

## Faiza Butt: Tales of Whopped Fantasies

*By Meagan Kelly Horsman*



Personal Structures 2013 - Venice Biennale

Faiza Butt describes her work as a trap – the “initial appeal”<sup>1</sup> acting as a way to draw the viewer in, to politely coerce them into considering works with a strong focus they might not have anticipated. Soft pinks and other pastel colors, delicate works on paper they appear to be, but in their dream-like qualities you find yourself confronted abruptly with bigger meanings. Butt grew up in Pakistan during the era of General Zia, and watched as the moderate cultural landscape changed, creating a new and altered version of the home she knew. Pakistan became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Sharia Law

was introduced, and schools and colleges were reformed to reflect this country’s new political and theological viewpoint. These formative years inspire Butt to create works that challenge; and whether they challenge politics, religion or sexuality; challenge they do. Butt’s background combined with her current experience living as a Pakistani woman in a Western culture cannot be ignored when exploring her work, as it is instantly evident in her unusual choice of imagery and subject matter. After graduating from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Butt moved to London to continue her



Placebo for my warrior, 2011, ink on polyester film mounted on lightbox, 82x60cm. Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery.

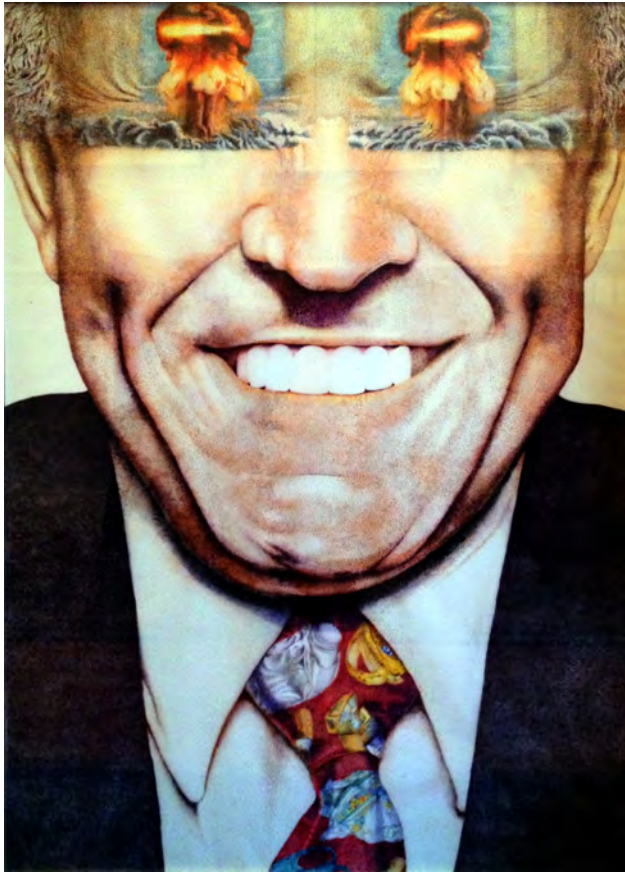
studies at the Slade School of Art; achieving her masters in painting, with an invitation to teach at the Slade School of Art and an Outstanding Student Award. Butt recalls her time at Slade as the time when she began to resist the Western values of art history; distancing herself from her classmates who were inspired by the trend of Abstract Expression; working mainly with paint on larger scale canvases.

Instead, Butt considered her heritage and a focused her work back East, to home, choosing instead to work with paper and inks; working in a figurative manner,

utilizing a very distinct style that she is now known so well for. This was a very overt and conscious decision by Butt to diverge from normality, from what is expected and to focus instead on what is culturally relevant to her own identity. Butt's ability to combine contemporary imagery with traditional techniques is evident in her pointillist works, a style she developed by combining "the traditional Purdkhat technique with the formation of pixels in a photograph" <sup>2</sup>.

The resulting effect can be shown in a work such as *Tales of Whopped Fantasies*, where an explosive and





Moderate Fantasy Violence, 2010, ink on polyester film mounted on light box, 82x60cm. Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery.



Is this the man3, 2011, ink on polyester film, 135x82cm. Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery.

dynamic figurative and iconographic scene invites the viewer in, only to surprise them by the precise, labour intensive technique and suggestive subject matter. Like much of Butt's work, what you see at the start is very rarely what you get.

