

Rithika Merchant

ARTIST PROFILE (/ARTICLES/CATEGORY/ARTIST+PROFILE) · APRIL 19, 2021

BIRTH OF A NEW WORLD



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HARVEST, A LAND OF PLENTY, 2020
RITHIKA MERCHANT

AN ARTICLE BY GUEST WRITER: RHEA KHANNA (HTTPS://WWW.MATRONSANDMISTRESSES.COM/CONTRIBUTORS-RHEA-KHANNA)

You know that feeling when you accidentally eavesdrop on a conversation and hear something you weren’t supposed to know? Yes, it’s deathly uncomfortable. But sometimes, a little unintentional eavesdropping can eventually lead you to sitting down and chatting with one of the most imaginative minds in contemporary art over Zoom one day.

That’s right, I was (quite unknowingly) introduced to the fanciful worlds of Rithika Merchant through the trailing words, “*Rithika Merchant’s work on Instagram is...*” —and so *of course*, I took to Instagram to determine the end of that sentence for myself. Mesmeric, thought-provoking, and supremely humanistic,

“I’m always hopeful.
We all have the
capacity for good.”

– RITHIKA MERCHANT

her work grounds itself in cultural myths, to not only reflect who we are and who we can be as a society, but to carefully thread us closer together no matter where we might be in the world.

Rhea Khanna: So, tell me, where are you in the world right now?

Rithika Merchant: I'm in Barcelona... I'm a little bit—well, not trapped but a bit stuck. Basically, I divide my time and go back and forth a lot between Mumbai and Barcelona. Usually around 2-3 times a year. And when I go to Mumbai, I'll go for long periods. I actually got stuck there for three months in the beginning of the pandemic. I wasn't meant to be there that long, but I ended up enjoying it. And now I can't go back to Mumbai, because it's really not convenient given the travel restrictions. I could go back for some kind of emergency if I absolutely have to. But I wasn't able to go back for my show.

RK: How does it feel to start your first show of the year, *Birth of a New World* (<https://www.tarq.in/exhibition/birth-of-a-new-world/>), and not be able to be there physically?

RM: It was really sad! I think I would've been a lot sadder if it had been my first show ever, but I've had the experience of having a show open, installing it, and going to the opening, etc., a few times before. So, for that part of the process, I felt it was okay. Though of course, it's always sad having to install and do all of that stuff over Zoom. But TARQ, the gallery that represents me, has been especially lovely—Hena, the director, called me on Zoom when she was literally installing each and every wall. I almost felt like I was there! People have also been so sweet; I've gotten so many nice messages, and a lot of people have been able to go see the show. So, it hasn't been all that bad, given the fact that we're in a pandemic. At the end of the day, for me it's more about making the artwork. That, to me, is the exciting bit.

RK: Right! Of course. I'm so grateful for the ways that Zoom, and other kinds of technology have helped us stay connected to art during this time. I spent so much time on the online viewing room for your show, which I wasn't sure they were going to continue with, since yours was one of the first physical shows. I had my fingers tightly crossed, and it all worked out!

RM: This is something that we really wanted to make sure we still had. Even though by the time the show opened, many people were able to go, there were still many others who weren't comfortable going to a gallery because of COVID. Also, we realized that it gave people the chance who don't live in Bombay to view the show through the viewing room and the virtual tour – in which someone at the gallery takes you around. My parents-in-law who live in Belgium, did a virtual tour, which is so nice! They would never have been able to do that. I have friends in a lot of other places who were also able to see it. I hope that TARQ keeps this feature for all shows, forever. Because then I get to see them from far away too. But let's see...

RK: It's going to be interesting to see how the art world will adapt once again as things settle down in the future. It makes me think of your show's pivotal question—*What are we going to take forward and what are we going to leave behind?* Was this theme and the narrative structure of your show motivated by the events of the pandemic? Or were you thinking about this beforehand, with the pandemic later cropping up as an added influence?



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ARCADIA, 2020
RITHIKA MERCHANT

RM: I started work at the end of 2019, so it definitely started pre-pandemic. I was looking at it from the environmental angle of, 'Oh my God, we're ruining our planet!' I was having this conversation with my husband, and I wondered, 'Well, what if the planet was a being?' Essentially this is the thesis of the show: that the planet is a being and that geology, which is land, are the forces within; astronomy, which is air, are the forces without; and hydrology, which is water is the vital force. I was looking at human beings as being the fire, which when you add it to any of those other elements, it changes its state.

