

Life in Conflict Settings and Life after Life

Lajja Shah traverses post-apocalyptic mythscapes, current scenes of socio-political strife and a shrine to eternal love at three shows in Mumbai.

Across two solo exhibitions and a group show, artists explore a rich profusion of mediums and materials to contemplate on the crises that plague our times. Drawing from sources as diverse as nature, astronomy, memory, history and mythology, they deftly fuse the personal with the universal, in direct or oblique ways, to provoke timely and telling reflections on the growing imbalance between the natural and human worlds, and to elicit narratives of socio-political turbulence. They also reaffirm the abiding power of stories to replenish us with hope in times of despair.

In *Birth of a New World* at TARQ, Mumbai, from the 14th of January to the 26th of February, Rithika Merchant conjures a resplendent universe whose allure is as captivating as it is disquieting. With their jewel-like tones, graphic borders, recurring symbols that include floating orbs, disembodied eyes, coiled serpents and exquisitely detailed renderings of plant life, the mixed media works on paper, at first glance, come across as botanical illustrations or ancient maps. Accentuating this impression are the neat creases that also function as a kind of grid to emphasize the play of symmetry – a visual feature that Merchant deploys to striking effect in many of her works.

A closer look reveals the perils that lurk in her paradisiacal evocations. Underlying her sensual and sophisticated depictions of flora and fauna, celestial bodies and hybrid beings, is a planet on the brink of an ecological meltdown. Merchant tempers the graveness of the natural calamities – rising tides, depletion of natural resources, volcanoes, wildfires and the gradual extinction of non-human species – by locating them within the ‘enchanted’ world of myths and archetypes. In *Tantalus*, a half bird, half human figure stands, partly submerged in a pool of water, with its arms outstretched, as if reaching for overhanging fruit that is beyond its grasp. Recalling the eponymous Greek mythic character with a backstory of greed and punishment, Merchant comments on the mindless wastage of water and the heavy price that is being paid in the wake of its mounting scarcity.

While depicting apocalyptic scenarios, Merchant also proposes speculative paths that would lead humankind back to a primordial time of harmonious co-existence. To navigate this cyclical journey, she looks to the stars as metaphoric guides. Alluding to the black hole or ‘nothingness’ into which all life forms may eventually descend, the sombre mood that pervades *Dark Star* is uplifted by the regenerative intensities of works like *Return to Stardust*. *Summit* portrays a spiral pathway leading up a mountain peak that is rendered within the outline of a human figure in profile. Here, the artist urges us to search for answers within, in order to bring about a meaningful change in the world. By distilling lofty themes and recrafting them using decorative elements that constitute her stylized visual language, Merchant’s allegorical works offer a glimmer of hope and perhaps, a possibility of Utopia.

The note of optimism is replaced by a creeping sense of melancholy that accompanies the viewing of *This Boat with a Broken Rim*, presented by Mumbai Art Room at Kamalnayan Bajaj Art Gallery, Mumbai, from the 14th of January to the 13th of February. The lyrically titled group show, conceived as an “offering for our times”, addresses a world being swept along by the rising tide of populist discourse and geopolitical conflicts. Curator Phalguni Guliani channels the capacious, glass-fronted gallery into immersive zones that enable stirring conversations between the spare yet conceptually charged works.

The first work we encounter is Danish artist duo Hesselholdt & Mejlvang’s tapestry, stitched from items of clothing and linen in varying shades of white that were contributed by their friends, colleagues and strangers. Imbued with a solemn aura, the starkness, scale and the soft folds of the assorted textiles draw us closer, at which point, the sentence, “Please rest in peace for we shall not repeat the error,” embroidered in white across its surface becomes discernible. The quote, which is also the title of the work, is paraphrased from the inscription

on the cenotaph at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, Japan. The quietly monumental work speaks to the idea of repairing historic wrongs, but can also be viewed as a talisman for collective hope. In *A Memorial for the New Economy*, Chinara Shah transforms the humble handkerchief into a powerful testimony to record the human toll in the aftermath of the arbitrarily enforced Demonetisation Policy by the Government of India in 2016. Arranged in a grid are 16 individually mounted digital prints of handkerchiefs, of which 15 are embroidered with the names of victims, while one is left blank in memory of the nameless, faceless and countless 'others'. In a gesture loaded with poignant irony, she embellishes the handkerchiefs with flower motifs, culled from the now defunct currency notes, as a floral offering to the dead.

