

Miniature artist mixes traditional skills, modern ideas

Mass.-based Ambreen Butt concerned with global issues

By **MEERA RAJAGOPALAN**
INDIA New England Correspondent

LEXINGTON, Mass. — Ambreen Butt's work is a lot like her — working within boundaries, but often reaching beyond. Her paintings, from the series "I Need a Hero" are now being displayed at the Heard Museum in Phoenix as part of the exhibit "Holy Land:

Diaspora and the Desert."

In one piece, the subject of the painting reaches beyond the traditional ornate border of the miniature.

Three miniature paintings portraying the metaphoric evils of society affecting women are displayed in a triptych, or three pieces of work that can be read together, with a distinct narrative structure. In one triptych, a group of women are trying to rescue a woman caught in the clutches of a demon in the first piece, followed by a painting depicting a part of a woman trying to escape from her body. The painting also features a dragon who seems to beget

a simian creature. The third painting shows a woman vanquishing the demon.

"The paintings show that the evil is not the dragon but something else that's driving it," says Butt. "It's mostly metaphorical."

Butt, 36, says she tries to use the wall as an active component of her paintings. "The work is somewhere between a film and a book," says Butt, who adds decorative borders around her paintings, in tune with tradition. "So it's a mural in some



Image courtesy of AMBREEN BUTT

Artist Ambreen Butt, of Lexington, Mass., uses traditional miniature techniques to portray modern themes.

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Miniature artist says she found direction after Sept. 11

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sense," she says.

Butt's work fuses the traditional art form of the miniature with contemporary themes to talk about issues that touch her.

For example, "I Need a Hero" explores contemporary women in roles of heroism, featuring women in gym outfits battling evils of society represented by demons and monsters.

The paintings are inspired by real life women like Mukhtaran Mai of Pakistan, who was gang-raped by elders of the village as retribution for her brother's transgressions, says Butt.

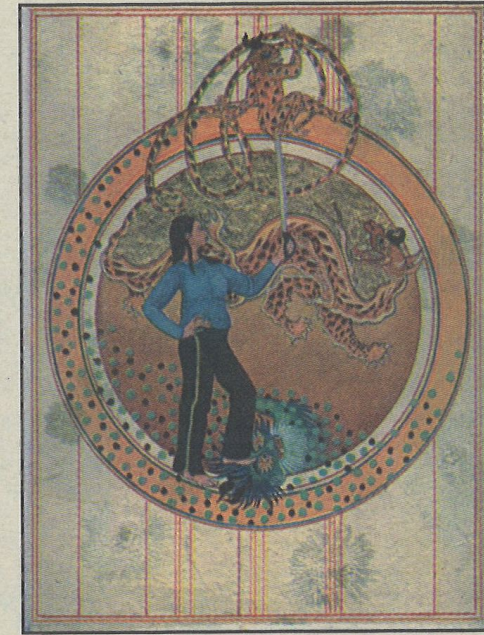
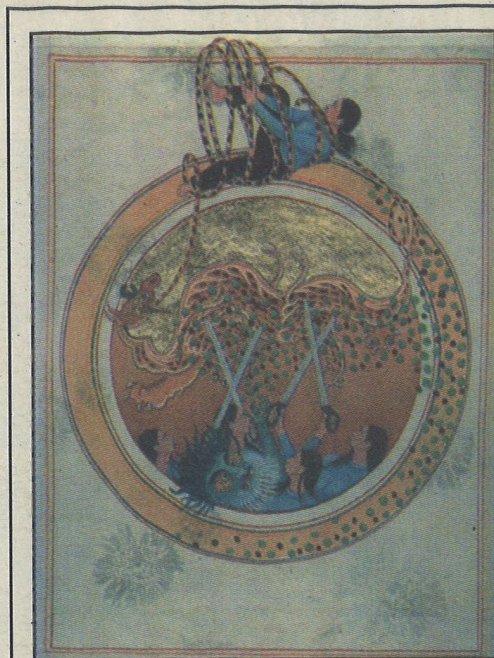
"The woman is seen doing many different things [in this series]," says Butt. "The idea is to bring a woman hero who is not 'Xena the Warrior Princess' to life. It is inspired by someone among us, a real woman."

A graduate from the National College of Art in Lahore and the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, Butt was used to creating imagery with traditional processes.

She struggled to find her niche outside the medium, when her professors at the Massachusetts College of Art encouraged her to think beyond the uniqueness of the medium.

"You have to be very, very honest with yourself," says Butt. "To get to the bottom of what you think and feel."

Butt was working on a series called "Home and the World," when September 11 happened, and changed the way Butt thought about her art.



Images courtesy of AMBREEN BUTT

Ambreen Butt likes to work a narrative structure into her art. In a triptych being displayed at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, she describes the issues that women face. Her work features traditional borders and materials, but tackles modern themes.

"The meaning [of the series] changed, and it was so much about seeing the world from the inside and the outside," Butt says, "I had something to say, and not just for the art world."

Since that exhibit, Butt has tackled serious issues such as politics and women empowerment in her paintings.

Bernard Toale of Boston, who represented Butt's work, says he was impressed with her work the minute he saw it. When she entered Toale's office with her portfo-

lio, he says, he thought Butt was going to be just another artist with a bunch of pictures, but he was hooked.

"Her work is very special in the realm of what is seen here in New England, also very special in terms of the craft and technical stuff," says Toale.

"The work, when she first showed it was very personal and intimate," says Toale, "and about her life and being an Islamic woman. It was mostly diaristic (diary-like)."

Now, says Toale, her work has become more global. "Her work has evolved so much, and she has created a beautiful body of work after 9/11," he says.

That Butt's work has reached beyond boundaries is reflected in the fact that her work has been displayed throughout the country, as part of different shows.

