

WATER RUNS THICK, LIKE TIME.

by Skye Arundhati Thomas

Every morning, Rithika Merchant takes a walk down a sea-facing boulevard in Barcelona, where the hard architecture of the new city meets a soft, rippling shoreline at an impasse. A tall structure with an amoebic surface (much like the map of the world) stands on the beach – installed by Mayor Ada Colau in July 2016; the structure is a counter, and its numerical display directly corresponds with the number of migrant deaths at sea. The numbers increase everyday, and sometimes with great speed. “We’re here to look the Mediterranean in the face,” said Colau on the day of its unveiling. With a single gesture, Colau ensured that every time both residents and tourists look out at the shoreline, the bodies buried in the water below are at the forefront of their minds.

It is important that we see the world on its hydraulic terms. If there is one thing that ties together the flagrant, and riotous, circumstances of our current political time, it is the ocean. The

ocean, its seas, the rivers that feed them, the lakes and ponds that scatter in between – and even the shining aquamarine swimming pools that miraculously (and sometimes morbidly) sustain themselves through yearly drought – all tie together our earthly landscape in complex political terms. In a time where everything is determined by political extremity, people want to know at which point of the spectrum you stand. To declare your politics, even though you may not realise it at first, is to situate yourself in proximity to the ocean.

To think of the water then is to think through the politics of its movement, production, consumption – and the exhaustion too – particularly of its metaphors. In Amitav Ghosh’s recent book of essays on climate change, *The Great Derangement*, he points us in the direction of an urgent and activated dealing of the ocean. For our imagination to fully sustain the arrival of a climate crisis, he says, we can no longer think of the ocean as metaphor, or as allegory – but as an active, brimming body of political potential. He writes, “[The] most intransigent way that climate change resists literary fiction lies ultimately in its resistance to language itself.” Language is insufficient, and we have run out of metaphors. Instead, he writes, “new, hybrid forms will emerge, and the act of reading itself will change once again.”

To look at Rithika Merchant’s work, we must change our act of reading. What reaches the eye as a decorative, melancholic rumination holds an innate whimsy, and an arrangement of layers of symbolism. She refers to the Mediterranean, a sea which she frequents everyday, as the “sea of the dead”, an appropriate cliché, as it’s not far from the truth. In her work, she renders the water as she sees it: an amalgamation of intense blues and greens, set against starry, glimmering skies, and even, as in *Voyagers* (2016), the dropping down of the moon to meet its watery mirror.

Hybrid human/animal bodies slip in and out of aqueous, febrile depths. They are often perched upon boats or skiffs, skimming their limbs across water bodies. In *Fortunate Isles* (2016), a two-panel gouache and ink on paper (Merchant’s medium of choice), a deepening sea gathers darkness, but also a thickness. The thickness is both in the treatment of the water, as in the density

of characters that suddenly arrive: eyes floating at irreverent and haunting intervals, nestled atop waves, or tucked into undulating, slight crevices. Or of course, the bodies themselves, at first fighting against the current – attempting to gather the thick water in their outstretched palms, only to reach a perfect, tragic stillness once at the bottom. Merchant has invented these hybrid bodies – human in their shape; yet furry, with spiky, punk-like hair, and blank faces over which dotted eyes appear (articulated only with a single stroke of pen or brush).

To understand Merchant's work is to situate her in a political time, as well as in the city that she inhabits. She lives and works in Barcelona, a city that wears its politics on its sleeve. Not in the least because of its sea-side ticker of death, known locally as the "Shame Counter", but in the way that it is feverish with political activity: a referendum for independence; the continued opposition of the closing down of borders; a city where Ada Colau was elected to office even though she was a well-known radical housing activist. This spill of the political onto the pavement is met with the romantic and decorative nature of the city itself – Gaudí, of course, being the most celebrated composer of this history. The billowing turrets and cornices of La Sagrada Familia, Casa Batlló, Torre Bellesguard, and the sprawling, magical, Parc Güell, stake their claim along the expanse of the city as markers of its history, over which contemporary life resides and interacts. Although the parallel might not be the obvious one, it still simmers below the surface: Merchant has grown accustomed to witnessing political enactments set against the backdrop of intensely decorative histories.

