



ISSUE

NOV 01, 2024

New Currents: Rithika Merchant

BY CAMILLA ALVAREZ-CHOW



RITHIKA MERCHANT, *Astral Habitat*, 2023, gouache, watercolor and ink on paper, 100 × 140 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Rithika Merchant Mumbai

To understand the world they inhabit, humans tell one another stories. For Indian artist Rithika Merchant, our propensity for mythmaking has endured to this day. But instead of seeking answers to our origins, we are searching for solutions to our current and future

crises. Born in 1986 in Mumbai and a graduate of the Parsons School of Design in New York, Merchant took inspiration from Joseph Campbell's book of comparative mythology, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). In her works she molds together ancient myths from diverse cultures to create a universal cosmic tale. She crafts these narratives on paper using gouache, watercolors, and ink, and adds another dimension to her work by folding the paper and using the creases to guide her compositions.

For her 2022 exhibition "Festival of the Phoenix Sun" at Galerie LJ in Paris, Merchant drew on Egyptian, Roman, and Aztec mythologies and motifs from shamanic and animist cults, Buddhist rites, and 15th-century European cartography, combining them into a "solar syncretism." In the titular painting, *Solar Syncretism* (2021), anthropomorphic beings with multicolored feathers and avian heads gather in a circle reverently holding up the sun, with one blue-hued figure bearing an enlarged eye on top of its neck. Hovering in the heavens above the Earth's volcano- and plant-covered surface, the hybrid animal-humans are tinged

 ARTASIAPACIFIC



Astral Habitat (2023), shown in "Terraformation" at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London, features a similar cast of avian and humanoid characters, unified here to hold up the celestial "threads" that bind them to the universe. Standing atop a flattened Earth, the constellations fill the meteor-streaked night sky around the planet. From the orbiting cosmic bodies in the great beyond to volcanoes that erupt, all becomes interconnected, as our existence is inextricably dependent on one another. As in the mythology she creates across her works, which are featured in Brisbane's 11th Asia Pacific Triennial in November, the answers to our existential fears can be laid to rest when we respect our place in the universe.

MORE IN CATEGORY