



DIFFERENT
STROKES
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BRAVE NEW WORLD

Not all art has to be political, but visual artists have always sought to reflect the environment they work in: To chronicle, respond and offer escape. Meet eight contemporary artists, under the age of 40, from the Indian subcontinent, who are skillfully wielding their paintbrushes and digital pens to reckon with everything: from climate change to social inequality, tradition and future technologies. Ones for the wall

WRITTEN BY NIDHI GUPTA



IMAGE: COURTESY OF RITHIKA MERCHANT AND TARQ © RITHIKA MERCHANT, 2019 (INFINITE PORTALS, 2019), COURTESY RITHIKA MERCHANT (RITHIKA)



#HungryPlanet

RITHIKA MERCHANT

Each of Rithika Merchant's collections of exquisite paintings is built around a character on a journey. Invariably, these are half-human, half-animal creatures navigating whatever issue the artist is preoccupied with in the moment: In *Voyager*, it was the global migration crisis and identity; in *Ancestral Home*, the idea of rootlessness and belonging; *Aerial Women* and *Luna Tabulatorum* meditate on women's existence.

"Technique-wise, I love paper. I find it to be a very democratic medium," says the Mumbai-bred, Barcelona-based artist whose gouache-on-paper works have inspired a collaboration with the French brand Chloé in the recent past. "I love watercolour, its translucence." Her signature move is to fold the paper before she begins, adding a neat cartographic element to these worlds that dwell somewhere between the hydraulic and cosmic, botanical and anatomical, folklore and political commentary.

The Parsons' alum now plans to deploy her "lexicon of symbols and characters" in a new set of paintings that will consider "what it means to be at this crossroads" – vis-à-vis climate change – "when you know that everything we do has a ripple effect, and any action might just be about mitigating disaster. These works will consider what it means to be the consciousness of the solar system."

Missy Baba's So Dignified, 2020
Tarini Sethi
Paint on Paper

(Opposite) Infinite Portals, 2019
Rithika Merchant
Gouache and Ink on Paper
38.5 x 28.3 inches

(Opening page) Hyperlife, 2020
Rithika Merchant
Gouache, Watercolour and Ink
on Paper
25.5 x 19.6 inches

