

Mythography

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Do Epics need Myths?

Alfons Mucha began with an art project to which he would need to devote almost two decades of his life with little support from the state or from whom he had intended to make those epic works of art. The Slavic Epic consisted of 20 large canvases intended at celebrating the Slavic culture and history. Through his canvases he was to unite a divided people who were spread across the kingdoms of Russia, Poland and his native Czech Republic, visually creating a certain commonality of cultural inheritance. The Czech Republic had just recently emerged from being part of the non-slavic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Thus his act was to rekindle the imagination of a people who had begun to forget their past and the myths that created their culture. These myths united distant geographies of the slavic countries.

Alfons Mucha was popular for his decorative style that was characteristic for its pastel

colours, beautiful women and stylised renditions. His style was to be soon known as Art Nouveau which was to be then lent to designing jewellery, architecture, furniture and objects. But when one views the Slavic Epic, we imagine creating an iconography for a people, to support their history. He believed his art was Czech Art, representing a certain modern aesthetic that emanated from Moravia and Bohemia. The faces in his canvases no longer resembled those from Byzantine influenced icons of the Russian Orthodox Church, his technique surely arose from his years in Paris. But the myth was real for it was an act to narrate a certain history and thus accepted, his visual vocabulary became the script for history.

Rithika Merchant returns to a similar period, to a city which used to be the Bombay of her childhood. Now renamed, each journey to her hometown is marked with unfamiliarity. For the facades of the Victorian inspired mansions that dot the road where she was born are often

brought down as they give way to towering spires that contain the new homes of Mumbai. The precinct near her home still holds a remarkable collection of the city's art deco homes. The architecture of these buildings move inwards into the homes onto the furniture and the decorative aesthetics of the space. The city changes, surged on by an economy of speculation and the borders within it begin to grow, it comes to house gated communities, its people begin to live in contempt of the poor, of migrants and unimagined representations of alien culture. This paranoia creates myths for the citizens of the city, unfortunate myths that are divisive.

Rithika though returns home to her mother. She reads her past and her present in the form of myths that gather around the journey of human life. As a young woman she sees her mother as her spiritual guide and herself as a hero camouflaged in the intricacies of her drawing technique. A certain mosaic forms of pieces of

paper brought together onto which she has drawn certain icons. These icons were first brought forth while representing her imagined animals, their domestic existences almost mirroring human nature. But these large drawings of an eternal umbilical cord between a mother and a daughter represent a certain feminism made bold by Rithika's use of line and colour.

The divisive myths that plague her country are repeated in her new home in the city of Barcelona. She is a close witness to the Belgian question, can chauvinism based on language divide a people? But the same myth echoes differently in Barcelona where art nouveau is imprinted in the architecture, stories of cultural self determination of Catalunya now exist as myths. But her arches, the beautiful rounding in her paper, do not come from the mosaic we call Spain. She spent some time in Lisbon, from memories of those mosaic sidewalks she creates her shapes, giving credence to mythical geographies that are brought about by

maritime trade. In 1497 Vasco da Gama had set sail from Lisbon on an attempt to reach India by sea, that act changed the mosaic of many nations on the African coast and that of India. An act that led to the founding of our city - Bombay.

The Gond people are one of the subcontinent's oldest inhabitants. The Gondwana plate is where the peninsula of India after it split from Africa comes to join with Asia creating a series of plateaus. This ancient topography supports a certain ancient vegetation, fauna and flora. Much akin to the dry grasslands of Eastern Africa, for this reason we have species endemic to India - Lions, Elephants and Cheetahs that are also endemic to Africa. Within these forest live the Gonds, the tribes of central India. In the village of Patangarh was a man called Jangarh Singh Shyam he drew onto the walls the animals he encountered and the myths of his tribe. He was recognised for his talent and was taken to Bhopal by J Swaminathan to work at his

institute Bharat Bhawan. Here a museum of folk art was coming together, and Jangarh after his stint in Bhopal had opportunities in Paris, Tokyo and other cities. But the death of the artist was near, he was to commit suicide as he was forced to work and make works in confined in a Japanese museum without being granted leave to go visit his ancient land where the myths natured his ability to create art.

Rithika encountered his student Bhajju Shyam and probably from that visual encounter she is able to iconise urban myths that are not only representative of her own personal journey but of many others. But only a few like her chronicle their tales as the ancestors of the Gonds had done 30,000 years ago through their wall paintings in the rock shelters of Bhimbhetka, Central India.

Mythography thus becomes an encyclopedic almanac of urban myths derived from an attempt at self discovery and is aimed towards solving contemporary strife created by what we may

describe as a conflict of civilizations, which is negated by locating a mythical strain of unanimity.