So, I started working on the first section of the show, which is 'air,' and it includes the three collages. When working on that, I was thinking about a post-cultural, post-gender paradise of the future. Then in February, when I had finished those pieces, I went to India for a couple of weeks, but then got stuck there when the pandemic hit. I ended up working on the entirety of 'water' in Mumbai. So, I can't say that the pandemic influenced the works in a *conscious* way, because it's really hard to react to something as you're living it. But obviously, the bulk of the work, around 2/3 of the show, was made during the pandemic.

Luckily, on the terrace of my building in Mumbai, you can actually see the sea, so I was looking at that every single day. I was also there for so long that I got to be there for the monsoons, which I'm rarely there for. So, I would say it's quite poetic that the water section was made in Mumbai. I eventually made it back to Barcelona in June and started work on the section on 'land.' That was also interesting because I came back to my studio here, and I felt much more grounded. I was back with my husband, after being separated for three months. So, in that way, COVID did affect my work. But I don't know if there's any COVID influence other than having to create in that situation.

RK: Now having completed these works and looking back on your explorations of our relationship with the world, would you say that you're more hopeful or more anxious about the future?

RM: I'm always hopeful. I have that type of personality. I don't know if it's right to feel that way, because I don't know if we're too late. But I'm always hopeful. I think that came through the work as well because the number one message I got was, 'We went to your show and it made us feel so hopeful.' So, it's funny that you're using that word, because that was literally the word people associated with the show.

Also, I believe that as a species, we have generally evolved through processes of self-preservation and persistence. So, we will probably end up using technology or the like to keep living on this planet. It might not be something like, 'Ok, we're gonna stop the glaciers from melting,' because I do think we might be past the point of that, but I wouldn't be surprised if in ten years, someone invents something to reverse, let's say the effect of carbon emissions. So, I'm always hopeful. We all have the capacity for good, and even though it may come from a selfish place of self-preservation, I would be very surprised if we just cease to exist.



THE GATES OF HORN AND IVORY, 2020
RITHIKA MERCHANT

RK: I really admire how you reflect this message of hope and agency through the lens of interconnectedness. Connection has always been a major theme in your work, but in this particular series, you really dove into the connection between our inner selves, the outer world, and of course, our connection to one another.

One work you clearly see this in is *The Gates of Horn and Ivory*—which is a piece I always return to. It’s particularly intriguing to me, because you’ve shown two very different kinds of futures on the exact same plane. I love that because in a way, those two futures, as different as they are, are still connected. There’s an equal possibility of either one manifesting at any moment—it just depends on our actions each step of the way.

RM: That’s actually what I’m interested in as well. I do think we are at this crossroads of different realities or worlds. I believe in a multi-verse. Theoretically, there could be another universe or another reality existing in this very moment. It’s interesting to think about how different things could be in another timeline, really. With the painting you’re talking about, it definitely shows us in this particular world, with two choices in front of us—something I tend to think about often.

RK: Another significant aspect of your work is your focus on myths and epics. You’ve mentioned in earlier interviews, that you like turning to myths because there’s a shared sense of stories and ideas across cultures. But I’ve always wondered, what personally influenced you to adopt this particular visual language? Because folklore isn’t something that we come across every day. What made you think ‘Ok, this ancient language feels like *me*’?

RM: That’s a really good question. First of all, I’ve always really loved stories and I read a lot as a child. It was these mythological, fantasy stories, so I’ve always been drawn to that. But as an adult, the reason has evolved, of course.

Having lived outside of India for a long time, yet still feeling very connected to being an Indian, I’m always in the state of, ‘I don’t really feel like I belong anywhere,’ but at the same time, I feel very comfortable and I *do* belong everywhere. This is a huge cliché, but a lot of people who are part of the diaspora probably feel this way: you don’t really feel you belong when you’re back home, and you don’t feel you really belong when you’re where you are.

When I moved to Barcelona, around ten years ago, I was right in the beginning of my career. And as a young artist, you have no real assurances. So, through myth-making and reading about myths, I saw this commonality between people, and coming from a sense of not feeling like I belong anywhere, this almost gave me a mythical sense of belonging. I realized that we really *are* the same everywhere, because we’ve all come up with the same stories.