IMAGE: COURTESY OF TARINI SETHI



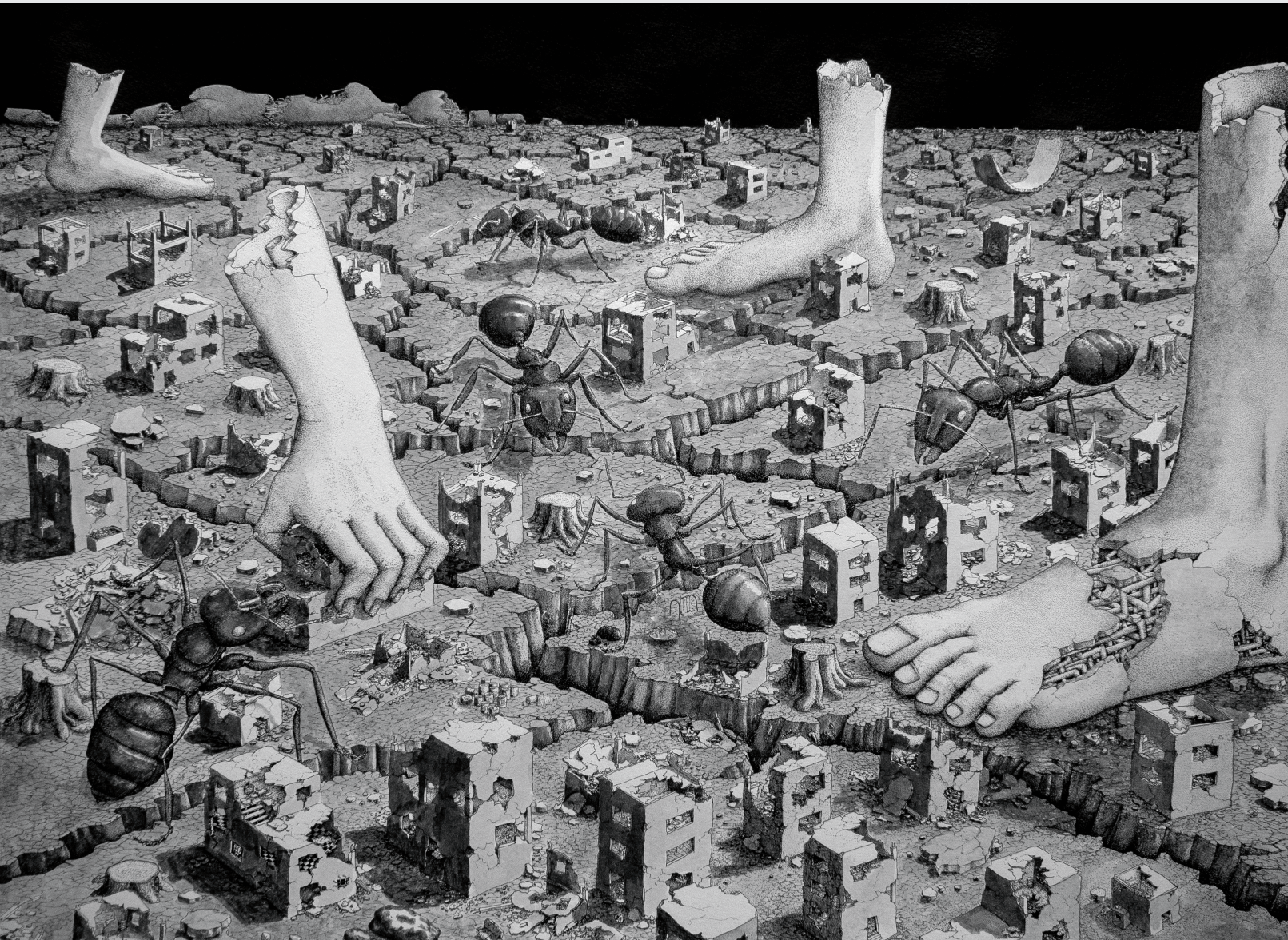
#TheBodyElectric

TARINI SETHI

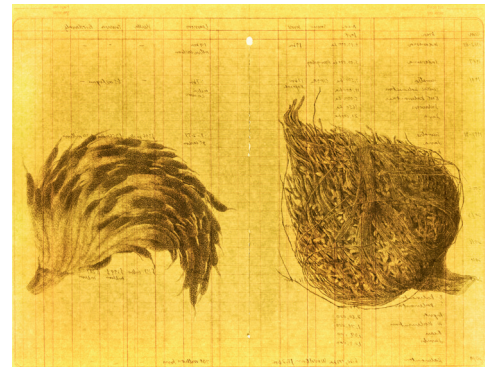
Art was always in Tarini Sethi's blood. She hails from a family of product and set designers in Delhi. But her rise to prominence has been firmly outside the box. Instead of courting institutions, she uses Instagram and the internet as her hanging wall. Since the beginning of her practice, Sethi's curated salon-style art shows in underground spaces. In 2018, she launched the famous Irregulars Art Fair, along with graphic designer Anant Ahuja – an anti-fair running parallel to the India Art Fair.

Much of this renegade impulse stems from Sethi's time in New York, a city where "people manage to do a lot with not very much," says the Pratt Institute alum. "People are curating shows in their backyard, painting on the city walls, on the trains. I learned that if I want to exhibit my work, I can just do it myself."

