

On *the* Great Hunt

by Joseph R. Wolin



Near the center of the left-hand sheet of Ambreen Butt's diptych, *The Great Hunt 2* (2008), the small figure of a man dressed in red rides a stylized galloping horse and draws an arrow from his quiver, his bow at the ready, as he pursues a herd of gazelles and spotted deer that flee from him, terrified, in several directions, one deer already pierced and slain at the bottom of the image. The rider wears a yellow turban and matching sash and slippers, his steed caparisoned with a blue flowered saddle blanket and an aigrette mounted over its head. Just above him, under a tree, a collared cheetah sinks its fangs into the neck of an unfortunate blackbuck, while, at some remove below, in a different scale and a different mode of rendering, two men in cloth caps and loose-fitting *kameez* shirts—one bearded, one with his face masked—attack a third, corpulent, clean-shaven man in a modern Western-style suit.

Clearly, the artist intends us to compare and contrast the two disparate scenes, the two separate orders of representation. The hunter, his prey, and his trained cat, exactly limned with tiny strokes of lapidary color, recall an enchanted world, a past half history, half fairy tale. In fact, Butt copied these elements from a late sixteenth-century manuscript, a page of

the *Akbarnama* illuminated by the artist Mansur, now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The horseman is the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, who had himself depicted killing ruminants for sport. The three men struggling underneath him, however, exist in the present. Although drawn in outline, mere contours in blue, the realist manner in which they are portrayed and their cropping on two sides imply a photographic source, and Butt, indeed, took them from a photo of riots in Pakistan in 2007, one of scores of similar scenes in the news that showed men in traditional white mufti beating and turning over to the police lawyers who demonstrated against then-President Musharraf's suspension of the country's Chief Justice.

The dichotomy of the historic courtly miniature of a royal hunt and the contemporary mass-media document of political assault, serves to trace correspondences linking histories of violence, all the more resonant because the Emperor's hunt and the President's battery-by-proxy occupy the same physical geography, the territory of Pakistan, which once formed a substantial part of the Mughal domain. If the predatory aggressors in each case represent the near absolute power of the state, then Butt has drawn

a parallel between the victims as well, equating the peaceable herbivores decimated for pleasure with the similarly vulnerable advocates of the rule of law and secular democracy, bloodied by thugs in the service of a regime long accustomed to annexing religious and nationalist sentiments for its own agenda.

Far from the leading clarity and simple pieties of a political cartoon, however, the image is equivocal and layered—literally so. Butt has not painted the trio in modern garb, for instance, but rendered them in stitched thread, puncturing the surface of the support, suturing the Mylar on which she painted Akbar and his animals to the tea-stained paper beneath while articulating the contemporary group's likeness. Behind, other images—partly revealed, partly obscured by the translucent Mylar—seem to surface like half-remembered dreams impinging upon consciousness: protesters, some with their hands gloved and faces obscured by the black-and-white kaffiyehs popular amongst Palestinians; a woman with a fast-food beverage; decorative patterns and meandering stippling. On the surface, but palely receding like the pictures behind it, dozens of white crescents shadowed by dark feathery strokes appear as tufted hillocks through which Akbar chases his game, but

a second glance shows them to be white caps with wisps of hair, echoing those of the stitched men attacking the lawyer, a huge mob reduced to barest signifiers. And existing somewhere between foreground and background, the pale apricot outlines of a few more hoofed animals—gazelles, another antlered deer, a horned ram—run with the herd, the ghosts of hunts long since or yet to come. Mutually overlapping, past and present coexist in Butt's vision, simultaneously and contiguously. One cannot be perceived in the absence of the other, and extraneous incident and errant detail inevitably complicate narratives that first appeared unassailable.

If the left panel of *The Great Hunt* depicts male violence, the right-hand sheet represents the distaff side. A herd of gazelles still leaps across the center of the picture, mirroring the one chased by Akbar. In the Emperor's place, however, are two women, one standing with her forefinger raised, balancing on the hands of another, crouching. And the stitched group at the bottom comprises three women in South Asian dress, grimacing in either anger or horror and clutching at a ladder that rises up to the woman who crouches above. Drawn blue lines echo the ones in thread, doubling both women and ladder, slightly off



PREVIOUS PAGES
The Great Hunt 2 from the series *Dirty Pretty*. (Diptych) (detail)

THIS SPREAD
The Great Hunt 2 from the series *Dirty Pretty*. (Diptych) 2008
Water based pigments, white gouache, thread and gold leaf on layers of mylar and tea stained paper.
45 x 60 inches

NEXT PAGES
The Great Hunt 2 from the series *Dirty Pretty*. (Diptych) (detail)



register. Background images appear far more minimally than on the left side, but include a woman in a burka and another with her hair veiled, gesticulating with a raised fist, the counterpart of the topmost one in the pair who balance like acrobats.

