

Reflections on 'osmotic' ideas

A group show, explores the ideas of life, death, and belonging says
Zahra Amiruddin

Educator and curator, Shaheen Wadhwana, brings together histories, myths, and stories, embedded in intrinsic drawings and found materials in a group show, *Osmosis*. With artworks by artists Rithika Merchant, Samanta Batra Mehta, and Savia Mahajan, Wadhwana builds a contemplative space that answers symbiotic universal truths, and explores notions of home. The show was prompted by a question asked by one of Wadhwana's students at the MIT Institute of Design in Pune, in 2018. While traversing through the historical evidence of social differences from the Harappan civilisation until present time, she was asked, "What is the History of Death?"

This triggered a thought on how we're interlinked with our ancestors through the circle of birth and demise, and just like them; we strive to experience the concept of 'home'.

"Looking at different artists' practises, one often

studies their points of intersection to understand where, and if, they meet," shares Wadhwana. She noted the use of pigment and ink by all three artists, and the similar ways in which they express a sense of identity to form a conjoined language. While all three bodies of work are different in appearance – Merchant with her bright colours, Mehta with her hypnotic black-and-white mixed media, and Mahajan with her alien-archaeological forms—they speak of both, personal and ancestral selves with the same fervour. Wadhwana explains that the artists enable their practices by dabbling with geography, region, ethnicity, memories, legacies. She speaks about the concept of *hiraeth*, a Welsh term that means an intense longing for a home, where one may have never been. "Sometimes, an attachment so strong to it, that it can cause physical pain," writes the curator in the essay accompa-



nying the show.

Feminine energy

The three artists have resided in different continents, namely Europe, Asia, and North America, yet it's the city of Mumbai that ties their pasts together. This is evident in Merchant's work that repeats the presence of the crow – an ode to 'Bombay', the city of birds. Her whimsical paintings that rely on mysticism, are scattered by these black birds, and

beaked heads on feathered female humanoids. This is reflective in her work 'Trial by Fire', inspired by the *agnipariksha* of Sita, and witch burning practices dating back to medieval times. Some of Merchant's works are an exploration of feminine power, and identity, she draws this feathered female burning, surrounded by an apparent agitation of the crows. "They are possibly wondering about the fear that defiant, strong wo-

men cause and their successive punishment for not following societal norms," elucidates Wadhwana.

Merchant's rich, geometrical artworks are bound by mythological threads, highlighting how women are still tools of patriarchy. She uses a range of winged feminine forms, representative of power and freedom in folklore. "There are many ancient depictions of winged females, and not winged males. They have been wor-

shipped as bird goddesses, Valkyries, winged goddesses, and witches," she shares.

Continuing with feminine energy, is Savia Mahajan's 'Madre'. "The work is her response to the singular universal feminine energy, of the life giving Mother – present across all cultures, faiths and belief systems," explains Wadhwana. The bearer of life is shaped with a black clay body, and rugged cotton rag edges that form a seemingly convulsing textile, arrested mid-way. It's representative of both birth, and death, and signifies seamless osmosis.

Mahajan uses materials that symbolise transience or impermanence. "Having moved over 19 homes while I was growing up in Mumbai, I feel a temporary inhabitant of a home, the same way as I feel a temporary inhabitant of my body," explains Mahajan. In her work, 'Rich deposits 2', she uses pen and ink on handmade cotton rag paper, embedded with shredded, out-of-circulation Indian currency notes and platinum dust. The floating silver creature feels like Mahajan's own patronus, created out of stacks of deposited layers. "I see the currency bits as something that once held great value, and went through exchange of many hands, with its sweat, blood, and hoarding. It is now part of the work as just [plain] human debris," she states.

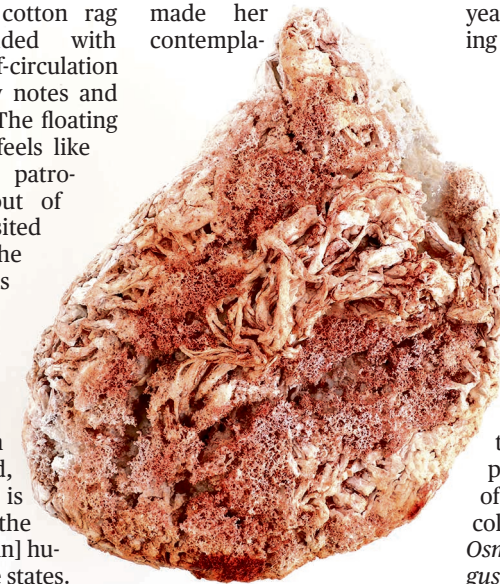
Linked to the past

Mehta's process is an amalgamation of internalising as well as detachment, about taking on, and still creating boundaries. Her negative-drawing cut paperwork, titled 'Half and half is not always full', feels spontaneous, as she lets the work decide the narrative, and not the other way around. "Here I cut, stitch, make marks, create tributaries, and carve networks. I obliterate, uncover, discover and recover," says Mehta. Much like new discoveries that shape one's life on a day-to-day basis, her drawings shed layers to reveal the complexities of a wandering mind. "It's about the rich and varied tapestry of human existence and finding one's place in it. I could have alternatively titled it, 'Half and half is more than full'," she emphasises.

Mehta's peripatetic family history has made her contempla-

tive about the idea of belonging. Growing up with stories of her grandparent's tumultuous crossing during India's Partition, her own experiences of living on a ship for the first few years of her life, and then in the UK when her father attended post-graduate studies, made her feel more attached to Mumbai, where she spent her formative years. Specialising in collecting antiquarian objects and maps, her works are fragments of available histories in sepia-toned memories of books, flora, and fauna. Wadhwana is particularly interested in Mehta's body of work, 'Return to the Garden', an installation of 18 works which have hand-cut red pigment foliage, with foetal motifs, overlaid on sepia-toned vintage photographs. For Wadhwana the work highlighted, an "interplay of a germinating pulse of life, over photographs of lives long gone over 100 years, with memories vibrating even today."

Osmosis, is a visual and tactile diary of personal lives – equally accepting about the future's uncertainty, and as much about the surety of the past. Wadhwana describes Mehta's 'Untethering, Unfolding', as a work that is whisperingly light in weight, and yet so heavy in *hiraeth*. This holds true for the show on the whole, piecing together strands of light ink, in search of a collective belonging. *Osmosis is ongoing until August 10 at Tarq, Colaba.*



Now and beyond: (Left) Rithika Merchant's 'The Interior World'; and (below) Savia Mahajan's 'Liminal Entity 2'.
■ RITHIKA MERCHANT, SAVIA MAHAJAN, COURTESY TARQ