Sumesh Sharma Bombay 2013

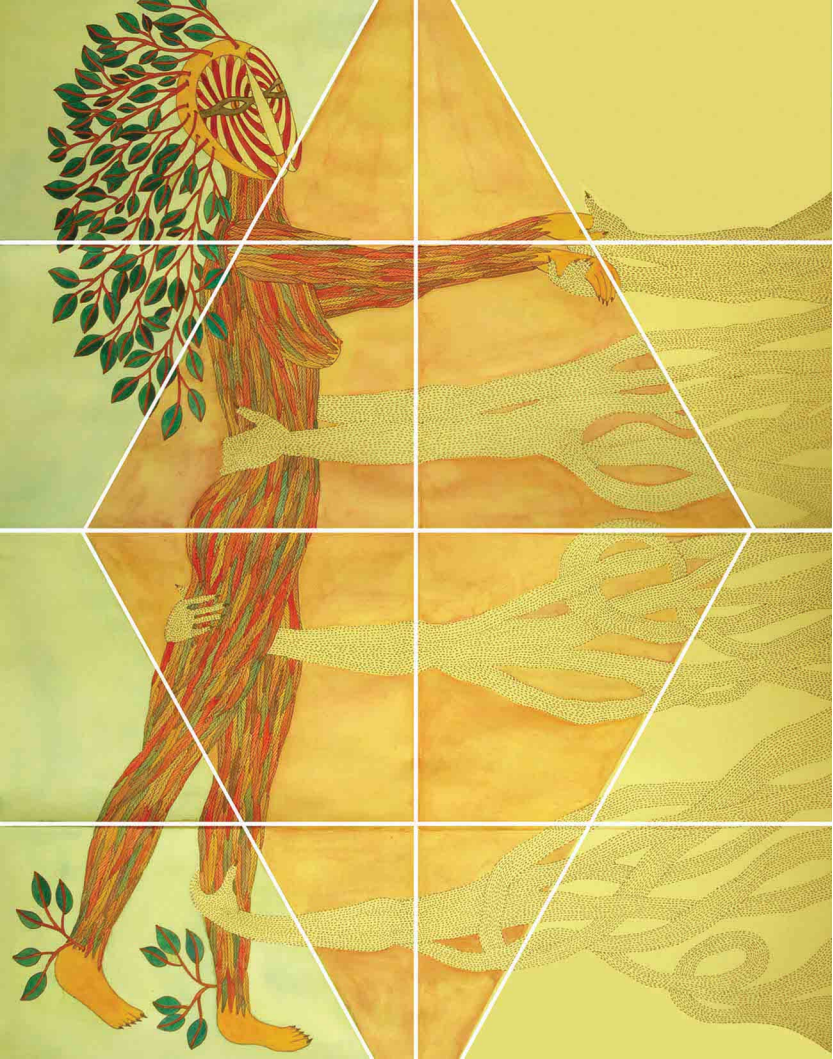
Mythography

Seventeen colour plates are in conversation with Joseph Campbell's theory of the Hero/Monomyth. The Monomyth refers to the journey of the Hero. There is a pattern that involves seventeen steps that the hero passes through during his journey. The seventeen step journey is split up into three phases - the departure, the initiation and the return.

Another seventeen plates illustrate the continuity of epics across geography.