We might take those two women, both seen in profile, for identical twins, strikingly sharing long, dark hair and matching facial features. Similar figures in other works, however, make it clear that both are self-portraits of the artist—the one on the bottom, barefoot, dressed in blue jeans and a red shirt; the one above, in pointed-toe slippers, wearing a bright blue *kameez* and jacket over white *shalwar* pants, along with a white head scarf, a red shawl, and a red and white garland of flowers around her neck. The doubled figure of the artist, fractured into two selves—one in the ordinary costume of her adopted United States supporting another in the traditional garb of her native Pakistan—might imply that such a split identity constitutes a precarious balancing act. Or, perhaps, it may suggest that the self in Pakistani dress can see a little further by standing on the shoulders of her American doppelgänger, like Isaac Newton on the shoulders of giants. Yet the woman on top does not

wear a generic outfit; rather, Butt has dressed her in the clothes that Benazir Bhutto wore on the day she was assassinated in December 2007, and her oratorical gesture, pointing into the air with one finger, was one Bhutto used. Depicting herself in Bhutto's garb and attitude, Butt appears to suggest more than mere adulation or empathy for the slain leader. Dressing herself up in this way seems an act of identification, as if she wanted symbolically to *become* Bhutto, to assume her mantle, to partake somehow of her meaning, her power, political agency, and even martyrdom.

We can read Butt's masquerade of the divided self, her simultaneous self-portraits as Benazir Bhutto and American artist, as the conflicted, yet somewhat removed, and possibly nostalgic expression of the expatriate, the longing for connection with a troubled homeland left behind. But it also intimates deeper responses to Bhutto's assassination: a kind of mourning—for both the woman and the ideals she represented—by identification with the deceased; a kind of memorializing as the American Butt holds up the Bhutto/Butt, almost as a monument; and a kind of moral intervention, both giving and demanding sustained attention to the facts of Bhutto's life and death.



Yet, as much as expressing any personal narrative (as Steve Reinke cautions, “self-portrait cannot be autobiography”), Butt inscribes the paired women into the meanings of *The Great Hunt 2* itself, into the matrix of art. She ascribes an importance to the imaginary divided self equal to that of the greatest figures of the past, positioning the balancing duo parallel to Akbar the Great and rendering them in the same manner. In fact, she embeds them within her complexly layered meditation on history and violence, and another Mughal horseman in a red coat and yellow turban, but this time on a polka-dotted charger, coming in, upside down, from the top of the image, points his long sword directly at the head of the Bhutto/Butt figure, while an orange-robed archer points his arrow at the two women from the bottom corner. History not only imbricates the figures of the female artist and the female leader—the very construct of the female self—but it proves decidedly menacing.

All this multifarious activity inhabits a large rectangular frame that hugs the inward-facing edges of the two sheets of paper. Ornamented on three sides with a pale blue-and-white pattern derived from leaves and flowers, glittering with outlines picked out in gold leaf,

and lined by an inner border of outlined elephants marching in several layers beneath the surface, the frames appear contiguous, as if they straddled the two sheets of paper like a double-page spread of an open book. In fact, we can see *The Great Hunt 2* as the illustration of a text, like the glorious illuminations that gave visual splendor to Mughal manuscripts, but here the pictures seem to illustrate a narrative that has become nonlinear, illogical, unmoored. Past and present intermingle promiscuously; the Islamic miniature collapses upon the photographic; the personal and the political become tangled up in red, white, and blue. Butt's pictorial structure seems to operate the way the mind sometimes does, in dreams, say—although history and politics, identity and culture, are not the typical concerns of the oneiric. Better, we might say that her image partakes of poetic logic, grappling with the violence of the world and the weight of history in a way that runs just beneath—or just above—rationality and reason. Yet the violence of the world and the weight of history will always echo beyond whatever poetic device with which we try to contain them, and, on the right-hand panel, a cheetah sinks its teeth into the neck of an unfortunate black-buck, just outside the storybook frame. //

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