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MATCHBOX

Athmaja Biju in Conversation with Artist Rithika Merchant on Her Exhibition Pillars of Fruit and Bone at TARQ

By Athmaja Biju

Pillars of Fruit and Bone Rithika Merchant



10th April- 31st May 2025

TARQ

KK (Navsari) Chambers,
39 AK Nayak Marg,
Fort, Mumbai 400001

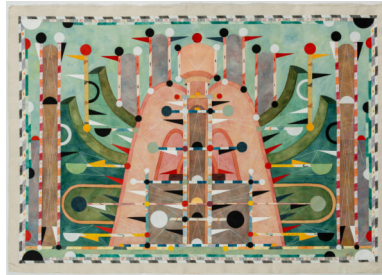
Athmaja Biju : Hi Rithika. Congratulations on your much awaited solo exhibition 'Pillars of Fruit and Bone' at TARQ! I'd love to hear more about your thought process in creating these ethereal paintings that envision sustainable utopias beyond Earth. What inspired this exploration?

Rithika Merchant : Thank you so much! In my practice, I'm drawn to the power of storytelling and world-building, and I often work by creating a visual language comprising universal symbols. Nature plays a central role in my work — it inspires me

deeply, and you'll often see that in the organic forms and muted colors I use.

In *Birth of a New World* (2020) I imagined my characters or “beings” (which are proxies of us) coming to terms with what humanity has done to the planet, as a kind of response to the growing environmental instability. They search for meaning and answers in the sky, the water, and the land. That idea evolved into later series of works like *Return to Stardust* (2021), *Festival of the Phoenix Sun* (2022), and *Terraformation* (2023), where I expand into exploring alternate realities and think about what it might take to build and sustain life in a new world — perhaps even away from Earth.

This exploration continues in the ongoing exhibition at TARQ, *Pillars of Fruit and Bone*, where I focus on what the architecture of a future world might look like. These imagined structures are rooted in forms from our own world and natural environments, but reimagined as part of a more utopian vision.



AB: The concept of abiogenesis — life emerging from non-living matter — Forms the central idea of this exhibition. Could you share how this idea first resonated with you, and how it has shaped your recent artistic expressions?

RM: I have been reading and postulating about various ways to imagine what comes after the Holocene and Anthropocene. When the earth begins to change in a much more rapid and real way, what knowledge systems or references could we work with. Throughout history comets have been viewed as portents of either disaster or some sort of huge change. This led me towards thinking about a future that has to start anew, pondering on theories such as abiogenesis.

AB : I was particularly drawn to your experience of creative immersion as an “act of self-soothing” and a response to climate anxiety. How do you hope this perspective might reflect in the viewer’s experience?

RM : I hope the narratives that I create and the symbols I use leave room for different interpretations. For me, art is a space where people can sometimes process what’s happening around them — especially the more difficult or complex parts of our world. It’s also a space that can spark empathy and awareness in a way other mediums sometimes can’t.

I’ve found that viewers are often curious about the mythical references and stories behind the symbols in my work, which is always encouraging. I’m especially grateful when people walk away from my work feeling a sense of hope.



AB : Your rich integration of comparative mythology, science, and speculative fiction creates such a distinctive visual world. I'm curious about the origins of these interests in your artistic practice and please please tell us how you came up with it.

RM : Art school really shaped the way I think and gave me the chance to explore materials I hadn't worked with before. I experimented with different kinds of paper, tried out cutting and folding techniques, and spent a lot of time painting with gouache, watercolor, and ink — which I eventually gravitated towards through a lot of practice. I tend to spend a lot of time reading and diving into research, whether it's related to an idea I'm developing or just something I'm curious about. Often, something I read sparks a vivid mental image. I've always been drawn to work that pays attention to small details and weaves together references — literary, mythical, visual. That's really how I started building my own visual language. Science fiction in particular is so much about world building — it's always been something I've naturally been interested in and found to be quite inspiring. And honestly, just showing up and working every day — that consistency — is something I always recommend.