When Merchant's work moves away from a narrative telling, it finds a sharp austerity: namely with high-contrast collage works that sit like well-crafted sentences, over which the artist has exercised a keen editorial judgement. As in *Exodus* (2016), the collage works are a total flattening of the plane. The narratology here rests in subtle manoeuvres such as the tightly packed colouration of the small fragments of paper that come together to form the image. Merchant treats the fragments of paper she uses with a dappling, gentle wash. In *Confluence* (2017), she gives us a symmetrical telling of history: while the narrative of migration is never far from the work, there is a sense here

that the histories at play are of the oral tradition, made up of the slippage between truth and fiction. This is most apparent in Merchant's choice to embed certain works into embroidery hoops: as though, like a wise and winsome teller of a tale told many times before, she quietly hums to herself as she stitches out the plot. In both the works *Metropolis in Flux I and Metropolis in Flux II* (2017), perfectly ovular boats carry a group of buildings across choppy waters, and each are given a set of eyes. It is clever appraisal of what it means to tell history, or to generate the objects of a history that is ongoing. There is a desire for the viewer to receive a certain intimacy, which, with Merchant's administration, is never far away.

In *Graveyard* (2016), the work unfolds like a map, as Merchant has indented the paper's surface by folding it several times. With a nod in the direction of what is a cartographic method, Merchant leaves the corners of the pages still folded, in the shape of small paper boats ready to set sail. Softly, and subconsciously, this seems to give the works a certain buoyancy. The work's figures – hybrid creatures with the heads of hunting birds and long human-like limbs with striped, hairy coats – all end up entangled across the plane. They are joined together by vines of water, rising together to meet a figure that ascends to the sky. Merchant cites a specific narrative that enabled her to produce the telling in *Graveyard*: the Sumerian Goddess Inanna descends unto the underworld, bringing with her the symbols of beauty, desire, and love, along with those of fertility, combat, and war. Many of the myths that involve Inanna have her taking over the territories of the other deities, and Merchant is particularly interested in her visit to the underworld. She relates this to the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, where the character Enkidu has a vision of himself among the dead. He describes the underworld as dim and hot, labelling it as the 'House of Darkness'; one that no one is able to leave. Its inhabitants eat dust and clay, and although they are individual figures, they are considered to be powerless shadows of their former selves. Merchant denies us such a simple reading, however: and has each figure embalmed with swollen flowers and pear-shaped leaves, melting to the ground with a great natural splendour.

The work is reminiscent of one of Merchant's favourite authors,

and inspirations, Joseph Campbell. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a book often cited by George Lucas as an influence on the *Star Wars* series, Campbell delivers us an archetypal hero who eventually makes a triumphant return from ruin, or if one were to push the parallel, from a graveyard. Campbell was first to establish the 'monomyth': a narrative strategy that has its hero or heroine embark upon a journey only to come full circle, and reconcile with his or her past. One could read this as formulaic, which it is, but that is precisely the premise, and it is a narrative strategy enabled all across most contemporary film and literature. Merchant's application of this onto her work is clever: she is relaying to us the foundational tools of narrative and structure. In doing so, she demystifies figurations that are at once descriptive as they are magical and light, and in which one may easily pick out the heroes, and their victories. Take for instance, *Modes of Displacement* (2016), where our solitary protagonist walks toward a whirlpool of anemone-like eyes, from which flow two bursting rivers. The protagonist here takes to the night sky, one that is densely patterned with clusters of starry constellations.