Anchored in her family's history, Sudipta Das' haunting works, depicting the plight of the displaced and the dispossessed, connect in compelling ways with the global refugee crisis, and closer home, the harrowing experience of migrants following the pandemic-enforced lockdown. Das combines medium and message to remarkable effect, whether it is in her large installation *Soaring to Nowhere* or in the three smaller works. The fragility of Hanji paper – with which she sculpts a sea of puppet-doll figures and the material detritus of their lives – eloquently portrays the precarious condition of her hapless subjects.

The thematic underpinnings of the show come together in *No lines in the sea* by Salik Ansari. The two-channel video installation – placed between the works of the other three artists – is displayed on the floor to suggest



Rithika Merchant. *Tantalus*. Gouache, watercolour and ink on paper. 25.5"x 19.6". 2020. Image courtesy of the artist and TARQ, Mumbai. © the artist.



Chinara Shah.

A Memorial for the New Economy.
Digital print on Hahnemühle rice paper.
12" x 12". 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

a water body. *Untitled 1* and *Untitled 2* drive home the absurdity and futility of attempting to control and draw boundaries within an ecosystem that is in a perennial state of flux.

The underlying sense of desolation that marks these shows is offset by the life-affirming energies that course through *Reincarnate: We meet here in the Afterlife*. In her second solo at Art Musings, Mumbai, from the 14th of January to the 27th of March, Shilo Shiv Suleman looks back at a year when the world was in the grip of death to ponder mortality and the mysteries of the afterlife. While myths across cultures present us with varying conceptions of the afterlife, Suleman believes that, "we are not just reincarnating souls, but reincarnating stories." Shifting between registers that are, at once, spectacular and intimate, Suleman's fecund visual language – interweaving the personal, the mythical and the mystical – resonates with collective experiences in poetic ways.

In a series of large works including the titular work as well as *I Return to Soil and Live Forever* and *Tenacious Seeds*, she draws attention to our inseparable bond with the transformative and revivifying power of the soil – the site where we first encounter the afterlife.

Cocooned in floral abundance, the works individually depict female and male figures who appear to be in a state of transcendence and exude an other-worldly air. In the

adjoining room, a pair of lovers locked in embrace take centrestage. Nestled in the midst of an ornate tombstone overgrown with lush vegetation, the installation is imagined as a monument to eternal lovers and to love stories that reincarnate over lifetimes. Though adapting to the scale and conventions of the white cube, Suleman imbues her figures with a larger-than-life appeal that brings to mind her practice as a muralist working on large-scale public art projects engaging with social and gender issues as the founder-director of the Fearless Collective.

Resembling miniature paintings, *Raazdar*, *Embrace* and *Betab (Impatient)* comprise small works on paper upon which the artist inscribes her own love letters, text messages and love poems using fine calligraphy and collage. In these and two larger works on archival paper illuminated with embossed gold, *Tishnagi – All Thirst Ends in Our Embrace* and *Intezaar – Until We Meet Again*, Suleman articulates her love stories by reclaiming the beauty and sensuousness of Urdu. *Picking up the Pieces of Myself* is a stunning installation comprising 21 parts of Suleman's body, that are cast in brass and individually suspended from the ceiling against a deep red backdrop. Inspired by the myth of Sati, the wearable sculptures, that are also part of a ritual performance piece, embody our crushing vulnerabilities as well as the innate strength to build back our lives. /