic works that radiate delicate beauty, underpinned by a pervasive threat of violence. *Lay Bare My Arms* coincides with the publication of the Pakistan-born, Texas-based artist's first monograph, *What Comes to My Lips*, after more than two decades of group and solo exhibitions. Beauty and violence have long been themes in Butt's work.

As a Muslim woman living and working in a state where veneration of the gun is written into law — Texas allows permitless carry of handguns and rifles — Butt is likely more aware than most of the tension between security and danger. In her work, she translates American gun idolatry into a traditional art form as coded and mythic as any illuminated manuscript of European Christianity (a religion that often feeds the United States' gun cult).

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One of the first pieces in the show, “Arsenal of Ambiguity” (2023), is both scary and whimsical, featuring a hairy, bearded, and oddly sweet demon with flaming eyes, holding an automatic weapon in one hand and a fistful of irises in the other. Both guns and irises reappear throughout *Lay Bare My Arms*, juxtaposing life and death, beauty and danger. The demon runs or dances in a collaged field of falling blue flowers and wears a red-striped skirt tied with a blue sash at the waist. This is a demon either made in America (or Texas) or frolicking in its abundant fields. The center of many of the flowers have “Arms” written on them in English, while the petals says things like “security” and “free state” and “people.” Some writing is also in Urdu.



Ambreen Butt, “Contours of Fragility” (2023), watercolor and collage on tea-stained paper, 30 x 22 inches

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human flesh. Bearing arms meets bare arms, which might evoke the feminine, even the maternal babe in arms. In the collages with Urdu, the words include “children,” “future,” “people,” and “innocent.”

Use of collage is a time-honored feminist device — from Hannah Höch to Lorna Simpson — and one with a political punch, utilized by Dada and punk rock. In her work, Butt wields collage as delicately as a scalpel, with teardrop and flower forms filling a scene, or ornate paper filigree, all carrying messages on their surface. Some words can be difficult to make out, and some are not in English, but they all convey a ritual power.

Not least, much of that power comes from the work’s visual allure and evident time-consuming process — the eight pieces in *Lay Bare My Arms* took three years to complete — with lovely decorative designs and soft color, dancing demons, purple flowers, and repeating images of automatic weapons. They beautifully bear the weight of history and of how we live today.



Ambreen Butt, “Guardians of Safe Heavens” (2023), tea, coffee, watercolor, and collage on tea-stained paper, 44 x 30 inches

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Ambreen Butt, "Tearful Harvests" (2023), tea, watercolor, collage and gold pigment on paper, 30 x 22 inches

Ambreen Butt: Lay Bare My Arms Gallery Wendi Norris (436 Jackson Street, San Francisco, California) through December 22. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.