

INTERSECTIONS / Q SHEET

An Artist's Vision of Queertopia

By Shweta Shiware



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5 Min Read

Artist Apnavi Makanji's new show 'Psychopomp' lies between identity, biology and ecology, spotlighting the climate crisis with urgency

There is a collage with an unsettling interior voice in Apnavi Makanji's new show, *Psychopomp*. Titled 'P.H.A.N.S.T.R.O.M.A.K', its colours dance, and our eyes dance with it, following contours and edges foreign and familiar— shells and dismembered parts of animal/plant species, bone-white coral and sinuous snakeheads, oil rigs and weapons of mass destruction. These may seem a jumble of metaphors but put together in a single frame, they connect.

Art provokes questions. Makanji's new work on view at Mumbai's TARQ

art gallery, throws up quite a few. They peel away the veneer of civilisation and show the connections of capitalism with overconsumption, ecological collapse with the manipulation of nature, to utopias where nature is considered “idyllic”. “But that’s really not the nature we live in anymore,” asserts Geneva-based Makanji, 46, currently in Mumbai for the show. “Nature is also the oil rigs, army tanks, arms and everything we have brought in, and almost asphyxiated other species with”.



P.H.A.N.S.T.R.O.M.A.K.

What does 'P.H.A.N.S.T.R.O.M.A.K' mean? The title might seem like an idea out of science fiction, but is actually initials of the people that

Makanji admires. Or in some ways have influenced their queer journey. P stands for Paul Preciado, trans activist, philosopher and author of *An Apartment on Uranus* and *Testo Junkie*. H is Haruki Murakami, A is Margaret Atwood, N is Nalini their mother, S is Patti Smith, an important figure in the punk rock movement, and so on. “Another of my collage is called ‘J.E.R.E.K.A.M.A!’ I am not very good with titles, and sticking ‘Untitled’ beside my works seemed kind of boring,” Makanji says with a laugh before pointing to their artistic concerns.

Art Confronts Climate Crisis

One of the things that troubles Makanji the most, is the audacity of the human mind to imagine that they are masters of the realm. How else does one explain the refusal of human beings to face the realities of climate crisis? A new type of existentialism is called for. As an artist, Makanji navigates “post-colonial histories”, “extractivist histories” and the current “phallocratic heteropia” (a patriarchal world) by dreaming of a queertopia. A brave new world, not exclusive to the human species, but which extends itself to the botanical and mineral worlds. Here, Makanji views being non-binary, trans masculine—using the pronouns they/them—as the ability to adapt, as well as to be kind, soft and compassionate. “Queerness for me is this keen sense of observation of fragility of this planet and its small and forgotten species,” they say.

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The show's title, *Psychopomp* signals and embodies queertopia as well. The idea that there are deities or spirits who escort dead souls to the afterlife have been part of most cultures. Some examples: the river Styx in Greek mythology; the Chinvat Bridge in Zoroastrianism, or the famous Grim Reaper, a figure of Death in Europe, and the Valkyries in Norse mythology. "For me, the term psychopomp also became a guiding entity that signified the crossing over of my gender normative journey [formerly they chose to identify as gay] to a more non-binary, transgender identity," Makanji explains.

Makanji always had "a sense" that they were non-binary. "[But] 20 years ago, there were no words to describe this identity. I was also uncertain whether expressing how I really felt would get me into trouble," says the self-taught artist. Coming out as a non-binary, trans masculine person around 2017-2018, Makanji says, changed their understanding of their own self, society and work. "Earlier in my career I refused to take the easy avenue by saying: ok, I am a gay artist so I have to address queer issues or body politics in my art. But I feel differently today. I feel the need to speak about the queer identity."

Juxtaposition of Art and Botany

Psychopomp features 13 works including drawings, collages, mixed media sculptures, and a 26:49-minute video, titled 'Daphne', shot by Makanji in 2019 documenting plants at the Geneva Botanical Garden.



'The Problem' (2022). Collage on archival paper.

Among the series of dystopian collages is 'The Problem', titled after a Saudia airlines advertisement in the *National Geographic* magazine in

the '80s. Makanji, an avid collector of the magazine—they have issues from the 1930s to the Nineties—and often uses its pages to conceptualise and make collages. “The first page of the ad in that issue showed a photograph of the earth from space. The headline said: ‘The Problem’. Next page revealed ‘The Solution’—a clever way to promote their top 10 airline fleets across 40 destinations. Only in the '80s could you get away with an ad like that without the faintest inkling of how flights contribute to carbon emissions,” says the artist.



Styx (2020). Mixed media and found objects on Elf Congo blueprint.

Another interesting work is ‘Styx’, an assemblage of found objects and blueprints of crude oil extraction sites in West Africa belonging to the French Elf petroleum company, which portray the artist’s concerns on subjects of neo-colonialism, slave labour, and extractivism.

Memory, botany and ecology—all play a key role in Makanji’s artistic idiom. “That’s the geeky side of me that propels me toward ongoing

research and curiosity about the plant world. It's interesting to find what narratives appear when art and botany are juxtaposed."

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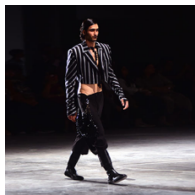
'Psychopomp' is on view at TARQ Art Gallery, F35/36 Dhanraj Mahal, C.S.M. Marg, Apollo Bunder, Colaba, till February 11. From Jan 12-15, the gallery is open 11am to 8pm for Mumbai Gallery Weekend; from Jan 17 onwards, open Tuesday to Saturday 11am to 6:30pm.

Banner: 'J.E.R.E.K.A.M.A.' (2022) graphite on archival paper, Apnavi Makanji
photographed by Stephanie Hügli and Liminal (2022) graphite, collage on archival paper.

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