So, I think it’s a combination of the two: really loving it as a child and just these stories, they’re next level. When you read them, the visuals are so potent, and there’s so much room to explore. And they’re written so beautifully. I’ve always loved how the stories feel like paintings. So, it just makes sense that I would be inspired by them for my own paintings.

RK: Going through the various series of your work, and especially your new show, really feels like walking through a storybook or watching a performance unfold. There’s such a rich narrative experience.

RM: Well, thank you. I’m glad that reads through to someone else, too.

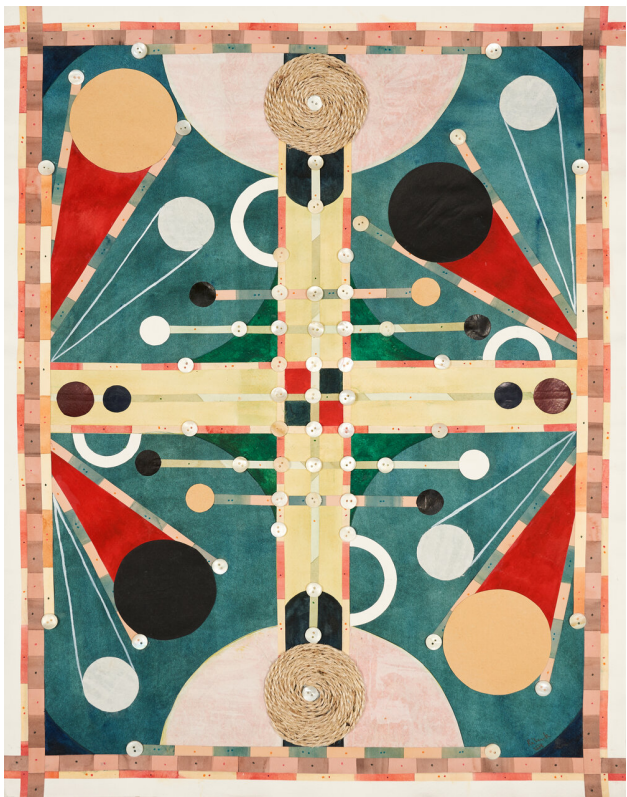
RK: With such a carefully planned and structured show, I wonder if you made these pieces sequentially, having them build off one another, or if you worked on multiple at a time? How was the process for you given how the pandemic shook things up?

RM: It’s really a mixture of the two. My process usually starts with an idea of something that I really want to explore. I’ll write it down on my computer, where I have a huge folder with all my notes. I never really sketch anything out, so the first part of my process is essentially writing and a whole lot of research! I’ll just go on these literal research holes and compile a lot of things that I’m interested in. My notes literally include quotes from movies like *Gattaca* to something I’ve read that jumped out at me.

For this particular show, once I had covered that part of the process, I decided to split it into three sections, and then tried to work one section at a time. I don’t like to plan a whole show out, because I want to leave space for organic thought. So, I’ll usually start out with the written research for three pieces at one time, but I won’t physically work on all three at the same time. I like to complete a full piece before moving onto the next.

With the water section, it was especially interesting because when the lockdown started in India, I actually had no art supplies. Thankfully, the art store was still open the day they announced the lockdown, so my dad drove me down there to grab paper, paint, and brushes!

At the same time, I had also found a roll of handmade paper recycled from cuts of fabric that one of my friends, who has a clothing brand, had sent over the previous year. I ended up breaking into it because I had no supplies at first. I had looked at some of Hans Christian Andersen’s paper cuts from an old book that my parents had and thought it would be so interesting to try. It ended up being the most soothing thing to do in these times of stress! Eventually though, I realized that I needed to get back to work because the show was going to happen the next year. And so, I went back to my notes, and it just sort of evolved from that. For example, with the piece *Water Witcher*, I had all the research written down, so then I kind of just drew it out directly on my paper.



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GALACTIC TIDES, 2020
RITHIKA MERCHANT

RK: I love how you balance structure and liberty when creating your stories. No matter the narrative, I’ve noticed you tend to rely on universal symbols and don’t really allude to any particular culture. But I have to ask—have there been any specific myths or folklore that have influenced you or sparked your curiosity more than others?