Sethi's ink-on-paper drawings (with a hint of early 20th-century cubism) and now metal sculptures have been exploring themes of human intimacy and sexuality. She meditates on the idea of utopias, "but it's now a more holistic investigation of how we take over spaces around us." Architecture gets as much attention as humans and animals in her work; inspired by folk tales, stories of kings and queens, modern politics. Much like others in her generation. There's a new confidence among the artists rising from India today, says Sethi. "We're now seeing more vocal, provocative, political and experimental art. We're rebellious now." ►



(From top) *Elaeis Guineensis*, 2020
Garima Gupta
Graphite and Pastel dust on "Khata paper"
12.7 x 16.3 inches;
Thank You For Shopping With Us! 01, 2020
Garima Gupta
Colour pencils and graphite on gateway paper
11.6 x 8.3 inches



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STROKES



Apophenia, 2020
Dheer Kaku
From *Casual Thoughts Of Doom*
22 x 30 inches

#DanceApocalyptic

DHEER KAKU

Dheer Kaku's IG bio introduces him as a "terror artist, credit stealer, ill lust traitor" – among other choice epithets. "My work is mostly sarcastic," says the Goa-based artist, "and critical of normal life, of the repetitions and loops we live in, which to me seem meaningless and funny on one end, and really deep and infinite on another."

Kaku's newest project, carefully titled *Casual Thoughts Of Doom*, meditates on "the loops of paranoia" that are a part of online existence. If you've access to the internet, on more than one occasion, you've felt that the world is coming to an end. In these monochrome works, Kaku inserts a bit of the apocalypse into his urbanscapes – a mainstay of his practice.

The Rachana Sansad, Mumbai alum calls Nikhil Chopra a mentor. He is particularly influenced by the senior artist's "act of using drawing as performance". Right now, he's enamoured with Laurie Lipton's intricate drawings, and it excites him that memes are considered art. As the world reckons with digital art, he's busy experimenting with form. "I hope to build this into a series that probably grows over years," he says. "I want to play with interactive sound and video projection, create a space where a person can walk in and absorb the whole theme."

IMAGE: COURTESY OF DHEER KAKU



IMAGE: COURTESY OF GARIMA GUPTA AND TARQ © GARIMA GUPTA, 2020 (ELAIS GUINEENSIS, 2020, 'THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING WITH US! 01, 2020), COURTESY GARIMA GUPTA (GARIMA)

#WildThings

GARIMA GUPTA

What began as a trip to the Arfak Mountains' rainforest in West Papua in 2014, to see the Birds of Paradise, turned into something of an obsession for Garima Gupta. The NID-grad quit her job and has spent a lot of the past five years researching wildlife trafficking in the region stretching from the island of New Guinea to the Southeast Asian archipelago.

"Wildlife trafficking is the world's fourth largest illegal trade after narcotics, human trafficking and counterfeit goods," she says. "It is essential to look beyond the rhetoric of supply-demand – how much, how many, when, how – and delve deeper into the subconscious of the region and its cultural complexities."

"I spent a lot of time interviewing tribe hunters in rainforests, taxidermists in bazaars and wildlife trophy dealers functioning in what can now only be called a dark, invisible market." These "micro stories" and experiences have made it into her ongoing show, *filed under :a/muse/um* at Tarq, Mumbai (till November 12). Her drawings of birds and wildlife – occasionally on "khata paper" – evoke and comment on the delicate colonial-era natural history art.

Gupta traces her interest in ornithology and art to her childhood and time spent with her grandmother. She feels that the Indian art world has now become more open to field research, science, technology and social justice. With this project, she hopes "to find crucial connections between unarchived fragments of a conflict that is pushing us into a war with the very world we inhabit." ►



Circle, 2020
Zimbiri
Saa-tshen on Rhay-shing (Earth
paint on canvas)
63 3/4 x 65 5/8 inch

#BurnBright

ZIMBIRI

While pursuing a double major in Economics and Fine Arts at Wheaton, Illinois, Zimbiri tried hard to break out of the mould of “the Bhutanese person” on campus, uncoupling her identity from her heritage. But it was also an un-learning of sorts. Through her training, she learned of Josef Albers, father of the Colour Theory. She also remembers visiting the Tim Burton MoMA exhibition in 2010. She was surprised to see that children’s illustrations could also be considered high art.

