

#HGCREATORS

## Visions Of Another Future: The Spectacular, Speculative Worlds Of Rithika Merchant



'Rithika Merchant and her painting, 'The Flowers We Grew'. L: TARQ R: Adrien Dirand.

 Drishya

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Agender, half-bird, half-human beings populate fantastical landscapes full of flowering plants, disembodied eyes, and [starry skies](#). They rest, relax, play, and dream underneath canopies of flowers and constellations. When you look at [Rithika Merchant's](#) paintings, you can almost imagine being in another, more hopeful world beyond our own. Recently, the currently Mumbai-based artist's surreal, otherworldly artworks served as the scenography for Dior's Paris Haute Couture Week Spring/Summer 2025 show. It was a resounding success — for both Merchant herself and the skilled artisans of Mumbai's Chanakya ateliers and the [Chanakya School of Craft](#), who transformed her paintings into massive embroidered installations.



### Rithika Merchant's Artwork For Dior's SS25 Show Was Inspired By Her Matriarchal Heritage

Earlier this week, I interviewed Ms Merchant over email. I asked her about the comparative mythologies and histories behind her drawings. I asked her how she navigates merging ancient myths with speculative and fantastical images? Are there specific myths or speculative concepts that you draw from, I asked.

"My works explore myths and epics across geographies as a conceptual premise," she answered.

"The structure and method of narrative employed in the myths or stories serve as tools to compose my own visual stories. The idea that you could create a feeling or step into another world through these mediums is amazing to me. I love [science fiction](#) and how a lot of these writers are able to create really detailed new worlds. I recently read the '*Children of Time*' series by Adrian Tchaikovsky and it's been very inspiring," she said.



Rithika Merchant and creative director Karishma Swali at the Chanakya School of Craft in Mumbai during the making of the scenography. Prarthana Singh

I find this aspect of her practice extremely fascinating: her ability to transport viewers to otherworldly, but oddly familiar landscapes. Her paintings and drawings often feature recurring creatures and symbols. There is always a strong sense of narrative — an observable evolution of a personal visual vocabulary. How did she develop this style? What do these motifs represent in the broader context of her individual, collective, and cultural narratives?



Temporal Structures, 2023, Gouache, watercolour and ink on paper, 41.3 x 59 inches Courtesy of Rithika Merchant and TARQ

"I would describe my style as semi surreal, intricately detailed, visual storytelling," Merchant said. "I just try and enjoy the process as much as I can without worrying too much about the outcome – especially if it involves things I can't control. I believe consistency is key and showing up to your studio and working everyday is important to my practice. I have come to form my own lexicon of creatures and symbols over years of practice."

"The symbolism of the bird and eyes recur often in my works," she said. "The bird stands for ultimate freedom, because they can fly. I'm from Mumbai which is the city of birds and I've always had a special relationship with crows. They are clever and powerful [creatures](#) that have a lot of mythological significance in many different cultures. Similarly the eye is a very evocative symbol across geographies. These signifiers are universally perceived through similar ideas."



Silo, 2023, Gouache, watercolour and ink on paper, 41.3 x 59 inches Courtesy of Rithika Merchant and TARQ

Her works draw inspiration from a vast and varied spectrum of myths, personal narratives, 17th-century [naturalist botanical art](#), and various folk art forms.



**"I am drawn to works that are rich in symbolism and also have a strong element of storytelling."**

*Rithika Merchant*

"17th-century botanical prints, kalamkari prints, religious or folk iconography in general, serve my quest for small details and potent narratives," Merchant said. "I spend a lot of my time reading and researching my ideas and subjects that I am interested in to further build my own lexicon of symbols and creatures. I also use elements map-making and cartography in some of my works. These inspirations come together in a much more personal and intuitive way representing a feeling or concept."



Installation view of 'Flowers We Grew' at the Dior's Paris Haute Couture Week Spring/Summer 2025 show. Adrien Dirand

"Connection to nature is important to me and my work, there is so much to learn from it. Nature plays a significant role in the compositions of my work as the creatures or 'beings' are surrounded by it and often interact with it. For instance, 'The Flowers We Grew' that refers to the powerful ancestral stories of my matriarchal family from Kerala, features many of the plants, trees and flowers found in Kerala, such as jackfruit, palm trees, pepper vines, banana trees, coffee trees, and thunderlilies," she said.

'The Flowers We Grew', the new body of work Merchant created for Dior's Haute Couture Week Spring/Summer 2025 show, draws heavily from her [Malayali](#) matrilineal heritage.

"My matriarchal heritage has strengthened my sense of individuality and independence," she said. "In 'The Flowers We Grew' I turned to the powerful ancestral stories that have been passed on to me through a line of matriarchs, originating from the region of Kerala. Although I mine my own personal history, the works speak to a collective ancestral feminine energy that many women can relate to. The series of nine paintings for this project were conceived chronologically as past, present and future. Four works from the series reference these ancestral stories and feature many of the plants, trees and flowers found in [Kerala](#). In the panels that express my vision of the present and future, further connect and channel the energy of my female ancestors. They illustrate my vision of a future led by women harnessing this powerful female energy and joy."



Installation view of 'Flowers We Grew' at the Dior's Paris Haute Couture Week Spring/Summer 2025 show. Adrien Dirand

"In another series currently exhibited at the Asia Pacific Triennale, Queensland," Merchant said, "the works propose unique paths to building and sustaining a new world through various references from nature. Such as engineered pollination as a means of vegetative propagation; ant colonies and their ability to self-organise, communicate and use their collective power to build an ecosystem for themselves; and how humpback whales use their own bodies to sustain themselves over long migrations."

Merchant's practice imagines and explores possible new worlds. In presenting alternative, even hopeful, visions of a distant future, her works employ stories and narratives as detours through which one can negotiate with reality or introspect, she said.

"I hope that the viewers take their time to notice all the details and immerse themselves in the environment, with the symbols and signifiers that come together to create other worlds with several possible meanings."

Follow Rithika Merchant [here](#).

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Interview

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