RM: Definitely creation myths. There’s too many to actually talk about them, but in general that’s a genre that I find really, really interesting. I’ve always loved them because they tell you a lot about the genesis of a culture. But my all-time favorite myth is a feminist myth.

RK: Oh, I’m on board with that!

RM: It’s the myth of Visha Kanya. And you see this myth in different cultures—not only in India, but in ancient Greece as well. Basically, Visha Kanya were these young, beautiful women who were raised to take tiny little bits of poison, so that they became immune to it. Their bodily fluids then became poisonous, and they were sent off as assassins to go seduce rival kings. In a similar myth from Greece, there was a king who would do the same. He would slowly poison himself to become immune to it so that no one could slip poison into his food or drink and kill him. But in the case of Visha Kanya, I always thought it was interesting because it gave women agency to take back the power in those days, when they didn’t have all that much. So that’s definitely my favorite myth.

It’s so interesting how all of these different cultures, completely removed from each other, thousands of years ago, still came up with the same origin story and cultural ideas. There are these fundamental truths that are just the same. To me, it has to do with evolution. We’ve evolved to think a certain way. I’m very late to the party, but I’m reading *Sapiens* right now. It talks a lot about meaning-making, actually.

RK: That’s one of my favorite books ever. There’s so much to learn about how we make associations. It’s why I love that you explicitly encourage your viewers to construct their own ideas from your work. You provide a language through your pieces—building blocks that people can use to navigate and arrive at their own truths. And that’s so exciting, because to a viewer it feels like getting some sort of “permission” to freely engage!

RM: It’s definitely important to me for the audience to take what they will. I usually give a little bit of background, but you kind of have to dig for them. It’s always nice for people to have some references, but I won’t actually tell you how to interpret it.

RK: Yes, I see that you sometimes mention what a certain symbol means, like perhaps the white horse or the raven, but you don’t really instruct anyone past that.

RM: It’s a hard line to toe, but it also helps people like you, for example, who want to do more of a deep dive into it or those who are writing about the work, to have those resources. I’ve realized you can give people references and still leave enough room for interpretation.

RK: From this toolbox of symbols in your new body of work, is there—I don’t want to use the word, “favorite,”—but is there a particular symbol that you believe encapsulates the core sentiments of your new show? Sort of like a mascot, if you had to have one.

RM: Definitely the eye, because it's in everything. I've put them on a lot of the figures as well as in the sky. I've been using eyes for a long time. I think they're such a meaningful symbol. When you look into someone's eyes, it can tell you a lot about someone. Even mythologically, eyes have featured throughout history. I specifically like to use them as this all-seeing eye, eye-in-the-sky type of thing because it's ultimately like a divine power looking down at you.

RK: I noticed that a lot of your work has Indian folk art and mythological references, so I'm interested to know how being in Barcelona has influenced your work.

RM: In my earlier works, from 2010 to about 2012, for example, I have sets of different tiles in my work, which is actually a Portuguese influence. Portugal has these tile murals called *azulejos*, and living there for a while, I was kind of inspired by that. I also had quite a small space to work at the time, so working in that way allowed me to create bigger pieces. I could break my works down into smaller sections. Now I don't cut my work anymore. Stylistically, I don't know if living in Barcelona influences my work that much. However, my whole series *Voyager* was about the Mediterranean migrant crisis, which was directly influenced by living here. Seeing the "shame counter" on the beach and knowing that this is happening right where I am. That whole series was me reconciling with what was going on in Europe at the time.

RK: What initially brought you to Barcelona?

RM: Well, my husband and I met in Lisbon while I was doing a residency there. But he had been there studying abroad and still had to finish his Master's program, so I moved to Belgium and stayed with him for six months till he graduated. After that we were wondering, 'Well, should we go back to Lisbon?' Because we really liked it. Again, I'm an artist and he's an industrial designer, so we needed to live in a cheap city because living somewhere expensive was not possible for us. Especially at that point. But then, again, this was Lisbon 12 years ago, so it wasn't what it is now. I remember after being there for six months, it did feel kind of small, because it is a smaller city. We had both been to Barcelona; I'd been here on a family vacation just before I met him, and he had been here a couple of times as a teenager. So, we thought, 'Let's try it! Let's go for six months and we'll see.' And this was totally a 23-year-old decision. I would never do this now, but at that point, I thought, 'Yeah! Let's see how it goes!' Then honestly, we just stayed; we really liked it. I also like living here because it's easy to get to India. The time difference isn't so much. So, it works out well for me to be here. He works here so he's in Barcelona more, but I also try to spend more time there. We have our own system that works.

