

The Aesthete Style

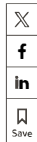
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Artist Rithika Merchant talks taste

The Mumbai-based painter loves comté, cold-plunging and Winsor & Newton paints



© Rid Burman



Interview by **Akanksha Kamath**. Photography by Rid Burman

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My personal style signifier is print on print. I don't mind clashing and I think I can pull it off. I often buy fabric and have my tailor make me stuff -- most recently a block-printed green strappy top and midi skirt with beautiful green flowers. I also wear a necklace from my grandmother, my dad's mom, and a cat's-eye ring that belonged to my maternal grandfather. My mum always said it was a lucky ring, and I feel like I have a very nice life, so maybe she's right? I wear it along with my wedding ring; both usually never come off.

The last thing I bought and loved was a woodcut by [Soghra Khurasani](#). It's a print of a night sky over a field that reminded my husband and me of the view from his family home in Belgium. It hangs above our dining table where we're slowly building a gallery wall. A lot of the art we have is from family. I have a portrait my mum did of my brother, and my husband's grandmother used to paint flowers as a teenager, so we have one of those.



The place that means a lot to me is Henri-Chapelle, a tiny village near Liège, Belgium, where my husband's family lives. It's the complete opposite of Mumbai – just fields and very quiet. Sometimes too quiet to sleep. His parents have a guesthouse where I paint, overlooking the fields. There are feral cats and magpies, the latter of which you might recognise from my paintings. There is so much nature and greenery and lushness in my work, and this is a really nice place to make it.

The best souvenir I've brought home is a Belgian farmer puppet named François – my husband's namesake. He hangs on the door as you enter the house and is a little memory of our other home.



Merchant in her studio surrounded by house plants © Rid Burman

The best book I've read in the past year is *The Vaster Wilds* by Lauren Groff, about a girl fleeing an early colonial settlement in America, surviving in the wilderness. I love the way she writes – the prose is near-poetry. I cried at the end. I'm quite drawn to survivalist tales and stories of our relationship with nature. My girlfriends and I recently started a book club, and our first read was *Bright I Burn*, which is set in medieval times and based on the first-known conviction of a witch in Ireland.

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It's refreshing to see someone confident with wrinkles and grey hair

The podcast I'm listening to is

Otherworld, which centres on the supernatural. The host, Jack Wagner, says it's for sceptics – he used to be one himself – but the stories are presented as they are,

without trying to convince you either way.

An especially gripping episode was about a couple who went camping in the middle of nowhere and heard this overwhelming metallic sound. It was so intense they had to cover their ears, and they never found an explanation for it. I had a similar experience at a residency in Portugal with a strange droning noise outside my window. I thought someone was working with equipment – a kinetic sculptor was staying next to my room. But when I asked later, he said he wasn't there at the time. It didn't feel unsettling, just odd. But listening to that episode made me think about it differently. I'm not a sceptic – I definitely believe in all of this. I want to see a ghost, maybe too much. Some people are just tapped into that frequency, and I'm not one of them... yet.



Merchant's style icon Georgia O'Keeffe in New Mexico in 1960, adjusting a canvas from Pelvis Series, Red with Yellow, 1945 © Getty Images

My style icon is [Georgia O'Keeffe](#). There's one photograph of her painting in the desert, dressed in black with her grey hair in a bun – she looks so powerful. I've always loved the idea of ageing naturally and painting till the end. It's refreshing to see someone confident with wrinkles and grey hair. I find it beautiful, especially on Indian women; the contrast looks so striking.

My biggest adventure was a month-long residency at the French Institute in Senegal; my husband came along and acted as my translator. We spent our days walking around, speaking to people and asking them to share stories from their past – a ritual, an old wives' tale, something passed down. I'd come back in the evenings, jot everything down, then turn my notes into drawings. I made an accordion book of these interviews, each with a corresponding artwork. We also visited the [Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary](#) during nesting season for pelicans. There was one in the Langue de Barbarie town market that someone had domesticated – it wasn't tied up or anything, just walking around like it lived there. His name was Galai. I ended up drawing him because I couldn't stop thinking about him. The experience of the trip has stayed with me – the stories, the colours, the fabrics, even the way the light hits the buildings there. It really was a special time.



