

Visual Art Source

Ambreen Butt

Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco, California

Review by Mark Van Proyen



Ambreen Butt, "Guardians of Safe Heavens" 2023, tea, coffee, watercolor and collage on tea-stained paper, 44 x 30"

Continuing through December 22, 2023

In these eight modestly sized collage/paintings on paper, Ambreen Butt sets a high standard for meticulous detail and obsessive elaboration. Titled "Lay Bare My Arms," this series was three years in the making, and the expenditure of labor, as well as time, shows. Each work teems with precise visual incident organized in multiple layers of material and technique. These layers

include cloudlike stains of diluted tea and watercolor from which deftly painted figures clutching firearms sometimes emerge. Collaged atop these layered surfaces are a plentitude of tiny forms obsessively organized into labyrinthine swarms, buzzing on the picture surface like angry hornets defending a damaged hive. When taken together, these distinct modes of representation (phenomenal, mimetic, and semiotic) become models of consciousness that echo the classic Freudian id/ego/superego model of the psyche.

Two of the three works that feature figures draw from Asian traditions of demonology. They feature grotesque protagonists called *Divs*, painted in an unusual watercolor technique, more developed than a cartoon and much more fanciful than a neo-classical rendering. This technique derives from the Indo-Persian tradition of so-called miniature painting (a descriptive term in English that has no specific meaning in Arabic, Farsi, or Hindi), and which reflects the focus of Butt's undergraduate studies at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan. For example, in "Arsenal of Ambiguity," we see a stout male figure wearing only a red and white striped skirt, triumphantly dancing while hoisting an assault rifle above his toothy head.

In "Guardians of Safe Havens," we see two *Div* figures, one blue and the other dark red, locked in an antagonistic dance. The third figurative work is titled "Sha Jahan." It overtly commemorates two royal lovers (Jahan was a Mughal emperor of India) from the sixteenth century. The passing of Mumtaz Mahal motivated Jahan to build the Taj Mahal. Covertly, Butt's artwork also commemorates the death of two similarly named individuals who perished in a drone strike during the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict.

Another pair of works reveal themselves to be something akin to word clouds. In "Tearful Harvests," we see a small cyclone of assault rifles radiating from a blood red cloud shape at the bottom center of the composition. This is the clearest indication that this body of work reflects on the ceaseless epidemic of American gun violence. Given that Butt lives and works in a Texas suburb near Dallas, it is fair to assume that she has some personal experience with American gun culture. No doubt, that culture must look particularly strange and fearful to someone not raised within it.

This is underscored by the fact that in "Contours of Fragility," we see the 27 words of the 2nd Amendment repeated dozens of times, separated and reassembled in dozens of combinations like a Tristan Tzara poem. In "Scarlet Masquerade," we see those same words rendered in English and Urdu in minute typographical collage.

"Floral Offering" seems to stand apart from the other works here. Because of its design structure based on a perpendicular grid, it clearly bespeaks a connection to traditional Islamic art. It features a singular Walking Iris centrally positioned in a symmetrical composition, beautifully painted in full bloom. The exhibition literature informs us that that particular flower blooms only one day a year, making it a fitting subject for a painting that reminds us how fragile and precious the momentary efflorescence of any life is prior to its being cut short by circumstances beyond its control.

Given that this exhibition takes place in a gallery well known for featuring the work of mid-century female Surrealists, Butt's exhibition contributes to and expands that legacy in a pointed way addressing a contemporary context that goes evermore fraught.