

Rithika Merchant

In her book 'The Chalice and the Blade', [Riane Eisler](#), by reviewing social history from the Palaeolithic, through the patriarchal take-over, to the present and future of society, discusses the transition from the feminine partnership chalice to the male dominator blade, and through these symbols, explores the psychological structures inherent within them. She states that "The way we interpret ancient symbols and myths still plays an important part in how we shape both our present and our future. At the same time that some of our religious and political leaders would have us believe a nuclear Armageddon may actually be the will of God, we are seeing a vast reaffirmation of the desire for life, not death, in an accelerated, and indeed unprecedented, movement to restore ancient myths and symbols to their original gynanic meaning."







The sentiments expounded by Eisler in her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, are echoed in the works of Rithika Merchant. An Indian artist currently residing in Barcelona, her work draws heavily upon a substantial visual vocabulary, emanating from deep within the caverns where our ancient creation myths are stored. Merchant's work, instead of pertaining solely to the historical, literary aspect of received history, attempts to democratise the myth through highlighting both commonality and personality embedded within them.

Merchant suggests that "the combination of having grown up in India, studied in the U.S.A, travelling extensively and finally settling in Europe, is the reason for my interest in the links between cultures. I've been lucky enough to have explored different cultures to observe them. Both Europe and India have such a mixture of different traditions, it has helped me see parallel histories everywhere. The history of myth and traditions shows links between cultures that often isn't highlighted in classical history."







The symbols that Eislser explores in her book are not necessarily related to gender, but more intellectually and naturally intertwined with characteristics of male and female that have been adopted and distorted by current psychological trappings of Western civilisation. The characteristics of Eislser's 'chalice' and 'blade' are perhaps more akin to the ancient Chinese dualism of yin yang (broken and unbroken lines in the I Ching, strong and weak, creative and receptive) that once seen as a constant interplay of opposites, create new dynamic perspectives of how phenomena emerge, and how to respond accordingly, depending on the kind of characteristic required.

It is for this reason that Eislser talks about partnership societies, as the overthrowing of Patriarchy with Matriarchy is simply substituting dominance with dominance. There are thematic overtones of collaboration and assimilation within Merchant's work that alludes to this partnership mentality. The notion of democratising narrative by allowing space for the ego to echo through the narrative does not overwhelm the art. Merchant explains, "I definitely do not try to make culture specific reproductions of myths. Nowadays I have been trying to make my symbolism as non-specific and as universal as possible. I use symbols found in nature a lot - as I think that is something that all cultures have in common. A lot of the time people see my work and immediately want to know the story behind it. I encourage them to first look at the title of the piece for hints and try to find significance in the symbolism within the work. Each piece tells many stories and sometimes the best ones are not what I have thought about whilst creating the work."



Given that the culture of information is a common motif of our modern civilisation, asking what art inherently is, what something 'means', can be somewhat misguided. Nonetheless, digital technology has had implicit affects on

