



Terraformation (2022 - 2023)

Coming home

For artist Rithika Merchant, 2024 is turning into a year filled with creating as she gears up for a new show in Mumbai and an exciting new collaboration. By Priyanka R Khanna



COURTESY TAKSI MUMBAI

At the very heart of artist Rithika Merchant's work is continuity in thought and narrative. The Mumbai-raised artist—who honed her craft at Parsons School of Design in New York in fine art and at Hellenic International Studies in the Arts in Paros, Greece—is known for her oeuvre that is rich in symbolism and unites histories of myths and traditions across the lines of geography, race, gender and politics. Using celestial and botanical imagery as well as mythological elements, Merchant's work has long caught the eye of collectors in India and abroad, as well as the fashion house Chloé, with which she collaborated on several collections,

most notably the house's spring/summer 2018 line.

As she delves into her brand of mystical and mythical storytelling, Merchant hopes that her work will continue to leave room for interpretation. We catch up with the artist as she settles in her hometown and shares what a day in her life looks like.

Welcome home! How has moving back to Mumbai been for you?

It's been pretty easy. I've always spent long periods of time in Mumbai, so coming back full time has felt quite natural. We transitioned over slowly though, by first spending longer and longer periods here, then setting up our own apartment and getting comfortable before we put down roots.

My husband isn't Indian. As much as he likes living here—and has spent lots of time here in the years prior—I was conscious of the fact that a slow transition into full-time Mumbai living was the best course of action. We've been nesting and making our home a little sanctuary. We're both homebodies and we also both work from our home →

ART & DESIGN

"I've been working on a series of paintings which have all led into each other through the years"

Festival of the Phoenix Sun (2022)



CURRENT OBSESSIONS

READING: A collection of Isaac Asimov's short stories

LISTENING: The Grateful Dead

WATCHING: The TV series *Foundation* and I recently rewatched *The Witch*. I love horror and sci-fi films so I'll pretty much watch anything within those two genres

FOLLOWING: @stephenellcock for the best esoteric and visual references. He always presents them as a commentary on the world. I'm also very into the work of @rajniperera. I think she is one of the most visionary artists

OBSESSED: With mangoes, the monsoon and swimming outdoors

studio/office space, so it's been essential to create a space that really cocoons us. It's also been lovely to be so much closer to family and old friends.

How is Maximum City inspiring you?

My studio is tree-level. All I can see from my windows are trees, which in Mumbai feels like a real treat. I feel like I work in a tree house now, which is beautiful. My work already deals with nature and botanical elements, so having so much of it just outside my window is incredible. I feel grateful to be able to create in such a lush space, where I get to look at birds and trees all day. Being back and in closer touch with the other artists at TARQ has also been great. It's a lovely little community that I feel lucky to be a part of.

On the flip side, challenges include dealing with mountains of paperwork that is needed for every small thing. I recently had to export my works to London for my show and it was a time-consuming process. I do feel like I learned a lot, though, and I can say that I am now pretty proficient in shipping and logistics.

Can you take us through your work process and a day in your life?

I like to rise early and start the day quietly with breakfast in bed before I read the news and check my emails. By 10am, I shower and sit at my desk. I work till lunch and then take a break. I go back into my studio till about 5pm. Somewhere in between I usually lie down and have a 30-minute nap (it's a really important way for me to recharge creatively and if I skip it, I feel it).

In the evening I hang out with my husband—tea, snacks and then a swim or some sort of exercise. Dinner is almost always home-cooked and then we either wind down for the day with Netflix or reading in bed. If I have a deadline coming up or I'm just in the mood for it, I go back into my studio after dinner and work for a few hours.

What are you currently working on? Where do these pieces stand in the trajectory of your career?

I've been working on a series of paintings which have all led into each other through the years.

In *Birth of a New World* (2020) my 'beings', which are proxies of us, are coming to terms with what we have done to our planet and looking for answers in the sky, in the water and on land.

In *Return to Stardust* (2021) I look to a more primordial time. I focus on the sky, using a holistic vision of the universe to try and answer what comes after the Holocene and Anthropocene, when the earth started changing in a much more rapid and real way. Each hoop is named after a star or star system. For example, the waxing and waning



The Requiem
(2023)

brightness of Sirius is a metaphor for how civilisations rise and fall. From dust to stardust, the cycle is endless. Throughout history, comets have been viewed as portents of either disaster or some sort of huge change. My collages are visual totems or altars to these powerful forces.

In *Festival of the Phoenix Sun* (2022) my beings look into the past to find solutions and wisdom. They begin to figure out ways to evolve by tapping into alternate realities. In this body of work, they prepare to leave their old ways and world behind in an effort to endure as a civilisation.

Following this, in my most recent series of works *Terraformation* (2022 - 2023) my beings have left our planet and are now rebuilding a more utopian world elsewhere. I explore what that looks like.

Building on the idea of *Terraformation*, I look at what the next steps would be to sustain life for a nascent, neo-primitive society that is starting afresh. I explore what it might be like to create more complex structures and environments, looking at the architecture we leave behind on our old planet as well as new forms inspired by nature.

You've had some incredible moments already in your career. What has been your biggest highlight?

Most recently, my monograph *The Eye, The Sky, The Altar*. This is my first monograph and I'm excited. It's a look at the last four or five years of production and it's a nice overview of how my work has evolved during this period of time. It also includes an insightful conversation with the writ-

er Fariha Róisín, a dear friend. We worked with Zeenat Kulavoor at Bombay Duck Designs and she designed this incredible book which ended up being a beautiful art object.

The monograph has been arranged according to themes rather than chronologically. It's been interesting to see how symbolism has evolved in my work. It has been great to look back at what I was thinking when I made those works and where I was in my own creative journey. It feels affirming. I try to be present while I'm making the work—and before I've absorbed it fully once it's done. My works go to exhibitions and then I never see them again, so it makes me feel accomplished to look back on them all and see them all in one place.

What continues to inspire and motivate you?

Nature, animals, outer space. Art in the form of fairy tales, illustrated books, graphic novels and music videos—the idea that you can create a feeling or step into another world through these mediums is amazing to me. In my own work, I love the fact that I get to create and inhabit all the new worlds I build. It's exciting to tell a story and create a world and characters in and around it.

What is next for you?

I'm currently working on my upcoming solo show at TARQ, which will open in mid-2025. I'm also in the midst of working on an exciting collaboration which will also be revealed in early 2025. 2024 is shaping up to be a productive year for me and I could not be more thrilled. 🙌