

FASHION & BEAUTY

Indian artist Rithika Merchant on her fantastical show set for Dior couture: 'It's about building a wonderland'

Rithika Merchant tells Wallpaper* the story behind her immersive work 'The Flowers We Grew', which backdropped Maria Grazia Chiuri's Alice in Wonderland-inspired S/S 2025 couture show in Paris yesterday (27 January 2025)

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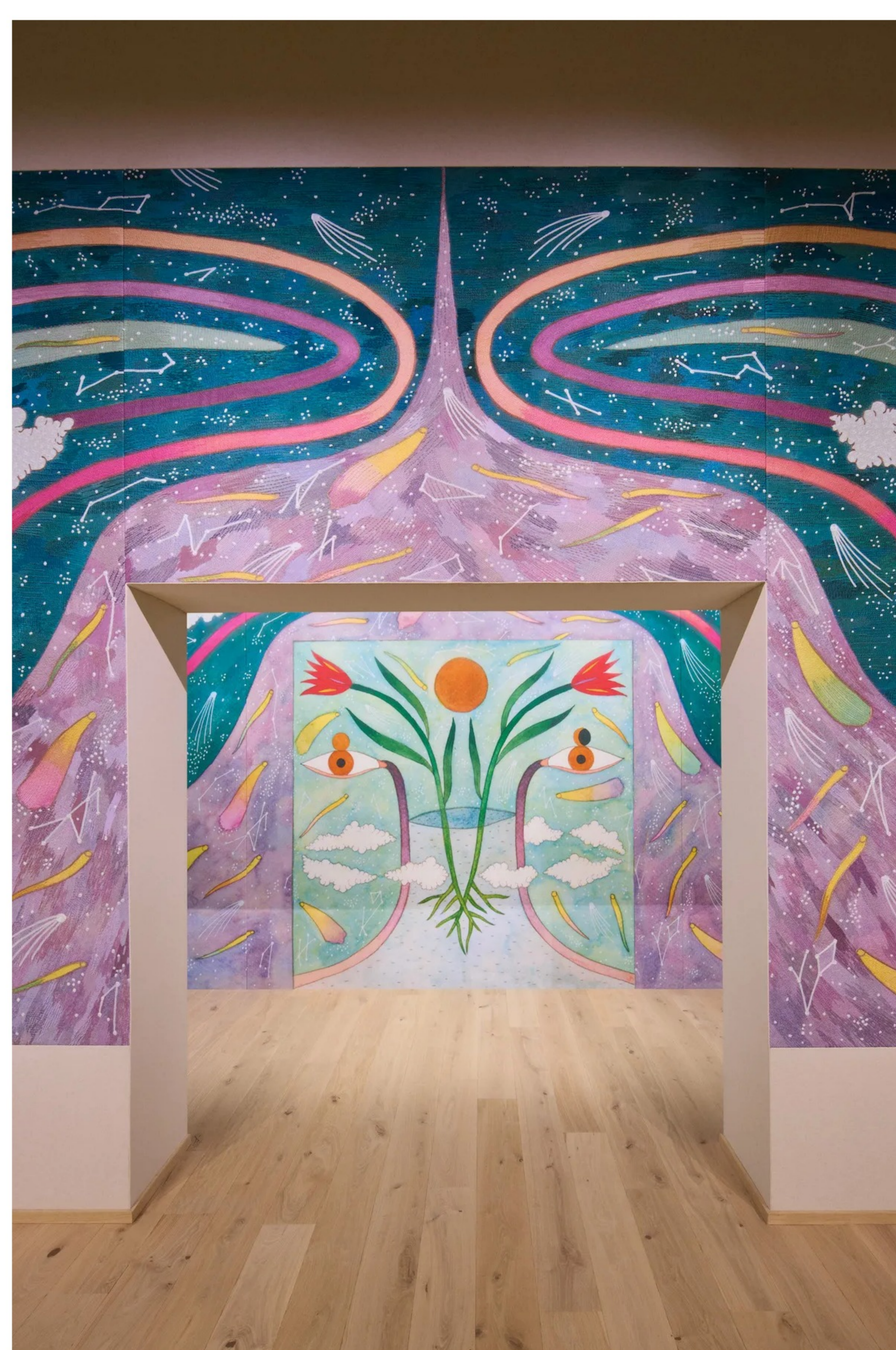
Rithika Merchant's 'The Flowers We Grew' at Dior's S/S 2025 haute couture show yesterday (27 January 2025) (Image credit: © Adrien Dirand)