“It had less to do with what was on the paper than what was behind it,” says the Thimphu-based artist. “It also made me realise the importance of an authentic voice.” Hers came through only after she embraced her culture and heritage in her

practice, after her return to Bhutan. Her debut show *Faces*, at the Royal Textile Academy, was a series of masks “telling the same story over and over again.” In her sophomore show, *Found Icons*, she infuses staple Bhutanese motifs (primarily the tiger) – done in *Saa-tshen* (earth paint) on *Rhay-shing* (cloth strung on wood) – with new meaning, new stories.

She is part of a fledgling, contemporary art scene in Bhutan; along with the sibling-duo Twinz, known for their hyper-realistic art; and Gembo Wangchuk, who is teasing new meaning out of religious Bhutanese iconography at the risk of heresy. “In Bhutan, it’s sort of this blank page,” Zimbiri says. “Basically everything that we’re putting together now, is going to be the history of contemporary art here.”

IMAGE: COURTESY OF ZIMBIRI



#PromisedLand

SHRIMANTI SAHA

It’s possible to get lost for hours in Shrimanti Saha’s dense paintings, fall for that temptation to decode the meta-narrative in them. Take *Repair Work*, for instance, from her recent show *Fire In The Greenhouse And Other Stories* (at Vadehra Art Gallery). Brown men armed with bows and arrows fighting for survival; white men in khakis working with a metallic monstrosity up top; marine animals washed ashore, waifish women tending to the most vulnerable creatures – all in a desolate, almost hostile landscape bereft of colour.

Saha, a graduate of the MS University in Baroda, is keenly interested in visual storytelling, treading between mythology, folklore and reality. Her recent work evokes the American figurative painter Marcel Dzama as much as *Nausicaa*-era Miyazaki. It figures – Saha says her works are inspired by a diversity of fields, like the “writings of Jorge Luis Borges, Amitav Ghosh, Ursula K Le Guin; the films of Werner Herzog and Wes Anderson; graphic novels of Joe Sacco and Marjane Satrapi,” among others.

Fire In The Greenhouse And Other Stories has “extensive references to ecology, feminism, human-animal relationships; leading to the creation of dystopian landscapes or a fictional civilisation. I think of [my art] as a personal mythology, an alternative history. A collection of untold stories,” says Saha. ►



Repair Work, 2020
Shrimanti Saha
Mixed media on
paper
60 x 48 inches

IMAGE: COURTESY OF SHRIMANTI SAHA



#EveryDayRobots

SAHEJ RAHAL

Sahej Rahal is intrigued by the idea of what he calls the “post-human”, a sentient being that will likely emerge as Artificial Intelligence becomes increasingly commonplace. “I’m really interested in the conversation, the interaction, that performance,” he says, “because it’ll be an act of being human, but not actually being one.”

Rahal, an award-winning multi-media artist who graduated from Rachana Sansad, Mumbai, also counts performance artist Nikhil Chopra among his influences. He consistently builds from found objects, and draws from pop culture – like *The Matrix*, William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, anime like *Ghost In The Shell* – to build his own ever-expanding universe. It’s masculine, predatory, pre-historic, post-modern and soaked in irony. It is also stalked by strange beasts mutated from a clash of the ages.

Rahal’s answer to the post-human quandary has been to build an AI program, Shrota, that borrows from his spectacular show *Juggernaut* at Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai, two years ago. It “follows a horned biped as it wanders the twilight landscape of a digital biome,” one that has an AI script attached to each limb, and that obeys and responds to sound picked up through a microphone.

Rahal’s next project builds upon an archaeological site in Maharashtra, and an unlikely similarity in the ritual of burial here and in another site in South Korea. “I’m working on a semi-fictional story, a ‘found’ sketchbook full of these anthropological drawings. It’s like moving between worlds and that’s fascinating to me.”