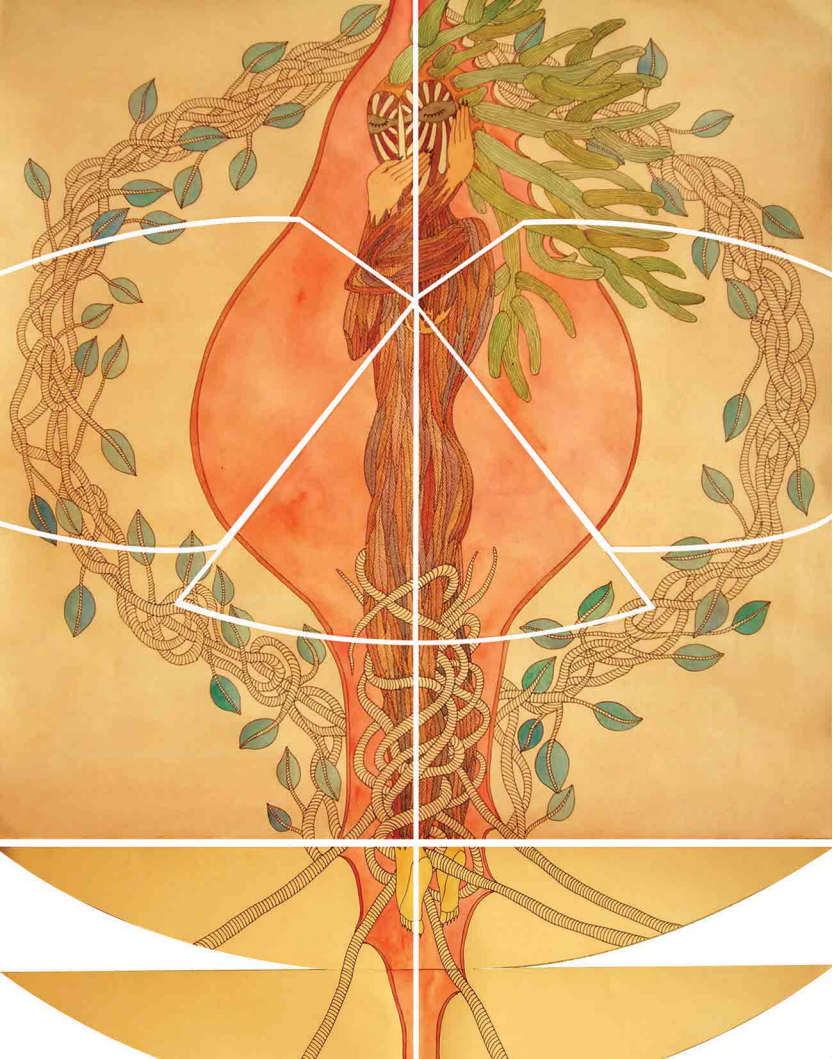
Departure

Rithika Merchant Bombay 2013



Call To Adventure

She, is swamped by the roots of a parasitical want to endure a journey of adventure, the tree of uncertainty emanates through her veins forming leaves that prophecise in their veins an epic. The damp walls and the humidity of her city nurture trees that take root in the red bricks quarried from the hinterland, making them unstable divisions, erasing the architecture, mocking the grandiosity of these edifices, creating ruins for which stories are to be told. She, the Hero, begins to allow the manifestation of the urge to leave, to script her survival within a history that denies her the epic.



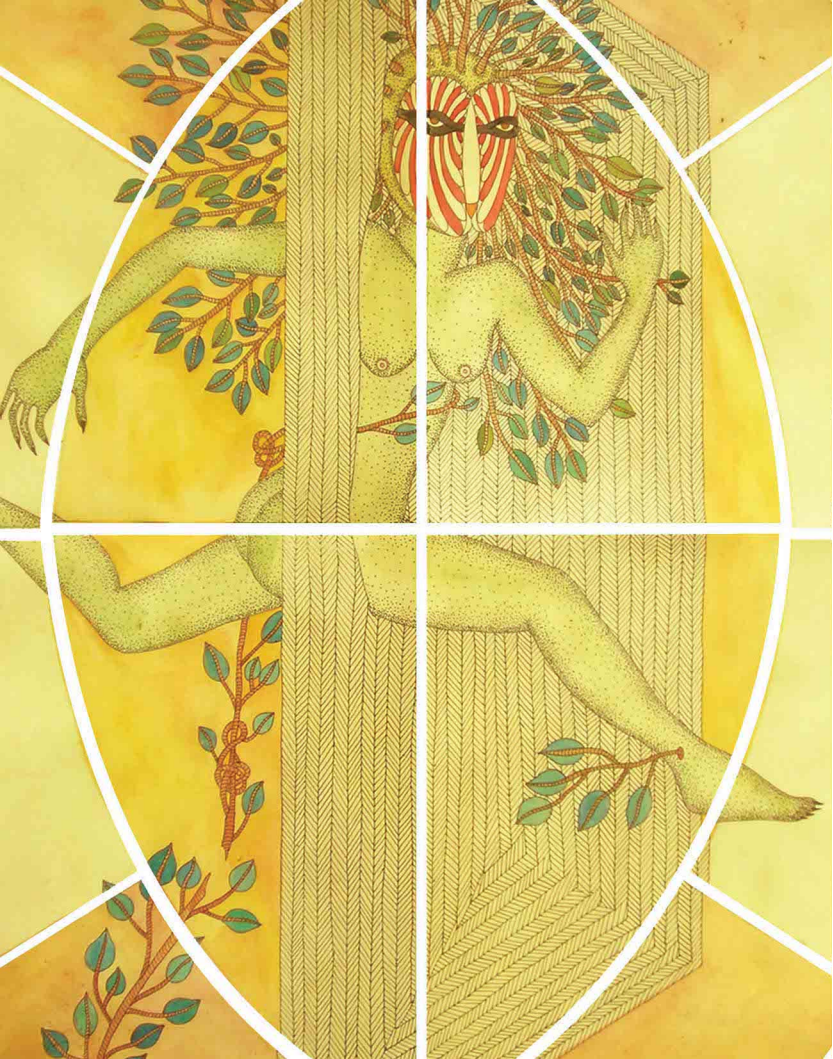
Refusal Of The Call

Fear settles in her gut, the journey is imagined, witnessed in her dreams, but she wonders if the move would erase her roots that are held together by her mother. The Hero, withdraws into the the warmth of the womb. Her mother draws her close - she knows the Hero will leave, these kindred moments between them is from where the Hero unconsciously seeks the fuel for her journey, as she is to wage a war, writing her own epic on humanity.