The things they carried
Gouache and ink on paper
9.8 x 14.1 inches (each)
2016

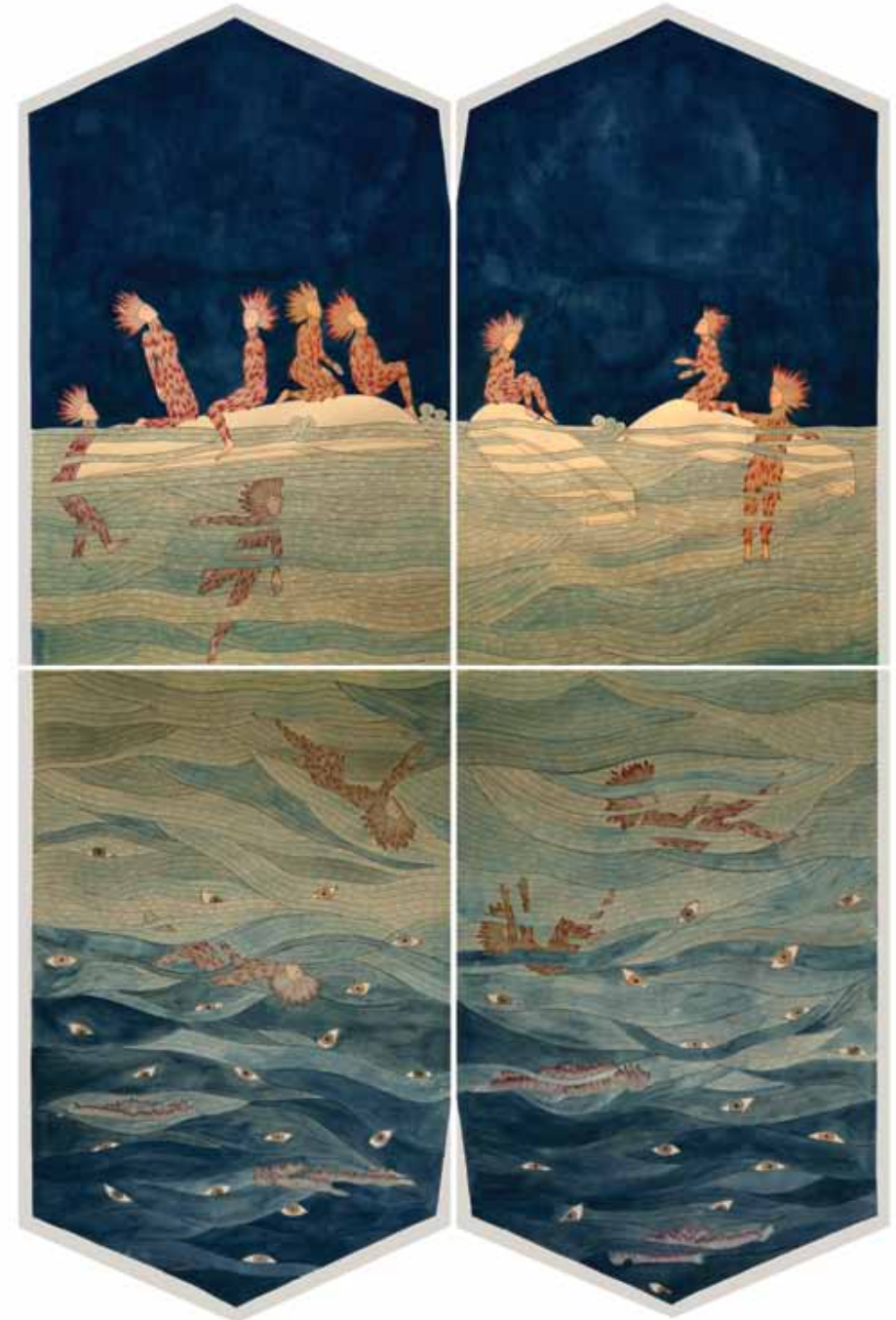
In the eponymous work of the show, *Where the Water Takes Us* (2016), Merchant gives a murky, powder blue pond of water the quality of refinement, and cleansing. Characteristically hybrid figures step into the water, as though in a ritual, turning from dark to light, and crawling out on all fours, humbled. There is an ambiguity to the image – as the slippage between narratives of cleansing and ritual are intentionally left unclear. In *The Travellers* (2016) there is yet another such binary, and rupture: figures atop their steeds (of horses, camels and elephants) step through an eye-shaped portal to move into an entirely different landscape. From the tropical to the desert-like – yet in both, the water flows thickly, reflecting the many colours of the sky above it.

Perhaps this is the moment to introduce to the conversation one of the most pervasive qualities of Merchant's work: its ability, in the rendering of an innately narrativised and intimate history, to generate a nostalgia that grips the viewer firmly upon first encounter. The work is highly surreal in its fictitious, generative mirages, and yet at the same time, served with a



fierce uncanniness. In Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym identifies two different types of nostalgia: the reflective and the restorative. A restorative nostalgia is the kind with which we are more familiar (particularly in its terms of nationalist rhetoric) it is the one that is rooted to a sense of place, to the idea of home. The latter, is more utopian in nature, but a kind of utopia that it is always held at a distance – always once removed from the real – which is not about, as Boym writes, “rebuilding the mythical place called home [but about] perpetually deferring homecoming itself.” There is something about Merchant’s work that seems to conjure this to mind. It is perhaps in her treatment of nostalgia as a potent device for the acts of her imagination, which then translate themselves onto the page in magical and heavily codified ways. There is a sense that Merchant only delivers us the nostalgic as a turn of phrase, as a writer would with a carefully placed metaphor, it is to further along the plot – and to complicate its treatise.

By combining the powerful symbols both of mythology, and fictional terrain, Merchant is able to create landscapes upon which to complicate simple definitions of exactly such premises: of history, and of the nostalgic. Merchant also uses this binary to resolve conflicts between geographically located cultures, allowing each to be informed by the other, as well as to collapse into each other, and to hopefully form a third. This third culture is one that perhaps only exists on the plane of the imagination (and, rather irresistibly so). It is also one that is formed decisively, and swiftly, by the manipulations of Merchant’s paintbrush: we are given a history that is at once figurative, as it assumes an air of imaginative abstraction. Here, water runs thick, just like time itself.



Fortunate Isles
Gouache and ink on paper
39 x 25 inches | 2016