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AU \$39	CA \$36
EU €22	GB£19
HK\$194	JP ¥3,600
KR ₩36,000	NZ \$43
SG \$32	US \$25

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Rithika Merchant Pillars of Fruit and Bone

TARQ Gallery

RITHIKA MERCHANT,
Zoomorph II, 2024, gouache,
watercolor and ink on paper,
98 × 75 cm. Courtesy the
artist and TARQ Gallery,
Mumbai.

It is difficult to navigate a city like Mumbai without thinking about dystopia. The constant reminder of decay is present in the crumbling buildings and roads and the filthy sea, churning out endless amounts of plastic waste before your eyes. In a relatively quiet corner of the city, however, sits TARQ Gallery, a small exhibition space that hosted Rithika Merchant's latest show, "Pillars of Fruit and Bone." Stepping into TARQ was like entering a reassuring haven amid the city's pollution and chaos even though Merchant's art grapples with climate anxiety and ideas of our collective future. Her paintings, primarily done in watercolor, gouache, and ink with collage detailing, subvert expectations of a post-apocalyptic existence and Merchant herself describes her worldbuilding as an "act of self-soothing." The art is therefore brimming with hope and delight.

The show was a continuation of the Mumbai-based artist's previous series, *Terraformation* (2022–23) which is set in the distant future, where the reality as we know it no longer exists. The series follows hybrid beings as they construct a sustainably inhabitable environment from the ground up. "Pillars of Fruit and Bone" builds on this premise, depicting the same creatures in the throes of exploring their new utopia.

Interestingly, terrestrial elements make up a big portion of Merchant's otherworldly Paradise. Half-human, half-bird figures play with their environment as if they are making brand new sense of their surroundings—whether lounging in seashells in *Permutations of a Shell* (2024), suspended in cobwebs as in *Permutations of a Web* (2024), or lying on a giant leaf and surveying their habitat, as seen in *The Observatory* (2025). There is a playful distortion of scale in Merchant's compositions. It is difficult, for example, to discern whether the natural objects are magnified, or the creatures are small and weightless enough to fit under the umbrella of a mushroom. Coupled with her chimeric figures, Merchant envisions a world where the boundaries between nature and humans begin to dissolve.

The different scenes depicted throughout the series showcase natural—if surreal—landscapes that are heaving with earthliness, with scarce manmade artifice visible. Merchant's imagined future is not excited by technological advancements but rather draws from ancient wisdom, suggesting our return to ancestral knowledge. The painting *Zoomorph II* (2024) makes this point explicitly with the ouroboros circling the top of the frame, symbolizing the eternally cyclical nature of life, death, and the universe. The visible folding lines on the paper, along with the stylistic similarities to old botanical

illustrations, reinforce the connection to historical knowledge.

Merchant's characters and recurring symbols also seem to recall ancient artistic traditions and meanings from across cultures. The therianthrope creatures that populate the paintings, for example, are almost always depicted in a distinctive side-profile reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, unlike the stiff postures of the hieroglyphical characters, Merchant's subjects have incredibly expressive bodies, bending and twisting in works like *Orbital Habitat* (2025), or half in dance, limbs outstretched as seen in *The Grove* (2025). The poses they sometimes hold are from old Hindu traditions. In *Exoskeleton* (2024) the figure at the top of the painting holds his hands in a very specific hand gesture known as the *gyan mudra*, which literally translates to "knowledge *mudra*" and is seen in traditional Indian dance forms as well as yoga practices.

Finally, it is impossible to engage with "Pillars of Fruit and Bone" without talking about the eye as a symbol. The ocular motif permeated and repeated in every painting, whether it be in the chest of the hybrids, growing on vines, or suspended mid-air and mid-light. And every eye was watching the viewer. Merchant's use of the eye could be viewed as part of her subversions of futuristic imagery; in the 21st century, the eye has become synonymous with surveillance and Orwellian dystopia. Her incorporation of archaic and mythological symbols insists that we reinterpret the eye. In her works, it seems to stand for watchful rather than watching—an emblem, as it is across cultures, of protection and healing.

RABIA KAPOOR