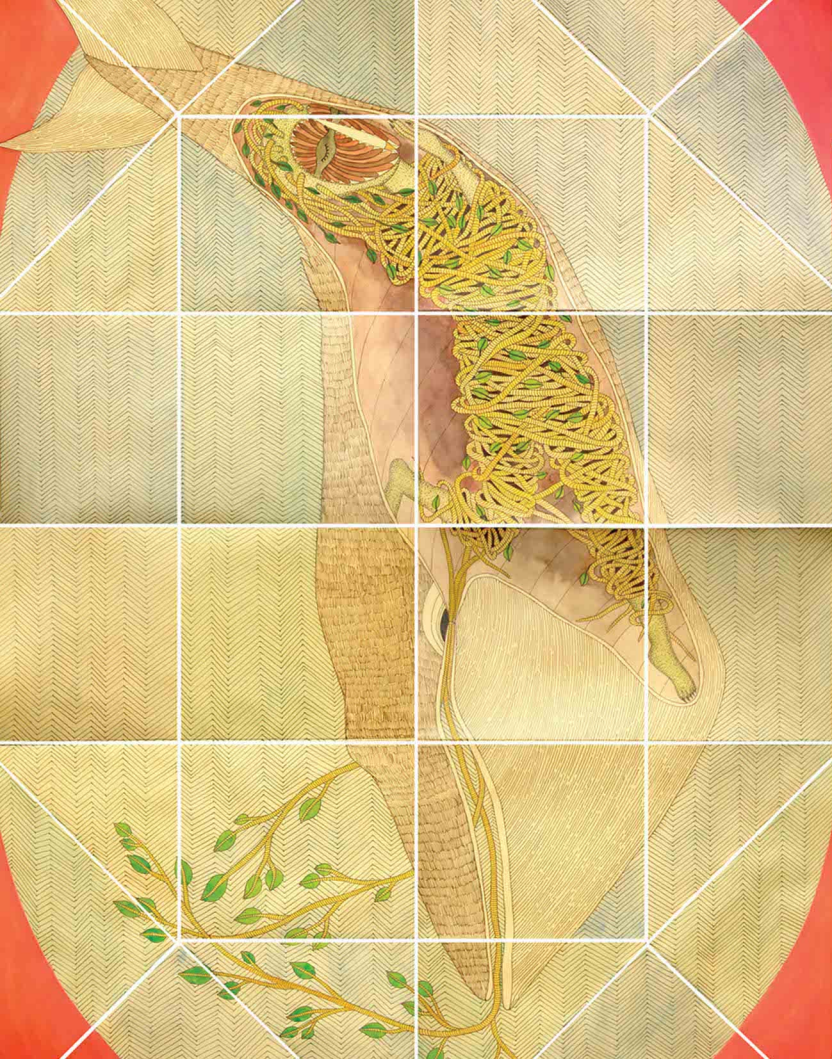
Supernatural Guides

In her land cats are a contemptuous species of ill-luck and infertility, feline femininity irks man into fear. He fears unknown strengths. The cats find the Hero, they enact the role of guides in her path towards the gates of individuality, to which they hold the key. They know the Hero shall release them from the contempt history lays on them, their awaited saviour - strengths unknown to her.



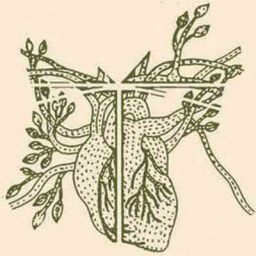
Crossing The First Threshold

The roots had crossed the threshold, firming her feet onto new ground as she crosses into her destiny. The twigs manifest to make a mask of an Owl that sees her through darkness. Her stride is now unwaveringly eager to encounter the adventures for which she leaves behind her past. The tree is now a marker of certainty, as the leaves form a crown to anoint her - she is now this epic's 'Hero'.