Merchant in her bedroom, holding the accordion book made at her residency in Senegal © Rid Burman



Merchant's wardrobe © Rid Burman

The last item of clothing I added to my wardrobe is a blue striped cotton dress from [Anokhi](#). I tend to wear summer dresses or simple [Cottonworld](#) slips when I paint because of the heat here. I also go to [Fabindia](#) because I love a block print, and [Okay Silk Store](#) for cotton kaftans. I'm not really a designer girl; I'm in my studio all the time.

In my suitcase you'll always find a travel art-supply set – my paints and a roll of paper. Even if I don't end up doing much, I like knowing it's there. I'm particular about paint – I use [Winsor & Newton](#) – because it really matters. Artist-grade paints are better pigmented and don't fade. For brushes, I'm less fussy; I just use [Faber-Castell](#). I can't paint in motion – no trains or planes – but one of the most unusual places I've drawn something was in the hills of Paros in Greece. I did a semester there during college, and our teacher would take us on hikes. I remember sketching up on a hillside, looking down at the sea. It really unlocked something.



A Winsor & Newton travel watercolour set © Rid Burman

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I was born in this house and lived here till I was three, so being here feels very full circle

In my fridge you'll always find water and cheese. We're running very low, but we're making a trip to Belgium soon, so we'll stock up. Reblochon is my favourite. We also really enjoy comté, maredsous and Belgian Abbey ones such as orval or chimay. [Kodai Cheese](#) in Kodaikanal makes a really good feta, and [The Spotted Cow](#) in Mumbai has a nice brie called Bombrie, which we get from [Nature's Basket](#).

I have a collection of owl figurines. There's something magical and fascinating about them. I love that they can turn their heads all the way around – kind of creepy, but I like it. They're also very beautiful, especially barn owls. My favourite is the smallest in my collection, a ceramic owl reading a book. It belonged to my husband's grandmother, who also used to collect owls, and his grandfather let me choose one. It sits on my tchotchke shelf.



Merchant's collection of owl figurines on a windowsill © Rid Burman

The best way to spend £20 – about 2,300 Indian rupees – is on flowers or houseplants. Peonies, gladioli, jasmine. Anything fragrant. Right now, I have about 15 plants in my studio. The place with the best flowers in Mumbai is the Willingdon Sports Club. They have such beautiful landscaping and so many different kinds. There's also a nursery, which I try not to visit too much as I always return with plants. I'm very lucky to live on a road with a lot of flowering plants – bougainvillea and a beautiful tree with yellow flowers that bloom pretty much all year round, even in the monsoon.

I would never part with my family photos. I had a nice childhood and I feel very nostalgic about it. My favourite photo is of my brother and me sitting on a yak in Himachal Pradesh. I'm about five or six, wearing a red raincoat, and my brother must be around 12. The craziest trip our parents took us on was to Zambia and Zimbabwe. My aunt was working for the British Council and living there at the time. We went on safari and travelled around – it was unlike

anything I've ever seen or been to, even to this day.



Merchant in her studio, holding an unfurled Shashibo puzzle, which was a gift to her husband © Rid Burman



A Shashibo puzzle and an origami goat on her ikat sofa © Rid Burman

The artists whose work I would collect if I could are Leonora Carrington and Kiki Smith, my two queens. Carrington's work is really narrative-led, with a lot of occult and esoteric symbolism. I could look at her painting *Green Tea* – the perspective, the colours, the story – for hours. [Kiki Smith](#) spoke at Parsons when I was there. She works across so many mediums – books, paper, sculpture, prints – and uses the body and a lot of animal imagery. *Born* is this incredible sculpture of a deer giving birth to a woman. It's really feral and made me rethink how art is made.

