

The Artsy Vanguard 2022: Rithika Merchant

Cleo Roberts-Komireddi



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In Rithika Merchant's beguiling paintings on paper, cosmological charts intersect with mythological, hybridized creatures, plant species, constellations, and geometries. In *Solar Syncretism* (2021), she conjures an enigmatic ritual enacted by five fantastical creatures set against a starlit sky, entangled in stems and plumes of rainbow clouds. The artist's clarity of line reflects the precision of her thought.

But rather than beginning her artworks by sketching, which Merchant says she has always struggled with, she instead creates parameters by folding the paper, as she explained from her Mumbai studio. The resulting creases are "the bones of the painting" upon which the composition is built, first in pencil, then ink, and finally watercolor and gouache. The porosity of the paper produces darker veins of pigment along the embossed lines.



Rithika Merchant
Solar Syncretism, 2021
Galerie LJ
Sold



Portrait of Rithika Merchant by Carlos Teixeira.
Courtesy of Galerie LJ.



"It reminds me of an old map, and gives the paper a narrative in itself," she said of her technique.

Merchant has developed her practice through layered storytelling. Informed by the concept of the "monomyth" put forward by comparative mythology writer Joseph Campbell—the idea that fabled heroes share common narrative arcs across cultures and eras—Merchant is interested in the three phases of a hero's journey: the departure, the initiation, and the return. Since her first group show in 2004, Merchant has consistently explored this idea, combining visual symbols of ancient myths from Egypt, Greece, and Portugal, among others, to create series with distinct yet interconnected themes.

Her series "My Monomyth" (2012) featured empowered female heroes, and responded to a brutal rape and murder case in India at the time. More recently, she showed the painting series "Aerial Women" (2019–21) at London's Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, which focused on Peri: winged, fairy-like Persian spirits who are kept caged and denied access to paradise for their devious and mischievous behavior. Merchant's take depicts the body of a Peri composed from several pairs of wings, liberated and dancing through an imagined cosmos.



Rithika Merchant
Deliverance, 2021
Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery
Sold



Rithika Merchant
Peri leaving Paradise, 2021
Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery
Sold

Lately, Merchant has been considering the spiritual significance of the sun, seen in her recent solo exhibition at Galerie LJ in Paris, "Festival of the Phoenix Sun." She proposes a "solar syncretism" that brings together references to Egyptian, Roman, and Aztec mythologies; shamanic and animist cults; Buddhist rites; and 15th-century European cartography. Ultimately, Merchant said, "I'm trying to sort of almost create my own world and my own cosmology, based on what I would like for our collective future."

Merchant's ability to converge global influences is echoed in her education and studio life. Born in Mumbai, she studied at Hellenic International Studies in the Arts in Paros, Greece, before attending Parsons the New School for Design in New York in 2008. Now, she splits her time between Mumbai and Barcelona, absorbing their particularities and finding the resonances between these two sea-fronted urban centers. "They have their own different yet quite similar politics of the sea," she said, which she explored in a body of work responding to the global migrant crisis, presented in the 2017 exhibition "Where the Water Takes Us" at TARQ.

Rithika Merchant, installation view of "Birth of a New World" at TARQ, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and TARQ.



Over the course of the next year, Merchant intends on making Mumbai her primary base. It's where TARQ, one of two galleries that represent her, is based, as well as her close artistic community. Unexpectedly for her, she has also been embraced by India's fashion industry. In 2018, Merchant was named a *Vogue India* Young Achiever of the Year and among the *Vogue World 100* for her collaboration with the French fashion house Chloé, a project she said "came completely out of the blue." Invited to create prints for the company's then-creative director, Natacha Ramsay-Levi, Merchant found that the collaboration allowed her to think "in a more sculptural way," she said. Bags, shoes, dresses, and tableware became adorned with elements of Merchant's majestic worlds.

Although renowned for her paintings, Merchant is materially agile, working with collage alongside her paintings. The technique serves as a break from her mythmaking, but she struggles to describe the process—a mix of intuition and creative "blackout" that takes her back to her childhood.

"I was always making as a child," Merchant said. "I used to often weave dried palm fronds from the trees near my house and I loved origami. This cutting out of all the elements felt like that."

Rithika Merchant
The Source, 2022
Galerie LJ
€650

Rithika Merchant
Wildfire, 2020
CFHILL
Sold

In her series "Birth of a New World" (2020), which she debuted at TARQ last year, Merchant's collages combine tight spirals of jute rope and mother-of-pearl buttons articulated by circular paper patterns. There are elements of tantra paintings—abstract visual forms used primarily for meditation—that were Merchant's initial inspiration, which linger in these images. Like this transcendent source, the suite of works are Merchant's "path to get off this planet," she described. Her sensitivity to the climate crisis and the environment's increasing inhospitality has left her grappling with forms of survival and spurred her to consider life beyond planetary confines in her work.

"Now my focus has gone into another dimension or into another realm," she said. Her next series is in its early stages, but Merchant senses it will "put down the foundations of this new world and consider the plants and the kind of structures we might need."

Rithika Merchant
Eluding the Basilisk, 2021
Galerie LJ
Sold

She will, however, be putting this new series aside during her forthcoming residency at Villa Saint-Louis Ndar in Senegal, the prize awarded to her for winning the Prix Dessin in Paris. Merchant anticipates a new trove of myths collected from informal interviews during her residency and is looking forward to her characters developing ahead of her first solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London in 2023.

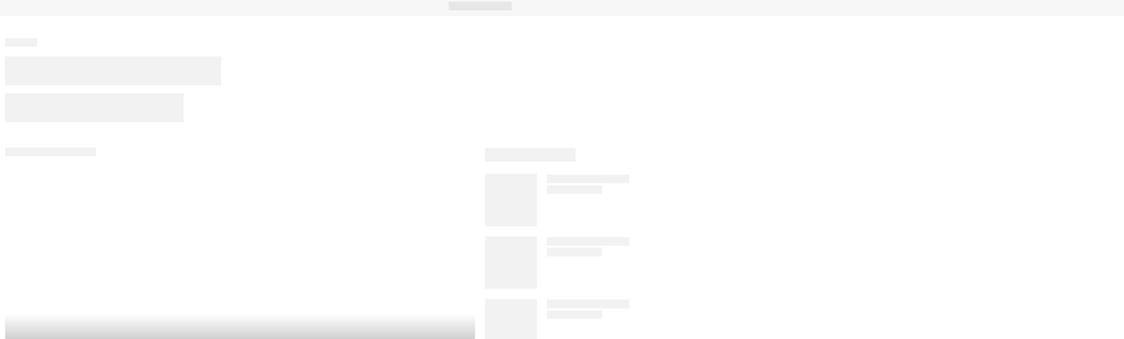
At this stage while her ideas are "still percolating," Merchant said, she is drawn to our capacity as a species for endurance. "I feel we will always find a way to enjoy. I think that's very much part of the human condition. People want to keep going."

The Artsy Vanguard 2022

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Cleo Roberts-Komireddi

Header: Rithika Merchant, from left to right: "The Sixth Sunrise," 2021; "Sun Feeders," 2021; and "Insignia of the Overseer," 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie LJ.



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Jenna Gribbon, Luncheon on the grass, a recurring dream, 2020. Jenna Gribbon, April studio, parting glance, 2021. Jenna Gribbon, Silver Tongue, 2019

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