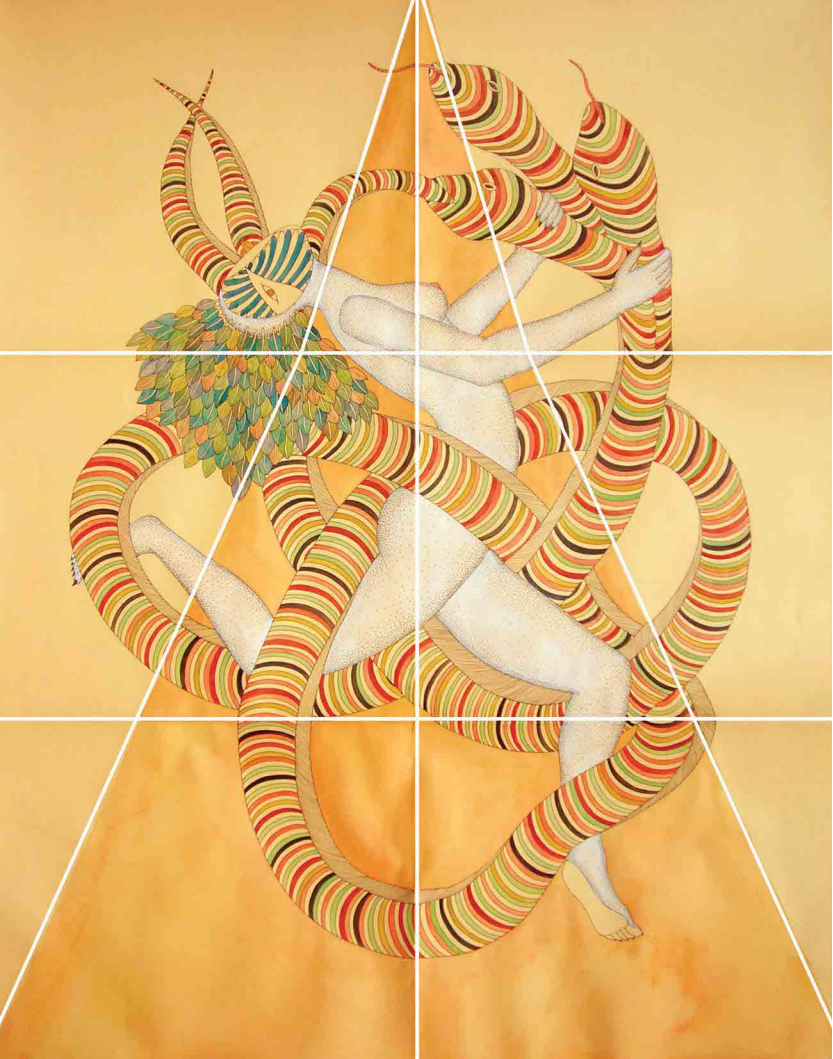


The Belly Of The Whale

Having crossed, she steps, she falls deep, she is in the belly of a whale. The tree of certainty cocoons her with its roots in the darkness as she slips into a deep slumber, so as to dream the epic she will have to enact when she awakes. A metamorphosis is in process with a girl who once was afraid.

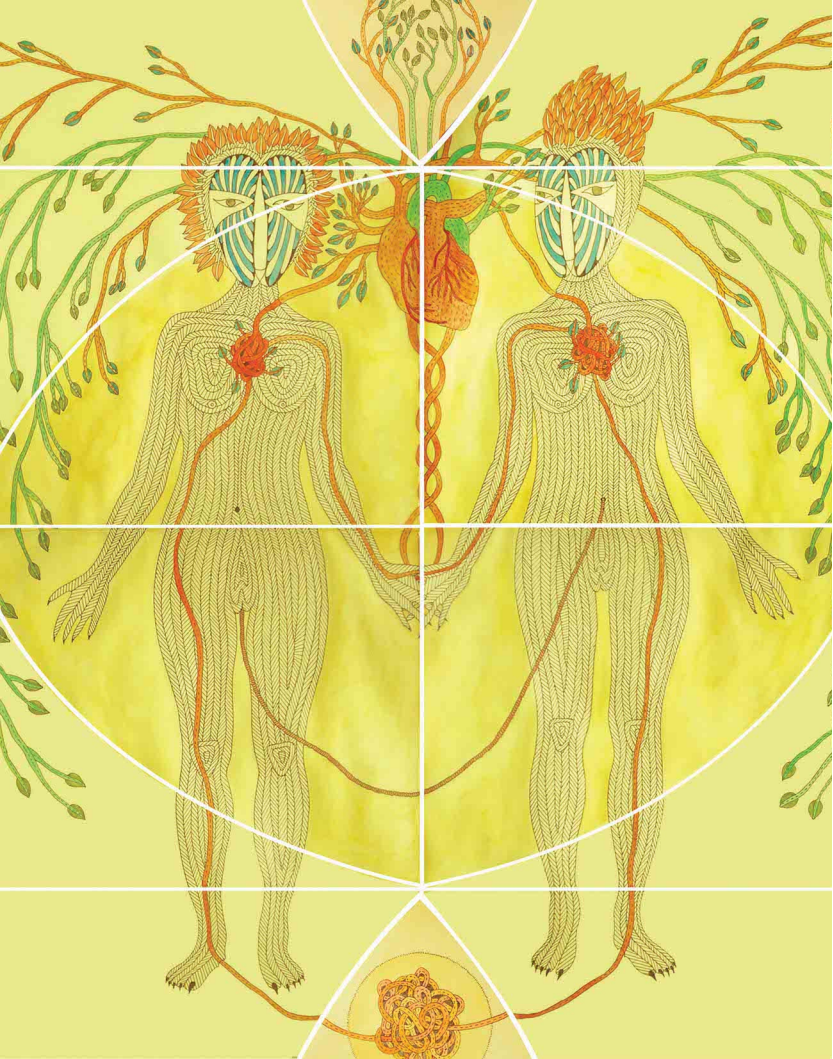


Initiation



Triump Over Trial

The Hero emerges with her plume of leaves, ascending on serpents, as she conquers the triumvirate of test and trial. She survives, her metamorphosis is final. In a distant land in a dead culture, a feathered serpent denotes, history, knowledge and Venus, but the hero does not hold the serpent sacred. For fear is to be overcome, the epics of yore venerate their fears - and she is one of them.



