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Radhika Agarwala: For Two Lovers

Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

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Against a shimmering background, a veritable Garden of Eden in monochrome bursts to life. Beasts, birds and cherubs bloom amongst sprawling, verdant vegetation. Closer inspection, however, reveals a carrion eater in the form of a looming vulture, a prickly dragonfly and a gaping snakelike creature. The branches and vines take on the form of squirming serpents,

the flower petals claw-like and foreboding. Elsewhere, a male figure rides upon the back of a giant owl, his impressive physique and limbs reminiscent of da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. Yet, his face has been replaced with an architectural structure, a geometric tangle of intersecting lines and angles that radiates from him like a sunburst as he flies upon the great bird's back through a sky of gleaming gold.

Kristin Hjellegjerde/ARTECO Gallery is proud to present a solo show of new works by young artist Radhika Agarwala, marking her second exhibition and her first solo exhibition with the gallery. Running from 15 November – 20 December, "The Two Lovers" evokes fantastic vistas that cross the divide between landscape and dreamscape.

For this series, Agarwala has been inspired by an amalgamation of old historical botanical illustrations from the 17th and 18th centuries, Tarot cards and literature on spirituality,

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including the Age of Aquarius, as well as her travels, personal experiences and childhood memories. Together, these feed into Agarwala's practice, imbuing her works with a unique visual language, bringing together and hybridising various images and influences; this is most often evident in her beasts and birds, which in themselves create a new zoology. Colour, too (or the lack of it) plays an important role, her black and white palette selected to imbue the works with a sense of memory and of a harking back to a 'golden age'. "I love looking at old photographs, and classic cinema and all those moments that I've enjoyed are always from black and white movies," says Agarwala. "I wanted to juxtapose snippets from my subconscious or present state of mind with a rich, theatrical feeling, and I felt I could best do so with a monochromatic palette." The warm tones of the 24-carat gold gilding give each work a sense of drama and presence, contrasting with the vintage tones of each scene.

This is immediately evident in *The Comrade and the Beast*, in which strange, phantasmagorical animals jump out as if from an old botanical manuscript, yet are encased in gold, like a rich Byzantine mosaic or medieval illuminated manuscript. The artist is also inspired by objects and memories she has collected during her travels, as evident in *The Midnight Void II*, in which a giant luminous sea shell floats in a universe of black; this was inspired by a seashell Agarwala owned as a child. "I have spent the last few years collecting objects, influences and memories to build an archive of imagery for myself," she explains. "I appropriate images from everywhere. I grew up in the India but studied and lived in the USA and UK, exposing me to very different cultures in terms of aesthetics, so I've been building up my own visual vocabulary as a mesh of all the cultures that I have been exposed to. From illuminated manuscripts to the courtly paintings of India, the masculine and feminine, Christianity and Hinduism, Freud's Pleasure Principle – my work is an honest by-product of everything that I have seen, read and experienced." Figures such as the lotus, the eagle and the swan are borne out of East-West mythologies to form their own neo-reality in Agarwala's works, a Utopian representation of reality. "The swan, for me, symbolises purity and honesty," says the artist, "while eagles can be quite cruel, masculine and powerful – it is this idea of two emotions, the greed, femininity and a fragile sensitivity that exist in my mind as a dream or an illusion, waiting to be painted or sculpted." The image of the swan, in particular, is worth noting as the sole sculptural piece on display in "For Two Lovers" – its neck curved, it hovers on the line of majestic and tortured, a fusion of various birds – all at once recognisable, yet created into something new.

By combining classical techniques with this vast visual vocabulary, Agarwala creates "a language of distorted reality", and like painters such as Brueghel or Bosch, a garden of earthly delights that are the subconscious mind brought to life. "We, as humans, have such a barrage of information in our heads at any given time that I thought it would be interesting to throw it into my work and try to make sense of it and see what it could produce both for myself and for the viewer." Here, in the works of this talented, multicultural artist, blossoms a whole new visual language. 'For Two Lovers' is a peek into an alternate universe that is at once as awe-inspiring as it is welcoming, as elusive as it is tantalising, always at our fingertips, yet always just out of reach.

'For Two Lovers' runs from 15th of November – 20th December at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, UK.



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About Radhika Agarwala

Radhika Agarwala's works, in painting and sculpture, take form and direction from her upbringing in India and her cultural experiences in Western cities and capitals in the years since. The works invest in the spiritual dimensions at the core of vastly different ethics and visual languages between Asian and Western cultures, and make playful gesture towards a complex history and developing interconnection between the two. In her work hybridisation is actual and represented, actual through the conjunction of divergent cultural vantages that exhume the sacred with the secular, the profound with the mundane, and the figurative with the geometric. Receiving her MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, London in 2011, Agarwala received her BFA in Painting from Rabindra Bharati University in Calcutta (2007), followed by her Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Painting from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2008) and her MFA in Painting from the University of Florida, College of Fine Art (2010). Recent exhibitions include 'Every Breath I Take is One of Yours' at Casa Dell'Arte, Turkey , 'Snapshots of Utopia' at Chitrakoot Art Gallery, Kolkata (2013) and participation in the Saatchi Gallery's Auction by Tanya Baxter Gallery (2012). Agarwala was shortlisted for the 2013 Threadneedle Prize for Painting and Sculpture as well as 100 Painters of Tomorrow (2013) and in 2009 won the Annual Fellowship from the University of Florida School of Art + Art History and Merit Scholarship from School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 2007. For more information, visit www.radhikaagarwala.com

About Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

The gallery is the conceptual brainchild of Kristin Hjellegjerde, serving as a creative outlet following the success of her art blog (ArtEco), established in 2010. After moving from New York to London, Hjellegjerde decided to establish the gallery in southwest London in order to offer a fresh outlook for Contemporary art in this part of the city. Based in Old York Road, the gallery seeks to showcase both emerging and established Contemporary artists from a range of backgrounds in an intimate and personal environment. Previous exhibitions include the inaugural After Munch, as well as 'Manmadegod,' 'Encounter,' 'Chromatic,' 'Four Seasons' and solo shows of artists such as Daniele Tamagni. For more information, visit www.artecogallery.com.

For further information and high-resolution images, please contact Kristin Hjellegjerde at khjellegjerde@mac.com.

Start 15-11-2013

End 20-12-2013

Times PRIVATE VIEW: 14th Nov, 6:30-9:00pm; Gallery Hours: Tues-Sat 11-6, Sun 11-5

Venue Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Address 533 Old York Road, London, SW18 1TG. UK

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