

PATRICIA McDONNELL

"Life is uncertain," says Pakistani native Ambreen Butt.

Ambreen Butt

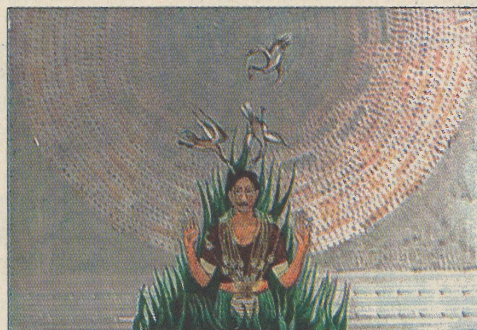
Finding a voice through her art

By Nancy Sheehan
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Cambridge artist Ambreen Butt named her exhibition at Worcester Art Museum, "I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips," after a concept by which she lives. It wasn't always an easy thing for the native of Pakistan to do, however.

"There was a lot of verbal expression when I came here, which I wasn't used to," she said of her first days in this country as a student at Massachusetts College of Art. "In Pakistan, you just did your work. You never talked about it. And, being a girl, you're taught as a child that good girls don't talk back. It was my personality as well. I was also shy."

But she didn't shy away from tackling an exacting art form, traditional Persian and Indian miniature painting. In her updated version of the historical form, cultural tensions between her Muslim roots and her contemporary American lifestyle are evident in the 33-year-old artist's work, which is on display at the museum through May 11.



An untitled painting from Ambreen Butt's "Home and the World" series.

In a gallery talk Thursday, she will speak about her paintings, which use the painstaking techniques of the intricately illustrative miniature form, a once-dominant style that has not been widely practiced for more than 150 years.

A BIG IMPRESSION

But, when she studied the form at the National College of Arts in her native Lahore, Pakistan, the venerable miniature style made a big impression on her.

"We learned all about their history," she said. "But I liked them more for aesthetic reasons. I just fell in love with them — the way they looked."

She began to wonder how miniatures might have evolved if they had carried through to the present time, and decided to try her hand. She learned all the traditional techniques — including how to make the necessary tiny paint brushes by pulling strands of squirrel fur through a hollow pigeon quill.

The highly detailed results are at once topical and autobiographical.

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They show the reaction to interior and exterior events of a subject — a young, dark-haired woman — whom we rightly take to be the artist.

Her actual autobiography is rooted in Pakistan and spans two disparate worlds, not always smoothly. Born to middle-class Muslim parents in Lahore in 1969, Ms. Butt received a BFA degree from the National College of Arts, then, at age 23, came to Boston to study at the Massachusetts College of Art. After receiving her MFA in 1997, she had solo exhibitions at the Bernard Toale Gallery and the Institute of Contemporary Art, both in Boston.

A SIMPLER SENSE

Her work reflects the questions and ambiguities of her own life and of our time. In contrast, the subjects of historical miniatures often evinced a simpler sense of good and evil, depicting hunting scenes, perhaps, or the heroic exploits of the leaders, the kings and sultans, who commissioned the works.

“In Ambreen’s images the outcome is not certain,” Susan L. Stoops, Worcester Art Museum’s curator of contemporary art, said. “They’re not about heroics. It’s hard to see, with this subject, what the outcome is going to be. What we see her in, usually, is a dilemma.”

And often, an unexpected one.

A 7-by-11-inch painting shows her lying on the ground, her long hair rooted at both ends — on one end, in her scalp and, at the other usually free-swinging end, forming the roots of a tree. Her feet, meanwhile, are anything but rooted. They are being raised in the air by three birds pulling a tether.

“They have her chained, then they are lifting her up,” Ms. Stoops said. “You think of a bird as this innocent, harmless creature. But in the painting — they’re appearing from out of somewhere unexpected, like an event that is happening to you, an event that is shaking you.”

There was altogether too much shaking going on in Pakistan when Ms. Butt was growing up. Terrorism, born of chronic tensions between Muslims and Hindus living in the divided country. Partly for those reasons and partly for cultural ones, she led a very sheltered, protected life in Pakistan.

“We would always be escorted

protected life in Pakistan.

"We would always be escorted anywhere we wanted to go, like when we wanted to go to our friends house, we would be escorted. We wouldn't go out by ourselves," she said. No one escorted her to the United States 10 years ago, however. This country was thought to be a much safer place.

"I think my parents could deal with me living here by myself because things were much better here," she said. "I could go out and move around, and my mother wouldn't have to worry about me as much as if I were doing the same thing in Pakistan."

Then the events of Sept. 11 unexpectedly brought old fears of terrorism to a new land.

'OLD FEARS AGAIN'

"Something that I found when this big event happened is that you suddenly feel like you are chased by those old fears again," she said. "I had almost forgotten about it."

She worked those issues out, of course, in a painting. In one untitled 14-by-11-inch painting from a 2001 series called "Home and the World," the dark-haired female subject sits in a meditative pose in tall grass. The three birds this time are swooping down, pecking at her head.

"It does represent this kind of optimism and hope," Ms. Butt said. "She seems very calm and stable. She has learned to live with the uncertainty and learned that part never goes away. No matter where you are and who you are. Life is uncertain."