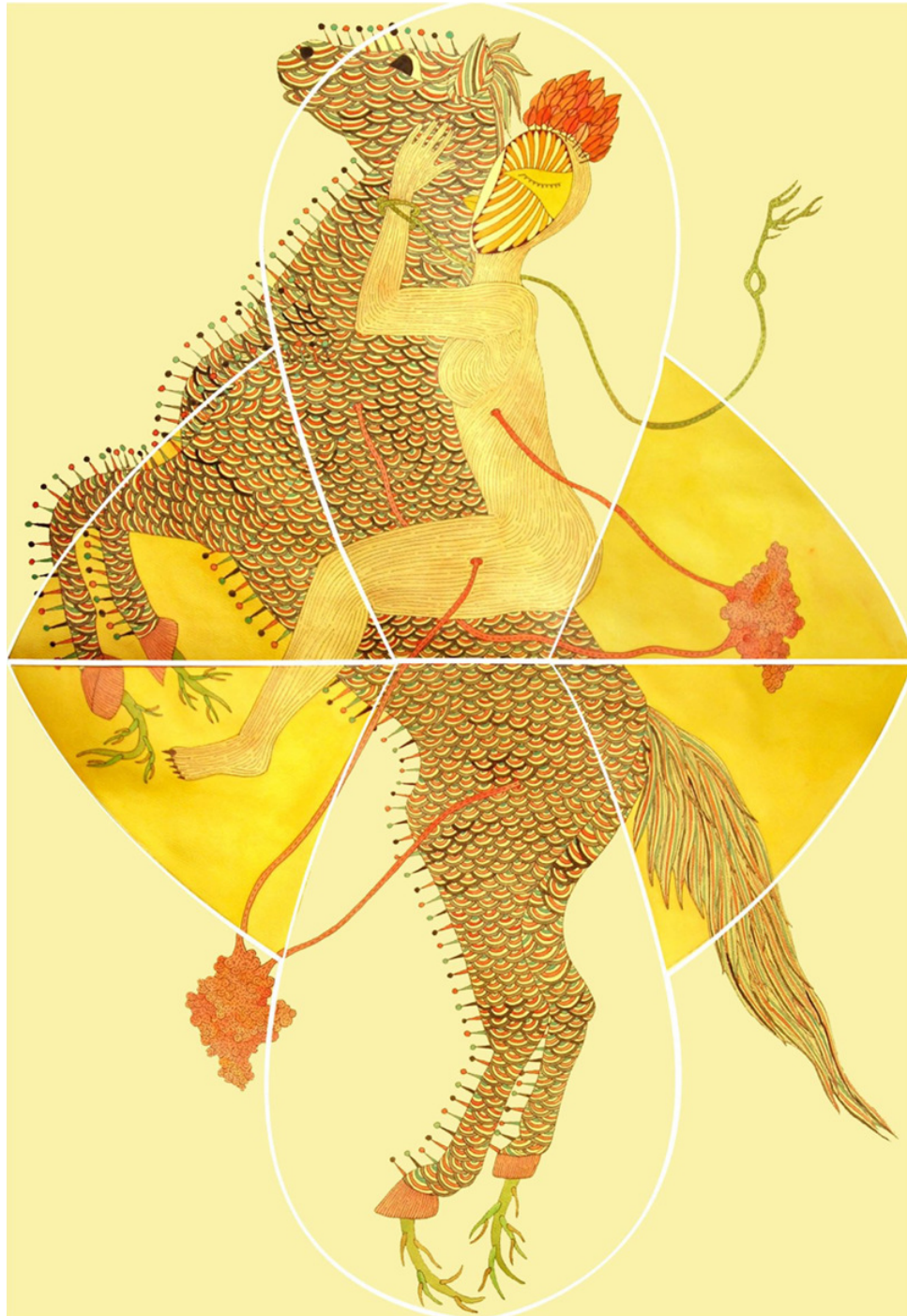
our most banal rituals to our most cosmic revelations, and the question of what something means is in someways the embryo of a new idea. The idea of being a collaborator in the significance of something. Merchant goes on to explain that "contemporary art has a function of culture mapping. As images and stories travel far and wide, sometimes within minutes, our age has become one of over saturation. For art and narrative to resonate, they must speak honestly and emotionally. The response to the art as well as it's place within the broader cultural movement of the time, is both enhanced by how fast things move on the internet and hindered by how soon they can be forgotten."

For Eisler, the widely held notion that technology is causing our global problems is a common misconception. "Indeed, the story of human culture is to a large extent the story of human technology. It is the story not only of the fashioning of material tools but also of our most important and unique non-material tools: the mental tools of language and imagery, of human-made words, symbols, and pictures...Technology is itself part of the evolutionary impulse, the striving for the expansion of our potential as human beings within both culture and nature. Once we look at technology from the new perspective provided by the gender-holistic analysis of our past and present, it is clear that the problem is not now nor has it ever been simply that of technology. The same technological base can produce very different types of tools: tools to kill and oppress other humans or tools to free our hands and minds from dehumanising drudgery.

The problem is that in dominator societies, where "masculinity" is identified with conquest and domination, every new technological breakthrough is basically seen as a tool for more effective oppression and domination. That is, what led to the nineteenth century's exploitation of women, children, and men in sweat shops and mines and the twentieth century factories of dehumanising assembly lines where workers became cogs in industrial machines was not the invention of machines. Rather, it was the use to which that mechanisation was put in a dominator system. Similarly, the use of modern technologies to devise ever more effective and costly weapons is not a requirement of modern technology. It is, however, a requirement of dominator systems, where throughout recorded history the highest priority has been given to technologies fashioned not to sustain and enhance life, but technologies to dominate and destroy."







Taking in as much of the historical and cultural information as we can, we begin to understand that the way we interact with all phenomena, whether digital, political, mythological and so on, often dictate the form of the resulting application with which we use to navigate these topics societally. In essence what this means is the cultural equipment we use to deal with problems have their own psychological directives, much in the same sense that the observer changes the behaviour of particles in quantum physics.

What Rithika Merchant's work encapsulates is a remedy, a panacea, that emerges not exclusively through the personal drive of the ego, but as a necessity, in opposition to any overbearing force of society, and the limiting definitions espoused by it. By utilising fragmentary myth to reflect and build upon our position in an increasingly digital construct of reality, Merchant draws parallels between ideologies of weaponising technologies of the West and the Ancient Indian Visha Kanya, the Poison Girls, who's sexuality became their greatest weapon against oppression.

"In the past, art and stories were often a way to make sense of natural phenomena and psychological events. In modern times and for the foreseeable future, science gives us a complete explanation for most things. However, it places humans as part of a greater scheme rather than the centre of our own narrative. As much as science gives a more accurate description of humanity, it takes away the spiritual power given to every human to understand their own destiny. I try to bring humanity back to the centre of concern."