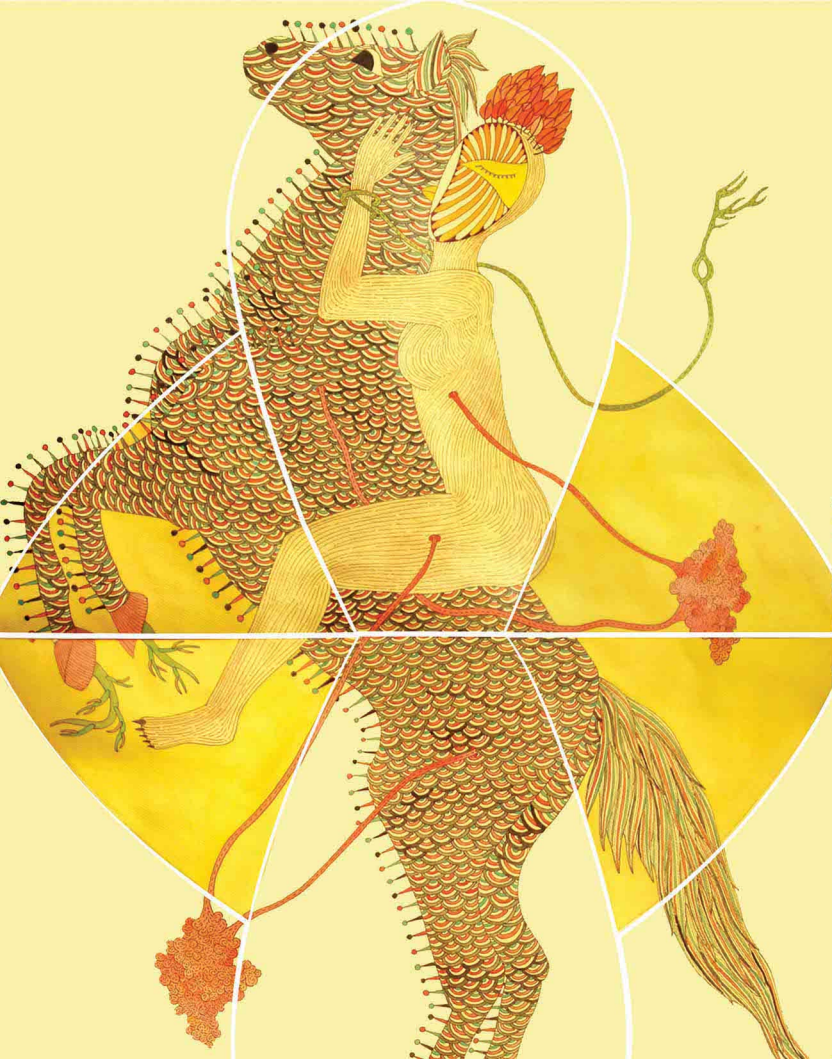
Meeting With The Goddess

A transfusion of the past awaited our Hero, she came to meet her Mother, she has not feared the encounter, for she now has courage to face her journey. She will leave, soon back on the circular path of adventure, that will see her return to her Goddess. The Goddess is not to renounce her child for it is a 'privilege' left to men. Emotion is not seen as an illusion, for the womb engulfs the pain of departure in physicality once and each time the Hero leaves.



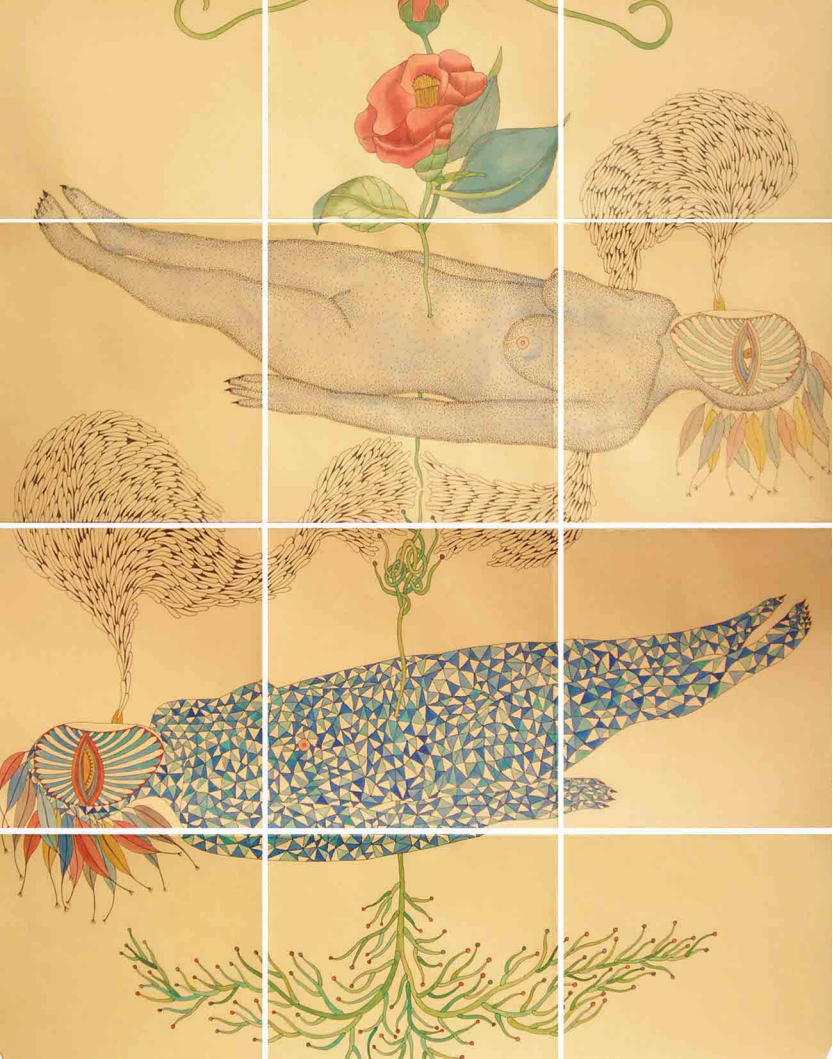
Surpassing Temptation

A sea of temptations, tempting the Hero to anchor, surrounds her as she sails into her journey. Magpies appear from the oblivion to warn her that those ports of call aren't where her journey ends.



