

Winter/Spring 2019

# Women in the Arts



NATIONAL  
MUSEUM  
OF WOMEN  
IN THE ARTS



# Ambreen Butt

## Mark My Words

December 7, 2018–April 14, 2019

*Ayeesha (3)* (from the series "Say My Name"), 2017; Text, collage, and pen on tea-stained paper, 29 x 21 in.;  
Courtesy of the artist

Orin Zahra

NMWA's focus exhibition on Ambreen Butt (b. 1969) reveals the deeply personal connection between the artist's global consciousness and the physical process that she uses to create each of her works. Born in Lahore, Pakistan, Butt trained in Indian and Persian miniature painting, an art form seen in historical illustrated manuscripts, before relocating in 1993 to Boston. Her practice fuses miniature painting with the conceptualism prevalent in contemporary Western art. In her first solo exhibition in Washington, D.C., *Mark My Words* highlights thirteen mixed-media works and prints that reflect Butt's exceptional range of mark-making techniques, as well as her ideas about women making their marks on society. Butt discusses her art practice with NMWA Assistant Curator Orin Zahra.



*Untitled (Weeping Woman)* (from the series "Daughters of the East"), 2008; Etching, aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint, and hand coloring on paper, 25 x 19 in.; Courtesy of the artist

My protagonist is not an idealized character; she is a mirror in which a million women see their faces.



PHOTO BY STEPHEN PETEGORAY

**OZ** Ambreen, you have said that you wish to use beauty rather than a sledgehammer to convey your ideas. How does your work reflect that philosophy?

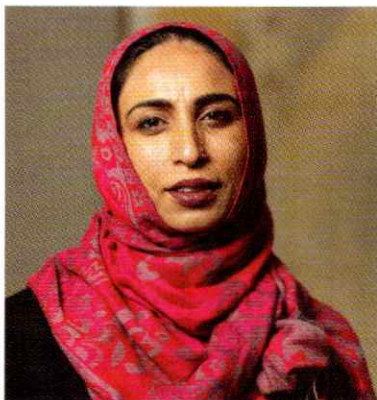
**AB** The work deals with subjects of a difficult nature, yet it uses beauty and aesthetics as a vehicle to make them more accessible to the beholder. It seduces the viewer to enter the symbolic landscape of the work. The pictorial and textual references that I use often come from the traditional Islamic arts of calligraphy and patterning, which are embedded purely in aesthetics. They are then weaved together with contemporary themes of social and political events.

**OZ** You trained in traditional Indian and Persian miniature painting. What prompted you to reimagine the genre with contemporary female protagonists in the 2008 series "Dirty Pretty" and related work?

**AB** My protagonist is inspired by the *nayika*, or heroine, of the *kangra* style seen in Mughal paintings.<sup>1</sup> I am fascinated by her beauty, seductiveness, and ornamental quality. She was imagined by male artists of earlier times, thus her role in this genre is often passive. My heroine, on the other hand, is redefined through the gaze of a female artist. She is beautiful and seductive like the old *nayika*, but at the same time she confronts the viewer with her vulnerability and strength. My protagonist is not an idealized character; she is a mirror in which a million women see their faces.

**OZ** Text frequently appears in your work. Where does your interest in the written word come from?

**AB** My use of torn text began when I incorporated bits of my own journal into an artwork. The ritual of rejecting the version of myself that was preserved in the journal and processing it



Left: Ambreen Butt

Below right: *Untitled 2* (from the series "Dirty Pretty"), 2008; Water-based pigments, white gouache, thread, and gold leaf on Mylar and tea-stained paper, 28 x 20 in.; Sara M. and Michelle Vance Waddell Collection

into a new form—one which had to be read and interpreted in new ways—exposed the vulnerability of the written word and posed new questions about its meaning. I explore ways of transforming text to create images that can be familiar yet untranslatable, the meaning never completely present.

**OZ Your mark-making techniques are incredibly varied, and often painstaking and labor-intensive. Does this approach help you to connect with the issues you address?**

**AB** It is through that physical experience that I process the complexities of my thoughts. I call it the labor of love, the bearer of the clarity of my mind. In my latest series, "Say My Name," each drawing is based on a victim of American drone strikes [in Pakistan and Afghanistan]. For example, I created *Ayeesha (3)* (2017) by writing and printing the name "Ayeesha" over and over on paper and then shredding it. These torn pieces are then collected and laid on a tea-stained surface one at a time, a very meditative process. I get to create an imagined portrait of Ayeesha, whom I've never met or seen. It gives a symbolic life to that person who is no longer part of our collective living, but rather part of a collateral damage.

**OZ The series "Daughters of the East" was inspired by press images of female student protesters at the 2007 military siege of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad. Can you discuss your representation of these women?**

**AB** These young women were highly influenced by the mosque's conservative teachings and many died as a result of their protests. In the first print, the group of women all wearing black burqas and holding bamboo sticks seem threatening; their individual identities are subsumed by the group, and their strength is dependent on standing together. In the last print from the suite, I celebrate the individual over the group and give a real face to the female under the black veil. The bamboo stick has changed from an image of empowerment into one of vulnerability.

**OZ What has your journey been as a Pakistani-American woman artist working today?**

**AB** Carrying a layered identity can be challenging, as you are in a constant state of negotiation. I have worked hard to develop a visual language that can reflect the complexities of being a South Asian Muslim woman artist in America. My narratives are layered with juxtaposed elements to reflect these complexities, generating a new vocabulary in Western art, but also recontextualizing traditional miniature painting. It has been a blessing for me and a hell of a lot of work at the same time.

// Orin Zahra is the assistant curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

*Ambreen Butt—Mark My Words* is organized by the museum and made possible through the generous support of the Belinda de Gaudemar Curatorial Fund. Additional funding is provided by the members of NMWA.

Note:

1. *Kangra* painting refers to a style that developed in the eighteenth century, when Kashmiri painters began to incorporate the hilly landscapes and natural elements of the sub-Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, India, into works that reflected their training in Mughal illustrated manuscripts.