The Phoenix-based Heard Museum was working on the theme of diasporas to open

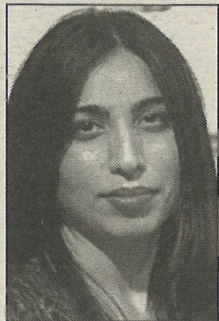
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Everyday women are inspiration for artist's work

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the doors to a dialog with native American artists, to tell them about other cultures and people who have lived through similar circumstances as theirs, says Lara Taubman, co-curator of the exhibit.

Joe Baker, also a curator of the exhibit, had heard about Butt's work, and felt that her work fit into the broad theme of the diaspora. "[Her work] is incredibly beautiful and powerful," Baker says. "I loved the play of a woman in the Western world, making her way through the experience."



Butt

Butt stumbled upon art after observing students from the Lahore College of Art with canvases and easels, and thinking it looked interesting. She enrolled in the school with no idea of what she was going to specialize in. During the process of learning about the different kinds of art, she found herself drawn toward miniature painting.

"It was so fascinating, the art," says Butt, who found that the art was more labor intensive than she had bargained for.

"It's funny, because I had the least

amount of patience, and for miniature, you need a lot of it," says Butt, whose professors insisted on students following the traditional style of painting.

For her master's thesis, Butt created eight paintings based on women's issues in Pakistan. Her thesis was not accepted well within the tradition-minded college, but Butt credits her alma mater for giving her a strong foundation in the basics of the art, and the process of the craft, something she uses even today. Butt makes her own wasli (rag paper) to paint on, a process that takes several days.

Though a lot of her work has shades of the Kangla (Rajasthan) style of miniatures, Butt has recently found herself interested by the Persian style. "Persian paintings have a very interesting, instinctive quality," says Butt, adding that they are characterized by the presence of animal figures.

Butt's paintings are much larger than traditional miniature paintings, and she has slowly emerged as an artist independent of her medium. Butt, the mother of a five-month-old baby, says she was most prolific when she was pregnant. Butt lives in Lexington, Mass. with her husband Dr. Iqbal Ahmed and their baby daughter, Noor-E-Saher.

Ambreen Butt's work can be viewed at the Bernard Toale Gallery, 450 Harrison Avenue, Boston.

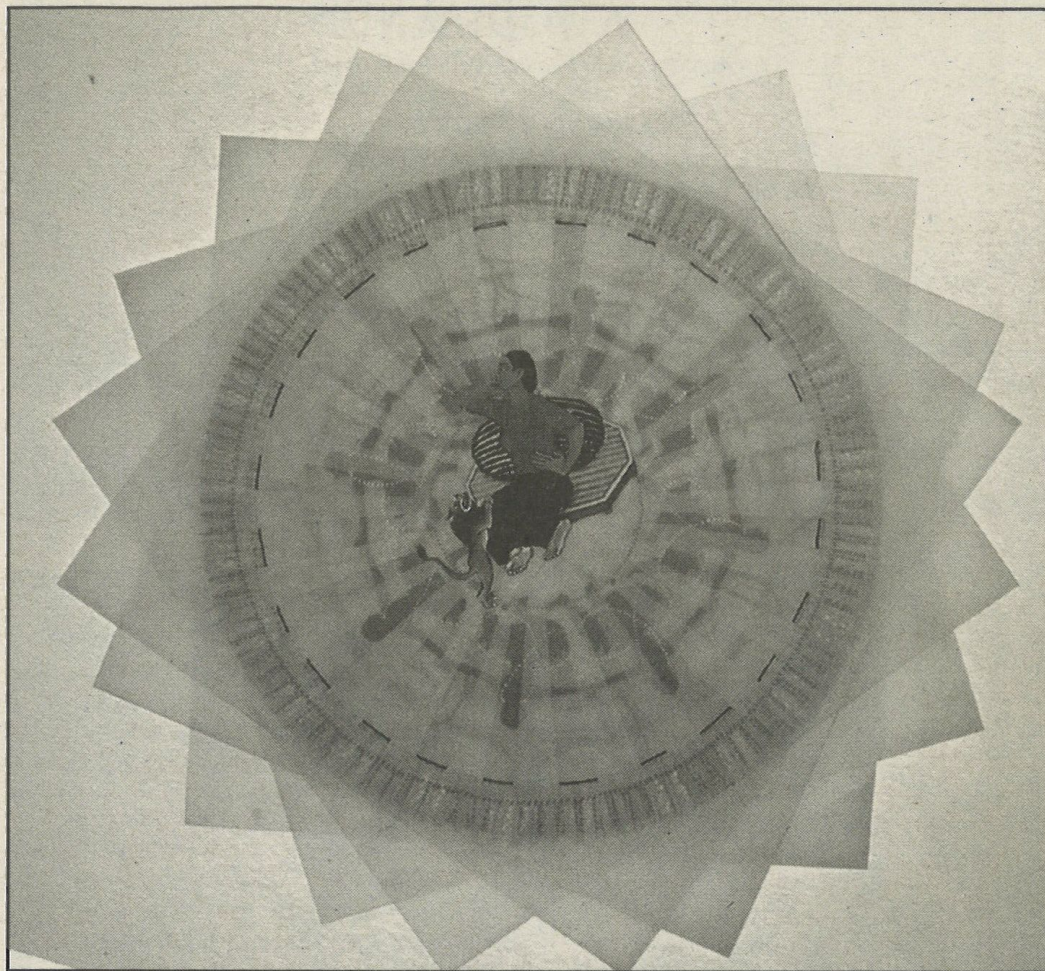


Image courtesy of AMBREEN BUTT

Miniature artist Ambreen Butt uses innovative media like transparent sheets of paper, to convey the depths and layers of meaning in her contemporary work.