

ART

Poetic mosaic of myths



Zahra Amiruddin

JANUARY 09, 2018 20:29 IST

UPDATED: JANUARY 09, 2018 20:29 IST

Rithika Merchant's debut show explores the ideas of migration, displacement and belonging through an imagined reality

Imagine a bustling city, quite like Mumbai where the energy gets overwhelming, and the chaos is closing in. Now think of the crowded promenades all leading to the vast expanse of the Arabian sea, and steadily the pandemonium begins to subside. Looking out to the sea for solace, has been engrained in us through evolution, and according to late philosopher Denis Dutton, it has to do with water ensuring our survival as a species. For artist Rithika Merchant, exploring issues of migration, displacement, and belonging, with the ocean playing the lead, has culminated into a new show titled, *Where The Water Takes Us*.

For somebody who has grown up in Mumbai, and moved to Barcelona, the sea has played a significant role in Merchant's everyday life. From one coastal metropolis to another, both of which have their own backgrounds in the politics of migration, the artist conjures up a world that ties together both myth and reality. Working primarily with gouache and ink on paper, Merchant uses ancient Mesopotamian, and Sumerian myths amongst others to explore the plight of refugees who continue to stream into European cities from conflict-ridden parts of the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Syria.

Bound by time and space

On her usual walk by a sea-facing boulevard in Barcelona, Merchant was struck with the harsh realities of the ongoing refugee crisis through a tall ticker, nicknamed the "Shame Counter". Installed by the city's mayor, Ada Colau, in July 2016, the ticker displays the number of known victims who drown in the Mediterranean in real time. "It's a strange juxtaposition. To be aware of leading a normal life while the situation around you is what it is seems unsettling," says Merchant as we walk through the gallery gazing at the intricately detailed artworks.

Using embroidery, collages, geometric shapes, and figures all set in the midst of nature, the artist creates a universe where forceful physical displacement has resulted in feelings of loss. By using bright colours, and heightened contrasts, Merchant lives in the hope of a better future for the refugees, free from the restrictions of race and gender. This is apparent in her painting titled 'Ghost Town', where the artist paints a colourful visual of vines growing out of homes. "Even though it symbolises an empty town, I didn't want to draw it in ruins since the hope is that someday, they'll be able to go back," says a wishful Merchant.

New histories

The artist also uses text to further evoke emotion, in an attempt to express herself poetically. Like in her artwork, 'Shrine for the forsaken', is the sentence "still ever silent," a tribute to the migrants who have died. Her usage of eyes in most of the paintings also defines Merchant's belief that as clichéd as it might seem "the eyes are indeed, a window to the soul". In two circular paintings titled, 'Metropolis in Flux I' and 'Metropolis in Flux II', Merchant sketches two boats carrying numerous buildings across a raging sea, each fitted with a set of eyes. In her essay accompanying the show, Skye Arundhati Thomas describes it to be "a clever appraisal of what it means to tell history, or to generate the objects of a history that is ongoing." According to the artist herself, each eye is representative of every individual as well as a higher power.

Even though Merchant's art symbolises a bleak time, there is a sense of surrealism attached to it. This has a lot to do with Merchant's interest in overlapping myths, and how she incorporates them into her narrative. In the painting called 'Graveyard', hybrid creatures with the heads of what look like crows, and the body of humans, are entangled across the canvas. They are bound together with vines of water, held by a figure in the sky. The cartographic painting is inspired by Sumerian Goddess Inanna's descent unto the underworld, and how she brings with her the symbols of beauty, desire, and love, along with those of fertility, combat, and war. The narrative lies in the hope of fighting through the ruins, and emerging victorious.

"The whole show is a journey based on uncertainty, to find a sense of belonging," says Merchant who also uses folds on the sides of her canvas to represent a paper boat. Subconsciously, it helps the work acquire a sense of buoyancy and movement. Even though she began using these as framing devices, Merchant realised that this graphic representation would help her break away from the usual narrative. "It was partially an exploration in materials, and partially about visual representation," she elucidates.

The detailed sketches are all set in nature, something that is universal and that everybody can relate to. To ensure that individuals have no specific race or gender, Merchant has invented hybrid bodies – human in their shape with punk-like hair. She explains that it was her way of representing something that comes from the Earth and free of ethnicity -- "almost like rock people," she says. The crow-heads on the other hand are symbolic of a higher power, or people in high political positions making blanket decisions, since the bird species is deemed to be the cleverest, but also conniving.

Inspired by nature

Like any artist who has a passion for fiction and storytelling, Merchant has a vivid picture in her head before she creates her work. "I have my own lexicon of symbols and creatures that I use as tools to help me visualise my ideas," she explains. The painter barely sketches beforehand, drawing directly on paper, later adding on ink and paint. While sitting in her studio in Barcelona listening to podcasts obsessively, Merchant scribbles notes for each artwork describing how she first "sketches in words rather than images." Her love for illustration and nature is deeply inspired by *Gwinna*, by Barbara Helen Berger, a book that belongs to her childhood. "The storybook is about a girl whose best friend is an owl, and is largely set in nature!" she exclaims.

Since water has played a significant role through her life, Merchant can't imagine herself living in a landlocked space. "There's something comforting about looking out at a horizon, and actually seeing a horizon," says Merchant while stating that the sea represents freedom and a chance to start anew. In the eponymous painting of the show, the artist uses water as a form of cleansing. As Thomas further explains "her hybrid figures step into the water, as though in a ritual, turning from dark to light, and crawling out on all fours, humbled."

As the title of the exhibition indicates, the show is about individuals dependent on the sea to guide them to a safe place. For example, the island of Lampedusa in the southernmost part Italy saw numerous refugees arrive from Africa solely because of its proximity to the continent. Having braved innumerable obstacles, and bearing the loss of a life left behind, the words Where the water takes us, also holds the hope of a positive future. One where humanity is finally free, both physically, and metaphorically.

Where the water takes us, is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba, until January 13