By **Ventral is Golden**

Further reading :

[Rithika Merchant, website](#)

[Riane Eisler, The Chalice and the Blade, pdf review](#)

[The Chalice and the Blade, wiki](#)

Artist Research Suggestions:

1. Hildegard Von Bingen - who was a 11th century German writer, composer, mystic, benedictine abbess and polymath.

"In recent years, Hildegard has become of particular interest to feminist scholars. They note her reference to herself as a member of the "weaker sex" and her rather constant belittling of women. Hildegard frequently referred to herself as an unlearned woman, completely incapable of Biblical exegesis. Such a statement on her part, however, worked to her advantage because it made her statements that all of her writings and music came from visions of the Divine more believable, therefore giving Hildegard the authority to speak in a time and place where few women were permitted a voice" - quoted from Barbara Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation

2. The Visha Kanya - The myth of the Visha Kanya is another myth which I find significant. According to the myth which dates back to the Mauryan Empire, young girls were made poisonous by exposing them to low intensity poison from a very young age. They would develop immunity to the poison and their body fluids would become poisonous, hence any sexual contact with them would be lethal. They would then be used as assassins against powerful enemies. I found the idea of weaponised women to be quite compelling.

3. Female Ghosts - Specifically the Japanese female ghost or Kaidan. The Kaidan are far more powerful after death than they were in life, and are often people who were particularly powerless in life, such as women and servants. Also the Nang Tani, a female spirit found in Thai, Cambodian and Lao Folklore - these spirits haunt banana trees and usually harm men who have wronged women.

4. I also find myths which speak of creation by the dismemberment or out of some body part or fluid of a primordial being very interesting, like The myth of Coatlicue - an Aztec goddess who gave birth to the moon and stars after being impregnated by a ball of feathers. She is also the patron saint of women who die in childbirth.

Filed under [Rithika Merchant](#), [india](#), [eastern](#), [myth](#), [ventral](#) is golden, [watercolour](#), [feminism](#)



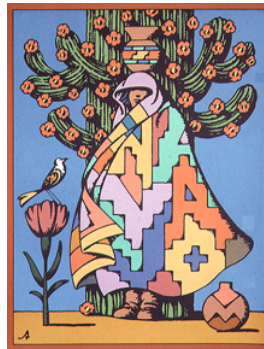
Interview: Leo Eguiarte

After a few months of going back and forth between emails and Instagram messages with each other, this interview with Leo Eguiarte finally came to a close. We had...



Mixtape: FvF x Melt

We made a mix for Berlin based online magazine Freunde von Freunden. It's filled with bombastic oddities from all over the world, capturing Melt's esoteric output....



John Alcorn

John Alcorn (February 10, 1935 – January 27, 1992) was an American commercial artist and designer, and an illustrator of children's books. In addition to his a...



Real Life X Melt: Against Immortality

Why let the body decay when you can just take a transfusion of youthful blood once a month? Why let a doctor decide how you die when you can upload your very self ...



Mixtape: Jura

"Adelaide reissue la flawless streak of re sixteen months ago anthem 'Fire In My H



Interview: Ra Bear

Adam Griffiths (Ra Bear) is a Designer, Art Director and Lecturer in Graphic Design at Manchester School of Art. Through a range of media, his practice occupies a...



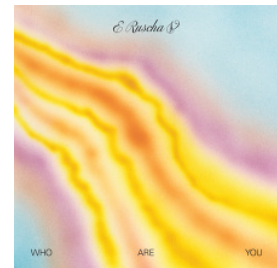
Mixtape: Métron Records – Sugai Ken

Sugai Ken is an incredibly talented experimental electronic producer from Kangawa in Japan. His recent LP 'UkabazUmorezU' dropped last month on RVNG. International, ...



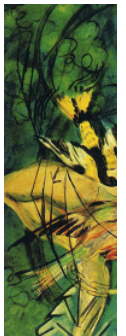
Album: Bokeh Versions – Jay Glass vs Guerilla Toss

"DFA Records and Bokeh Versions have teamed up for a joint release - a reworking of the freaky post-punk stylings of Guerilla Toss by Athens, Greece-based musician...



Album: E Ruscha V – Who Are You

Who Are You is a new collection of free form, free flowing music from E Ruscha V. A wandering, wondrous search for identity rendered in brilliant musical shapes and...



Francis Picab

"All the painters who are failures at paint talked about are fail into two categories c



Auguste Herbin

"Colours are light's suffering and joy." - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Colours are an essential part of how we perceive the world, from biological p...



Ex-Libris: Japan

A bookplate, also known as ex-libris (Latin, "from the library of..."), is usually a small print or decorative label pasted into a book, often on the inside front ...



Interview: Dewey Saunders

"Music for me is rather like the sea" proclaimed Kafka... "I am overpowered, wonderstruck, enthralled, and yet afraid, so terribly afraid of its endlessness. I am in f...



Philip Taaffe (Part II)

From minimal black and white works with eye-popping patterns, all the way to the other end of the spectrum with vibrant colors and the human experience, Philip...



Neo-Tantrism Santosh

"The colourless thro through form." - San of UCLA's Frederick : bind. By...



Mixtape: Instant Peterson & Andras – Diggers Rest

Two hard working men, fingertips black - exhausted from digging the deepest crates - take some time out in the middle of nowhere - somewhere down under. here's...

Like 19K