RK: I love the spontaneity of it all. How does this duality of living in Barcelona but staying very connected with India play out for you in your practice? I ask that because while you've had your works shown across the world, you clearly have a very significant presence in the Indian art world in particular.

RM: I feel like I have two lives in a way. When I'm in India, I'm super social. I go to the gallery a lot and meet a bunch of people. I'm much more in tune with the art scene there as well. I'm friends with quite a lot of artists, especially the artists that are a part of TARQ. So, I just love meeting up with people I've worked with before and seeing what everyone's doing! But when I'm here in Barcelona, I go into hibernation. I have friends in this city as well, but I'm able to do my best work here without as much distraction. I have that ability



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OPEN WATERS, 2018
RITHKA MERCHANT

because I don't have my parents or family here and no real obligations in the same way, so I can completely devote myself to my artistic practice. I don't like to see anyone that much, and I just do my own thing. I actually rarely go to art openings here. I do go sometimes, but in Mumbai, I'm much more out and about, in that sense. I'm also a little bit better known in India, so I feel more pulled in different directions there, in a good way. For me, it's a good separation.

RK: Although Barcelona feels more like your creation space, is there any particular reason you're not as out and about at galleries or social art circles in Barcelona versus Mumbai?

RM: Honestly, it's because I don't know as many people. Some of my friends here are street artists—so once in a while I'll go drink a beer and watch them paint a wall, but that's a different vibe. In terms of the bigger galleries—I'll go to a show, obviously, if I want to see the art in a show sometimes. But most of my friends out here don't actually work in the arts, which in some ways is kind of refreshing. They don't even care about what I'm doing that much. They're happy to support, but it's a good break because when I work alone at home, and I'm so involved in what I'm doing, it's nice to meet friends and talk about other stuff. It's not so art focused.

RK: As a former art student, I can totally relate to needing that kind of balance! Since your show is about the dawn of a new beginning, and you've spent this whole time reflecting on the past, present, and future, I wanted to ask you the question you've been asking everybody else through your show! *What do you want to leave behind and what do you want to take forward?* Have any new intentions emerged for you, either personally or professionally?

RM: A big thing that I've realized during this time when we are mentally all over the place is saying *no* to things. I was really bad at saying no to things, even professionally. One of the things I told Hena after this show was that I can't do any commissions right now. The show did very well, and essentially sold out. I was very, very lucky and I feel very grateful. I never expected it during this time. But the previous time my show sold out, a lot of people wanted commissions, and I agreed to making a couple more pieces. However, by the end of the fifth commission, it felt like squeezing water out of a rock. Once you've had a specific idea and you're done with it, I don't think it's fair to the buyer or the viewer to keep making art along the same lines. So, this year I specifically mentioned that 'Once these works go, that's it. If another person's interested, they'll have to wait for the next body of work.'

Having these boundaries also protects your own sanity and anxiety. Because as an artist you should never feel crazily overworked. At least for me, I don't want to get anxious looking at my schedule. It should be something that you *enjoy* doing. Because at the end of the day, it's art. It's a creative process. It isn't...

RK: It's not a manufactured process.



Copyright Rithika Merchant, 2016.

VOYAGERS, 2016
RITHKA MERCHANT

RM: Yes. So, this is definitely something within my practice that I will take forward. Also, I've gained a new appreciation for scraps through my time making paper cuts during the lockdown. I now literally walk around my studio looking for things.

RK: 'What can I find?!'

RM: Yeah! 'Where can I find scrap paper?' I've always loved craft and having that element in my work, especially with the collages and the embroidery hoops. So, leaning a little bit more into that aspect of my work is something I want to do. There's no need to throw away all this paper and material. I'm willing to use it in all my collages, and I have in the past too, but I've taken it to another level now.

In terms of my personal life, I'm actually way more connected to all my friends and family because of Zoom! I regularly talk to my nephew who lives in America. We draw on Zoom together and have dance parties.

RK: I love that.

RM: I don't know if we'll be able to do this forever, but for now I'm just enjoying that connection. I hope we can keep at least some of that going, because I really want to carry that into life post-pandemic as well.