Atonement With The Father

The Hero, confronts her last conquest of fear. Her father's armour cushions those truths, as she reveals to a man mistakes she hopes to be unburdened off. He accepts, as he atones himself of the tragedies his fellow men have brought upon his daughter.



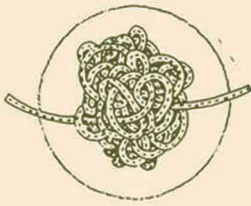
Apotheosis

She comes upon an oasis where flowers have no thorns, the Hero rests for she is not here to conquer but wait before she proceeds. The tree of certainty now shed its leaves, for they don't need to tell the future. As she sheds her plume the mosaic of journeys engraved upon her skin now become a memory.

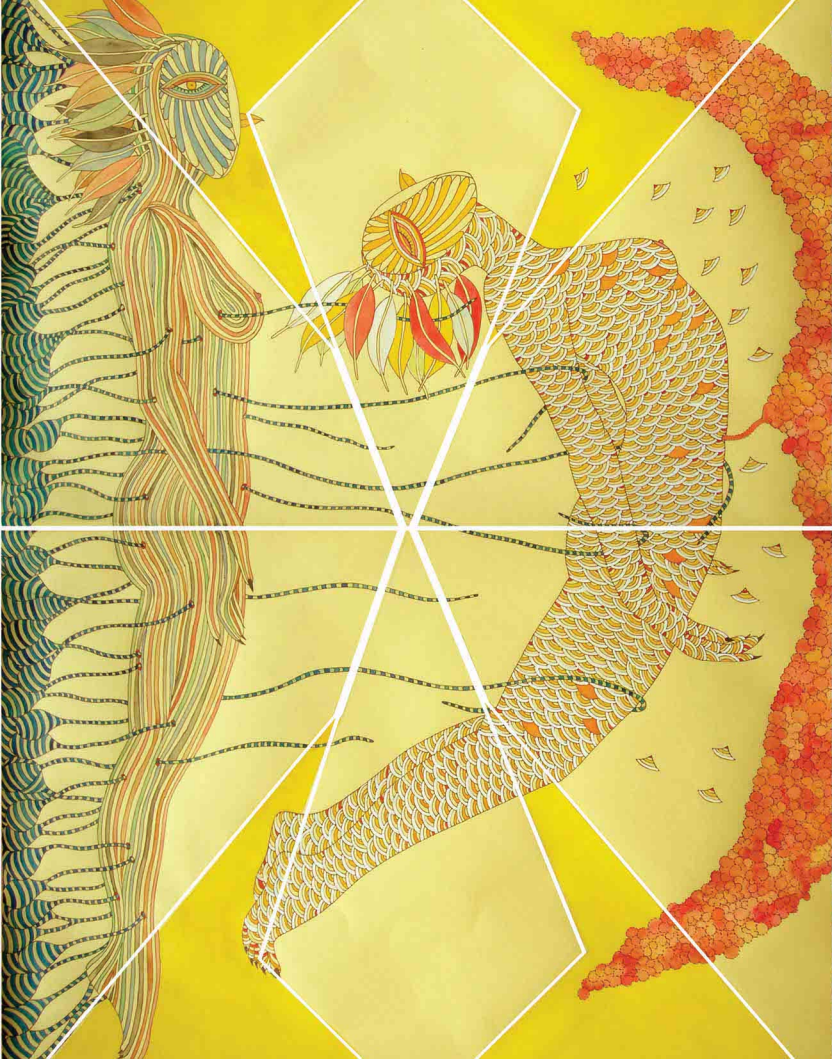


The Ultimate Boon

Drinking her potion of mana, tasting in it the rain, sweetened by the orchids, and leaves found in forests - the earth returned all it had taken in her journey, rejuvenating her body with its placenta as she reached her goal.