The use of this pointillist technique creates a sense of domesticity, of the feminine in her work – emulating the look of embroidery; reflecting the region from which she hails. What is also clear in this particular series of works is Butt's interest in photography, these highly detailed works becoming even more fantastical due to their aesthetically realistic nature. *Moderate Fantasy Violence* is another pointillist work worth investigating deeply as it seems at first glance a work only associated with war and destruction – and while much of Butt's work is political and considers a post 9/11 World, this is not the only agenda she has here. For Butt, the use of male

figures in her work is in direct response to the Western art world's obsession with the female nude, and the choice of old New York City's Rudy Giuliani as model is most intentional. After viewing a flattering image of Giuliani in *Time* magazine, complete with sharp white teeth Butt felt this image epitomized the imagery she was looking for – a type of political propaganda that as media consumers people see every day.

By replacing his eyes with atom bombs, Giuliani is transformed from friendly American Mayor, to mad, hell-bent terrorist. Butt has taken her interest in contemporary culture and technology and included it in her oeuvre, choosing to create a series of digital works shown on light-boxes. These digital works display jewel-incrusted objects, almost obscene in their decoration of seemingly everyday objects, such as nail clippers. Butt has always been interested in human

nature, how humans relate to one another, and imagery of instruments and objects has become a huge part of her artistic iconography.

This interest with objects and instruments manifests itself perhaps most clearly in Butt's Vortex series. These large-scale works on cotton paper, encased in glassy perspex, hang monumentally in a gallery space to invite, and perhaps to intimidate the viewer. Come closer, they beckon. The Vortex works appear from a distance as a text related work; calligraphic shapes bring to mind ancient manuscripts.

As one gets closer to the work, what appears to be text originally begins to define itself, and series of objects appears, items looped together to create one multi-mirrored image. Objects of torture, of sexual gratification and everyday household objects sit side by side, inviting us to consider how humans relate to one another at a very basic level.

Butt's work has been exhibited throughout the world; from Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East to much acclaim.

Most recently Butt displayed her work at the Palazzo Bembo on the Grand Canal in Venice, in a large, curated exhibition with the title *Personal Structures*; that ran alongside the 55th Venice Biennale. The room that Butt took over was very much a testament to her art and to her thought process – the space becoming home to a small solo show of her work. The exhibition room showcased Butt's work with light-boxes, from her hand drawn pointillist works, to larger digital works. The main focus of the room came courtesy of a large, free standing light-box, dominating the space. This digital work brought together imagery and text with a solemn poem in Urdu by Faiz entitled 'Aaj Bazaar Mein'; illustrations allowing the poem to be understood by all. It could be said that this particular work embodies Butt, in the way that it is so completely celebrates her original heritage as a Pakistani woman with such an overtly contemporary technique.

What is clear when considering Faiza Butt's work is that she is indeed an unusual artist – she shies away from the archetypal; both in terms of concept as well as medium; and instead creates extremely provoking works with deceiving aesthetic qualities. As she puts it, "I want to throw punches"<sup>3</sup>.



Tales of whopped fantasies, 2009, ink and acrylics on polyesterfilm, 135x80cm. Courtesy of the artist and XVA Gallery.

#### *About the Writer*

Meagan Kelly Horsman is currently living and working in Dubai as Meem Gallery's Director of Business Development. Her move to Dubai from London came in 2010 with Bonhams Auctioneers, after which followed her appointment to Gallery Director at XVA Gallery, Dubai, and consequently her appointment at Meem Gallery in September 2013. Meagan holds a MA in Art History from the University of Glasgow, Scotland, with a particular focus on contemporary American art. She is particularly passionate about art from the MENA region and South Asian sub-continent, as well as holding a strong interest in fine art photography.

#### *End Notes*

1. Faiza Butt, *Personal Statement*, London 2013
2. Faiza Butt, *Personal Statement*, London 2013
3. "I Want to Throw Punches" Interview with Nadia Butt, *The Friday Times*, Pakistan, November 23-29, 2012 - Vol. XXIV. <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/beta3/tft/article.php?issue=20121123&page=22>