

Ways of seeing

What do artists do during a lockdown? Three leading contemporary practitioners reflect on the works they made in self-isolation and discuss how the pandemic altered not just their thoughts but also their gaze



Painting In The Time Of Corona, 7 April 2020 by Dhruvi Acharya (2020)



THE THINKER

Dhruvi Acharya Δ

Experiences, emotions and things I read about and hear about have always informed my work. So, on March 22, the day of the janta curfew, I went to my studio in my residential building in Mumbai and began painting whatever was on my mind—which, for the fortunate among

us, is the virus (versus hunger, poverty, disease or death)—and continued to do so through the lockdown. These works are about the psychological, social and physical impact of the pandemic: social distancing, loneliness, the fear of touching anyone or anything, vigilance against the virus being transmitted via touch or a cough, and being afraid of the disease and its effects on the human body.

I hope that in these unprecedented times, humans will work together to combat this virus, or it may become a very long-drawn-out world war of a different kind. And I hope, when we do come out

on the other side, that we prioritise health, family, the environment, science and education above weapons, war, religious fanaticism, mindless 'development' (read destruction) and production.

I hope we will pay heed to scientists' warnings about the impending and extreme impact of climate change and learn to respect and value our environment and all living things. And rather than living and dying in a cycle of disasters in different parts of the world, I hope we realise how connected everything and everyone is on our planet, and work together to change our ways.



"I wonder if my skin will explode at a single caress. I wonder whose touch it will be"

—SHILO SHIV SULEMAN



THE DREAMER

Shilo Shiv Suleman <

A few months before the world was forced to come to a complete standstill because of a single cellular war, I began to paint a series of self-portraits for a series called *Sovereign*.

It was an image of myself with a crown of flowers and rocks placed on top of my head, bowing in reverence to a rose. Through this piece, I acknowledge that my true monarch is the plant kingdom—we are all bound and subject to nature's reign. Incidentally, the word 'corona' means crown. And in these last few months, we have realised who is truly king, and to whom I bow.

In every ancient myth comes a time when even the protagonists are cursed to live in exile, but in union with themselves and nature, in *vanvas*. This is a time when mystery and magic reign and fate is allowed to unveil her desires. What if this *vanvas* calls us to go into our own interior forests, the ones inside our lungs? And what mysteries will our breath reveal?

I am currently locked down in my studio in Bengaluru, which is a garden unto itself. Right now, in (temporary) separation from the natural world, I paint pomegranates, conch shells, orchids and forests that I can slip into. I create my own internal and external landscapes every day to fulfil my longing to be back in nature. I write long letters in slow handwriting and wonder if they will ever get sent. I think about our ancestors, who survived more than this, and sit in reverence and gratitude to them. I don't consume more than I need to; as someone who has always worshipped abundance, I realise the meaning of 'enough'. When this is over, I will have spent 30 days without any physical touch. I wonder if my skin will explode at a single caress. I wonder whose touch it will be. >



"[Paper cutting] is a meditative practice, perfect for these troubled times"

—RITHIKA MERCHANT

THE EXPERIMENTER

Rithika Merchant >

I arrived in Mumbai in early March. A few days later, the city was locked down due to the spread of the pandemic. I am lucky and privileged to be sequestered with my parents, with enough supplies and room to be able to hunker down safely and comfortably. The only way I feel I can get through this strange time is to work my way through it. I created a temporary studio space in my childhood bedroom and decided to use this time to try new things with my art.

Serendipitously, the materials I have been experimenting with have been provided by an old friend. In 2009, I spent a year in Lisbon, after having done an artist residency in Portugal. It was during this time that I met Mia Morikawa (who went on to co-found the fashion label 11.11/eleven eleven). We shared a little studio and even collaborated on some art. Recently, she told me that they had scraps from the remnants of the cloth (organic cotton harvested mainly by women in India) that they had pressed into paper. Mia had reached out to see if I was interested in using this handmade paper in my practice. Being obsessed with paper and its possibilities, I immediately agreed. By the time I arrived in Mumbai, there



Lodestar by Rithika Merchant (April, 2020)

was a roll containing a variety of the most gorgeous handmade paper waiting for me.

Since the paper is handmade and porous, it doesn't hold watercolour as well as I wanted it to. So I've been experimenting with paper cutting techniques. It's a meditative practice, perfect for these troubled times. Since

I've always included elements of craft in my fine art, it's been a comfortable extension of my work. I also love working with paper and seeing how many different ways I can use this medium as it has a narrative of its own. And now, with the paper cuts, I'm adding to this and creating a new story. ■