AB : I understand your practice involves writing alongside painting — making notes on structures from past environments, fiction, and the natural world. Would you elaborate upon how these different modes of expression interact and inform each other, and please tell us about your relationship with reading and literature, including your current favorite reads?

RM : I read and research on subjects that interest me, writing and taking notes alongside. I also enjoy reading fiction and looking at images and art, these references have myriad ways of finding themselves in my work. For example, *Aerial Superstructure I* and *II* currently on view at TARQ, are in some way inspired by *Gulliver's Travels* 'Laputa'-a kingdom devoted to the arts of music, mathematics, and astronomy but unable to use them for practical matters, and Rene Magritte's *The Castle of the Pyrenees*.

I think that all forms of art and writing inform each other, so blending the two feels very natural to me. A few of my recent favourite reads are — *Children of Time* (series) by Adrian Tchaikovsky, *Lilith's Brood* (series) by Octavia Butler and *The Vaster Wilds* by Lauren Groff.

AB : An artist's creative expressions are equally shaped from their observations of the surrounding world and the intimate landscapes of their inner experience. Which artists, thinkers, or traditions have most profoundly influenced your visual vocabulary?

RM : I have long admired the works of Hilma af Klint, Agnes Pelton, Leonora Carrington, Nalini Malani, Ana Mendieta, Kiki Smith, and Chitra Ganesh. Their influence stays with me. I also keep going back to 17th-century botanical drawings, Kalamkari prints, Mughal miniatures, Kalighat folk art, and religious iconography in some forms. Textiles — especially ones that tell stories, like tapestries or traditional weaving — really resonate with me too. I often pull visual cues from Art Deco and Art Nouveau architecture, and I often incorporate elements of map-making and cartography into my work.

AB : As someone whose work so brilliantly connects the past with future possibilities, what hopes do you hold for the future — both for your own artistic journey and for our world.

RM : I hope for harmony, equality, curiosity and innovation in all spheres.



AB : With everything happening globally right now, from climate challenges to social movements, how do you see art's role evolving? Has your perspective on contemporary

art shifted in recent years, particularly post-pandemic?

RM : Surrealism began after World War I because people needed a way to deal with and process the horrors they were experiencing. I think that people need art to be able to make sense of everything that is difficult in this world. Art is also often a medium through which society is able to have empathy and awareness about what is going on in the world today.

Art has always been connected to the world around it, so it's natural that practices evolve in response to what's happening globally — whether it's climate issues, social movements, or the aftermath of the pandemic. Every artist responds differently, and I think that's what makes contemporary art so layered and dynamic.

AB : Our Editor in Chief, Smita Sahay, has long admired your work on Instagram and beyond. I would like to know what message you might have for those who find meaning and inspiration in your art?

RM : I am humbled by all the appreciation and am very grateful for the engagement. It always makes me so happy when people connect with my work so deeply. I hope that any audience I have would place themselves in my work and feel transported to a new world, regardless of where they are from.

AB : I'd love to hear about your relationship with Hena Kapadia and TARQ, which has spanned several years now. How has this collaboration nurtured your artistic development?

RM : Hena and I have sort of grown up in the art world together and have worked on all sorts of projects and exhibitions through the years. Many of my career firsts have been with her and the gallery. I'm so grateful for the honest and supportive relationship we have. Hena also really understands how artists think and function and knows how to do what is best for the work.

The gallery has been very supportive not only with all the logistical and administrative aspects of being an artist but also with helping me manage many different career milestones. TARQ also has such a beautiful community of artists, who over the years have become friends. Being an artist is a very solitary practice and so having a community of other artists to share with is very important.

AB : We're so delighted to feature you in Usawa Literary Review. What are your thoughts about Usawa?

RM: It's a really great initiative that creates space for meaningful conversation. In such a fast-paced world, I think it's so important to highlight voices and topics that often get overlooked. I also value how accessible everything is on the website — you can read and revisit the features anytime, which makes it super easy to engage with.

Rithika Merchant is a visual artist from Bombay, whose work explores both comparative mythology as well as science and speculative fiction, featuring creatures and symbolism that are part of her personal visual vocabulary.

Athmaja Biju is a translator and a writer on art and design.