(Left) Pg 88, *Juggernaut folio*, 2018
Sahej Rahal
Mixed media on paper
41.75 x 30.75 inches

(Below) From *Antraal*, 2019

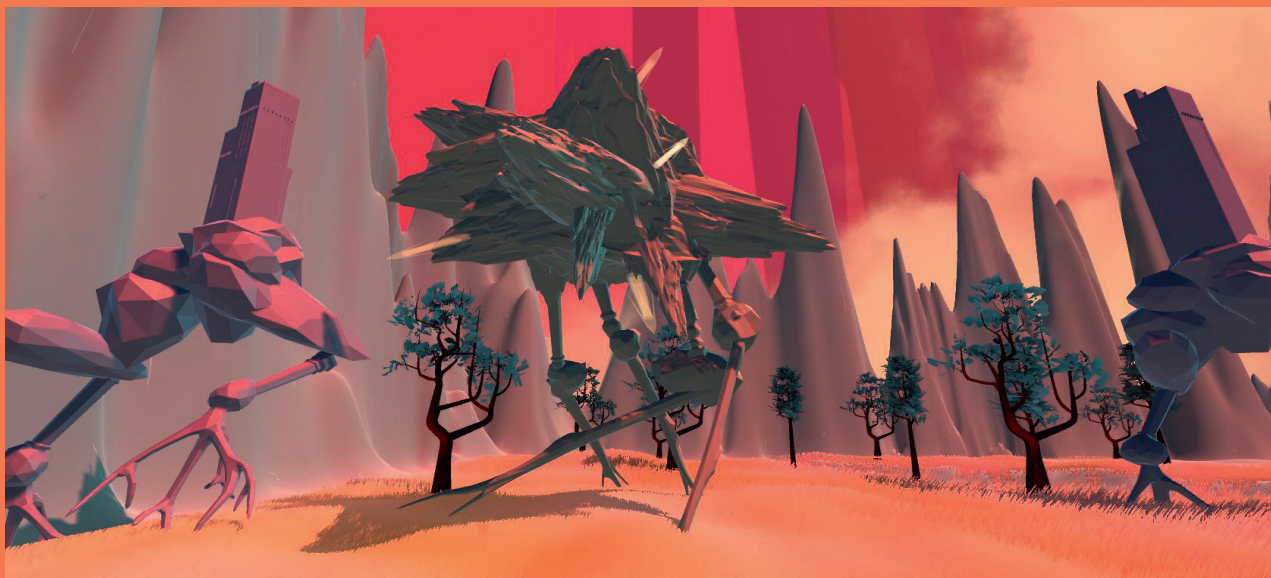


IMAGE: COURTESY OF SAHEJ RAHAL



#HighwayKind

ANJAN MODAK

Few debutante artists get noticed at a platform like India Art Fair like Anjan Modak did in March this year. While the fair’s tent facade had Sameer Kulavoor’s vivid paintings celebrating the everyday life of people, Modak’s arresting canvases of “the common man” at the Emami Art, Kolkata stall, drew a crowd, including respected artists like Atul Dodiya, and Manu and Madhvi Parekh.

“I hail from a family of masons and construction workers,” Modak says from Kolkata. “I’ve grown up in that milieu, in West Bengal and in Delhi. These are the images that have stayed with me through life.” Modak’s work took on a new immediacy with the migrant worker crisis that emerged during the pandemic.

It gave birth to his latest exhibition, *Fragmented Life* – a collection of small-size, circular paintings in which he uses his proficiency in narrative figuration and an eye for the surreal to highlight the dreams and dilemmas of a segment of the population left rudderless and boxed in at once. There is clearly an absurd, comical element to these paintings, but “I was deeply shaken up by the news during that time,” he says. “These paintings hopefully document this moment in human history.”

Fragmented Life - 10, 2020
Anjan Modak
Watercolour, graphite and archival
ink on acid-free paper
14 inches (diameter)

IMAGE: EMAMI ART