

Ambreen Butt demonstrates art of diplomacy



Ambreen Butt has always made political art. Early in her career, the Pakistani-born artist now based in the Boston area investigated the tug of two cultures in mixed-media paintings and drawings. These led Butt to make larger pieces, often painstakingly crafted from many tiny parts, exploring themes such as free speech and violence.

Her current installation at Carroll and Sons, “I Am All What Is Left of Me,” was inspired by a commission from the State Department’s Art in Embassies program for the new US Embassy in Islamabad. This work won’t go to Islamabad but it prompted a similar project that will.

Butt’s previous art has been challenging, but diplomatic: It asks questions rather than taking sides. Still, creating work for an embassy may compel her to be especially politic. This is less gritty than her usual efforts.

This installation comprises three mural-size pieces, each based on Multani tile patterns: lovely, symmetrical ceramic designs found in public buildings and mosques in South Asia, featuring saturated hues and botanical motifs.

From a distance, the works are crisp, bright, and pleasant; punchy colors and dancing patterns activate the gallery space. Indeed, this installation folds playfully around corners. In an American art gallery, the works don’t fade into the background; in a public building in Islamabad, where Multani tiles proliferate, they might.

Up close, Butt introduces a new, mildly subversive motif. Over the paint she has affixed an intricate design in small cast resin pieces — keys, padlocks, and combination locks. They make up the vines and

flowers spinning over the surface, quietly noting that embassies are gateways, murmuring about freedom and repression, about trust and safety, about mysteries yet unlocked.

Rather than keys and locks, the works that will go to Islamabad have designs dominated by abstractions of the Urdu and Arabic alphabets (a small version is on view now, although it hadn't arrived when I visited the gallery). More versatile visually, and honoring the languages and the written word, Butt's new approach should better convey the fragmentation of meaning that's rich in much of her art, if in a more subdued approach than we're used to.

The previous is an excerpt from an article in the Boston Globe by Cate McQuaid. For the full article see: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/2015/04/28/ambreen-butt-demonstrates-art-diplomacy-carroll-and-sons/UIIBddUXFB2zqMH9qKbNMP/story.html>