BY JACK MOSS PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO IN FEATURES

Since her appointment in 2016, **Dior's** artistic director of womenswear, **Maria Grazia Chiuri**, has been a staunch advocate of women artists, drafting radical figures – from **Judy Chicago** to **Mickalene Thomas** and **Penny Slinger** – to design site-specific installations to backdrop her runway shows. A T-shirt in her first collection, which read 'We Should All Be Feminists' from a quote by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, can now be read as a statement of intent from the Italian designer, who has always championed a woman-centric approach to creating her collections (notably, she is the first female creative director of the Parisian house).

Yesterday afternoon (27 January 2025) in **Paris**, Chiuri – who is now close to completing her first decade at Dior – drafted the latest in a roster of women artists to design the show space for the house's **S/S 2025 haute couture collection**. Presented in a specially constructed box in Paris' Musée Rodin, its exterior was adorned with paintings by Rithika Merchant, a Mumbai-based artist known for her colourful evocations of mythical scenes, which often feature lush elements of flora and fauna. Inside, translated by Karishma Swali and the artisans of the **Chanakya School of Craft** – a Mumbai-based organisation preserving historic Indian craft – her paintings were stretched on tapestries across the walls, reinterpreted in thousands of hand stitches (Chanakya remains best-known for its embroidery).

Rithika Merchant's fantastical show set for Dior Couture S/S 2025



(Image credit: © Adrien Dirand)

Merchant first met Swali, who is the creative director of Chanakya and a longtime champion of women artisans, at Dior's Pre-Fall 2023 show in Mumbai (Chanakya created a monumental 'toran' for the show at the Gateway to **India**, taking an extraordinary 35,000 hours of craft to complete). 'Karishma Swali originally discovered my work and introduced Maria Grazia Chiuri to it,' Merchant tells Wallpaper*. 'I came to Mumbai for the Dior show in 2023 and got a chance to tour the Chanakya School of Craft. When [Dior] told me about this project and I saw the work they do at Chanakya, I was immediately on board and the collaboration blossomed from there – they really allowed me the space to explore my ideas fully.'

Dior describes Merchant's work as 'convening stories of womanhood across generations', with the work in the showspace – titled 'The Flowers We Grew' – looking back to the tales of her ancestors from her mother's side, who originate from the coastal state of Kerala. The large-scale textiles, which enveloped guests in the showspace, were a fantastical assemblage of elements, from anthropomorphic figures to constellations of stars, leaves, flowers, and roaring animals. The work's title comes from Merchant's assertion that 'the seeds we plant in the past grow into the flowers of the present', referring to what Dior calls 'the continuous narratives passed on down the years through a powerful line of matriarchs'.



The artisans of Chanakya working on the tapestries in Mumbai, India (Image credit: © Prarthna Singh - Artwork © Rithika Merchant 2)

'I've always been inspired by tapestries – especially those that are narrative in nature,' explains Merchant, who alongside her painting, has also worked with embroidery hooks prior to the collaboration with Chanakya. 'Needlework, collaging, quilting, weaving, etc have long been considered "women's work"'. However, I think there is something powerful in taking whatever scraps you can find and putting them together to create something meaningful. These mediums also subvert historic ideas of how women create. Working with Chanakya has been a huge highlight for me – seeing how these master embroiderers work up close was incredible.' (In total, the work took 306 artisans an incredible 144,000 hours.)

As for how the work interplayed with the collection – which saw Chiuri embrace a kind of childlike wonder with richly adorned crinolines inspired by the fantastical journey of *Alice in Wonderland* – Merchants says that they 'talked a lot about childhood memories and stories and how both these things shape us and our creative process,' she explains. 'Both the collection and my work are about building a wonderland that you can fully immerse yourself in.'



(Image credit: © Adrien Dirand)

'It was amazing and very surreal to see my work at this scale,' Merchant says of attending the show yesterday afternoon, which took place during a brief moment of sunshine amid a day of rain, allowing guests to linger on the Dior's richly decorated exterior. 'It's such an immersive installation and I feel so lucky to have been given the opportunity to have free reign and to make my vision come to life in this beautiful space. I'm so grateful to Dior for letting my creative vision fly free.'