The beauty staples I'm never without are Étude's lip and cheek tint and Nuxe's Lip Moisturising Stick, because I hate chapped lips. And perfume – I alternate between Chloé Love Story and Issey Miyake. [Chloé Love Story](#), £119 for 75ml EDP. [Étude Dear Darling Water Tint in Cherry Ade](#), £5.32, [yesstyle.com](#). [Issey Miyake L'Eau D'Issey Pure Nectar](#), £76 for 50ml, [thefragranceshop.co.uk](#). [Nuxe Lip Moisturising Stick](#), £7.50



An oil painting (left) by Merchant's husband's grandmother and a Grateful Dead-inspired lithograph she made in college © Rid Burman

My favourite room in the house is my studio, where I spend the most time. I've set it up so it's just perfect – a nice chair, a drafting table, everything the right height. It's made for me because I made it. I'm very tidy and neat so everything's organised, but I don't get stressed out by clutter the way some people do. I was born in this house and lived here till I was three, so being here feels very full circle. The first painting I made after moving into this studio was

called *Terraformation*. At the time, the room was pretty bare, but I remember looking at the trees and just starting. The colours in the painting really reflect that early sense of green and lushness.

My wellbeing guru is swimming. Four days a week, 30 minutes, 30 to 40 lengths at the [Willingdon Sports Club](#). It's like an oasis in the middle of the city; you feel so serene when you come out of the pool. I swam competitively in high school, but I've only recently discovered cold plunging, which is crazy for someone like me as I'm extremely cold-intolerant. I'm a very wound-up person, and I find it really helps with that. My personal best is 45 seconds – I'm trying to build it up to two minutes.

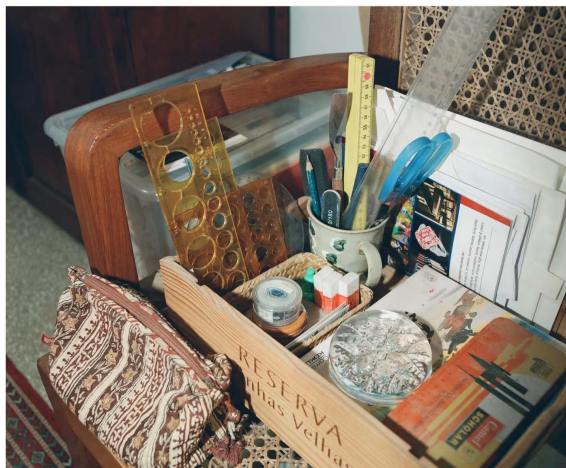


Merchant in her studio, working on one of her paper embroidery hoop pieces © Rid Burman

When I need to feel inspired, I have a nap. My best ideas come as I'm falling asleep. I'll get a flash of imagery, then I quickly make a sketch of it. I like sketching with words rather than literal sketching.

The last music I downloaded was the latest [Father John Misty](#) album. I love his lyrics. Plus just good guitar playing. I listen to a wide range of music, from Senegalese sounds I discovered during my residency to the Grateful Dead. One of their songs, "Terrapin Station", is 16 minutes long – they're not for everyone. I listen to what you might think of as dad music.

A way to make me laugh is with absurd or Surrealist humour – and cat videos. I'm a huge cat person. There's a sweet stray on our street that I've befriended, and she comes up to my window every now and then. I'm desperate to bring her in – I just need to sort cat-sitting first.



Supplies in Merchant's studio © Rid Burman

I believe in life after death. I believe in everything. There is energy in the universe and we have that energy. You can't really destroy or create energy. So when you pass away, that energy just goes back into the universe. And I think we live on in some form.

Recommended



The Aesthete

I don't like hotels. I much prefer Airbnb. I want to be able to make tea in the morning, do laundry. I just want to feel like I live in a place. I choose based on the neighbourhood, of course, but also by how much I can feel at home. It can't be something too modern; I want to feel comfortable. It's got to be a little bit artsy.

The best bit of advice I ever received

was not to overthink things. I'm a massive overthinker; the trick is changing your activity. I also try to always get everything in writing, even with people I've known and worked with for years. That one came from my mother.