

Ambreen Butt explores cultural divides

12 Dec 2012 By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com.

Good contemporary art has the charming habit of mashing perceived opposites together: high-brow and lowbrow, 2-D and 3-D, realism and abstraction. Ambreen Butt has long made art that grapples with the cultural divide between Pakistan, her native country, and the United States, where she lives. Her show at Carroll and Sons tackles certain ideological polarities head on.

The show's title, "Beyond the Ideas of Rightness or Wrongness There Is a Field; I'll Meet You

: There," is from a Rumi poem, which goes on to say that in that field, "Ideas, language, even the

phrase 'each other' / doesn't make any sense."

That's clearly the notion behind Butt's piece "Beyond the Ideas of Rightness or Wrongness." Eleven drawings depict Salman Taseer, the governor of Pakistan's Punjab province who was assassinated in 2011, and his killer, Malik Mumtaz Qadri, who reportedly told police he did it because Taseer opposed Pakistan's blasphemy law.

Two distinct portraits of the men hang on either end of the row of drawings, but in between, their features merge, as one gradually morphs into the other. Despite strongly held political beliefs, these men shared a common humanity. The difficulty here is that because the work hinges on the



Ambreen Butt's "I Am My Lost Diamond" installation at Carroll and Sons.

opposition between the two men, with their images at the ends of a continuum, there's no transcending it.

Butt does a better job with an untitled diptych collage about the trial last year of Tarek Mehanna, the Sudbury man convicted of conspiring to kill US soldiers and supporting Al Qaeda. Fragments from Mehanna's statement, in which he drew parallels between a jihad against US soldiers who kill Muslim civilians and the American Revolutionary War, swirl in a vortex on one page, while text from the prosecution's arguments eddy on the other. The texts are impossible to follow; each is a cyclonic cloud of broken-up meaning, bordered by arabesques. Here, Butt presents arguments and ide-

ologies as constructs, perhaps riveting for a moment, but then dispersing.

The best piece in the show, "I Am My Lost Diamond," has more passion than pedantry. The artist has made resin casts of fingers and toes in shades of red. Thousands of them hang in radiant circles on the wall. From a distance, they are lovely as fireworks, but get closer and there's a sense of blood splatter, and of flying digits after a bomb blast. Here, beauty and violence blend into something more moving than thought-provoking, and therefore more powerful.

Real and purposefully vague

Multimedia artist Victoria Fu makes work that evokes a sense of

connection from afar in her show at Samson. She also conjures the space between here and afar as layer upon layer of screens and projections. The show's title piece, a 16mm film, flickers in grainy black-and-white low on one wall.

In it, a blurry figure in the distance walks along a path, and then through the woods, carrying a mirror. The sun bounces off the mirror and into the camera lens at the viewer, obliterating the image in a flash of white. It feels like direct contact, and at the same time, erasure.

Fu offers precise graphite drawings that look modeled on old photographs, small images that float on large white sheets of paper, such as "Smile," which depicts a woman grinning gamely

for the camera. From her hairstyle, I'd place her in the 1940s. There's immediacy in the drawing's realism, but distance in its small scale and the suggestion of time passed.

Veiled photographic images, such as "Window," are purposefully vague: filtered through red, depicting the slats of a blind, a window, the overhanging branches outside — so that it seems as if what we're looking at is not as important as what we're looking through, and that includes the camera lens and our own eyes. There are rich, moody filters upon filters between us and anything tangible, Fu seems to be saying, and even when something does connect, it may be merely a reflection, the flash of the sun in a mir-

ror.

Painterly and photographic

Working from found photographs of such things as explosions, smoke, and flocks of butterflies, Sam Trioli often paints just a small part of the photographic image so that it's hard to know what you're seeing. In his show at Howard Yezerksi Gallery, he works mostly in black-and-white, using the weave of the canvas to evoke the graininess of an old photo, and wax in his paint to give his deep black a matte finish. The effects of photography are here, but this is painterly work, and largely abstract, small canvases that pull you in to mysterious scenes.

“Untitled (Melt)” is based on a

portion of a photograph of the Hindenburg explosion. The dark lozenge form of the blimp is truncated on either side, and the burst of fire on the right, in creamy whites and grays and shuddering blacks, is a spectacle. There's violence as white flame tears through black blimp, and the flame blooms above it like a flower.

Taking small elements of a larger image in “Untitled (Caractacus),” Trioli leaves context out. We see the ghostly but modeled forward thrust of a whitish form, and the frenzied breath of grays below, all phantasm and force. Caractacus, it turns out, was a 19th-century racehorse. This is an image of a hoof skimming the track. But you don't need to know that — the painting has its essence.