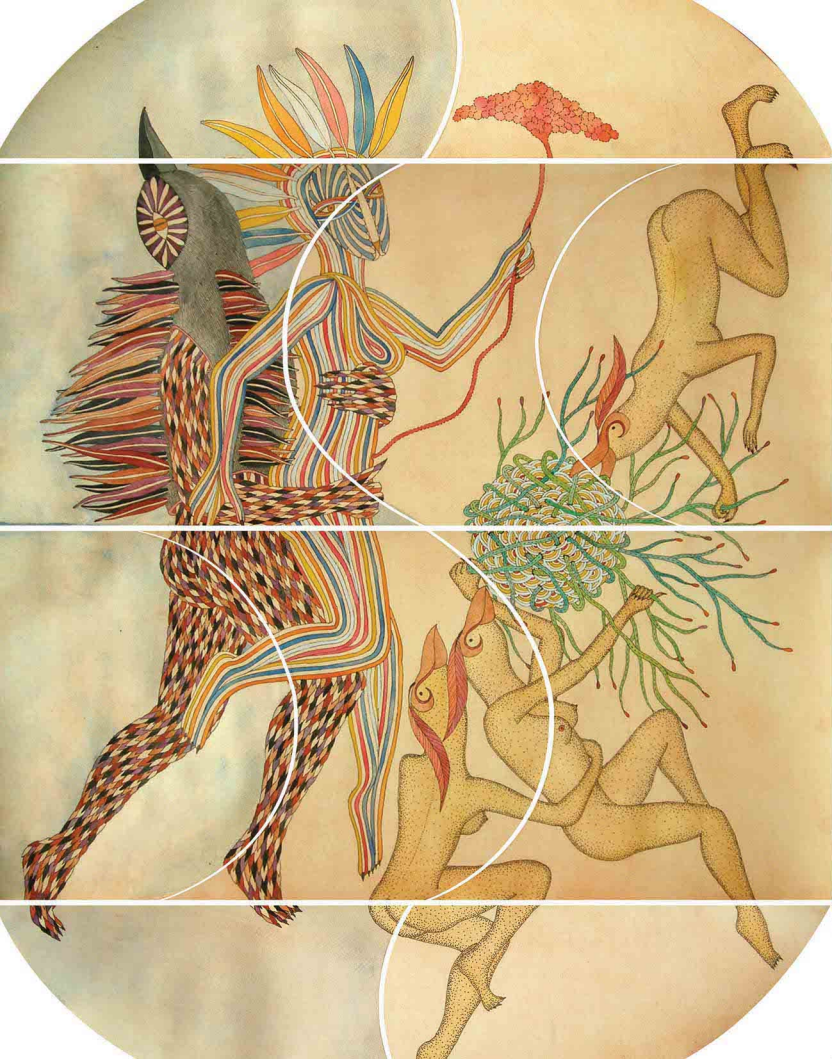


Return



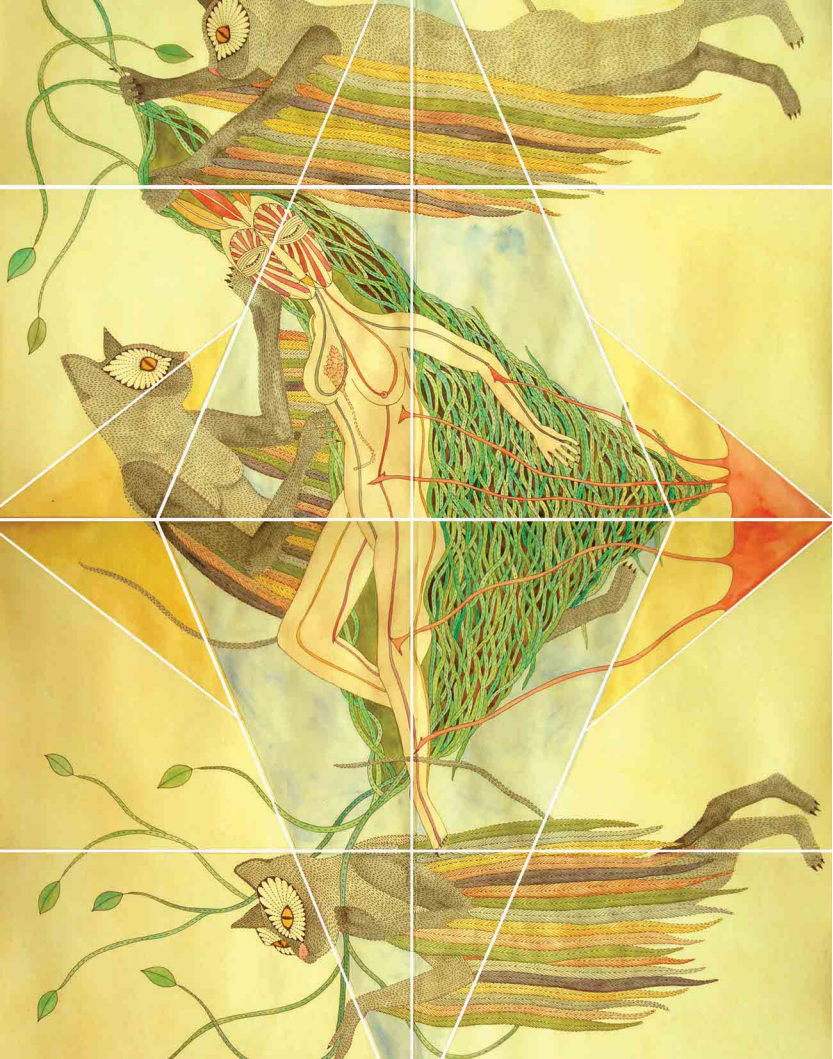
Refusal Of The Return

She is suspended in a moment of bliss,
unclear and selfish she refuses to
return. At that moment clarity returns
in the shade of the sun - she
remembers the boon is to be consumed
as her promise to selflessness.



The Magic Flight

A divine eagle carries the Hero in her flight helping in her return. Baser creatures fight for the twigs of the discarded tree and her discarded skin. The twigs are to manifest onto their bodies feeding parasitically on their fears.



Rescue From Without

In the hospice of the cats, they
return to help her garner strengths
she has weakened in her escape.
The Hero to salvage those condemned
in the epics of men. The ministering
cats nurture a Hero of their creed
and thought.



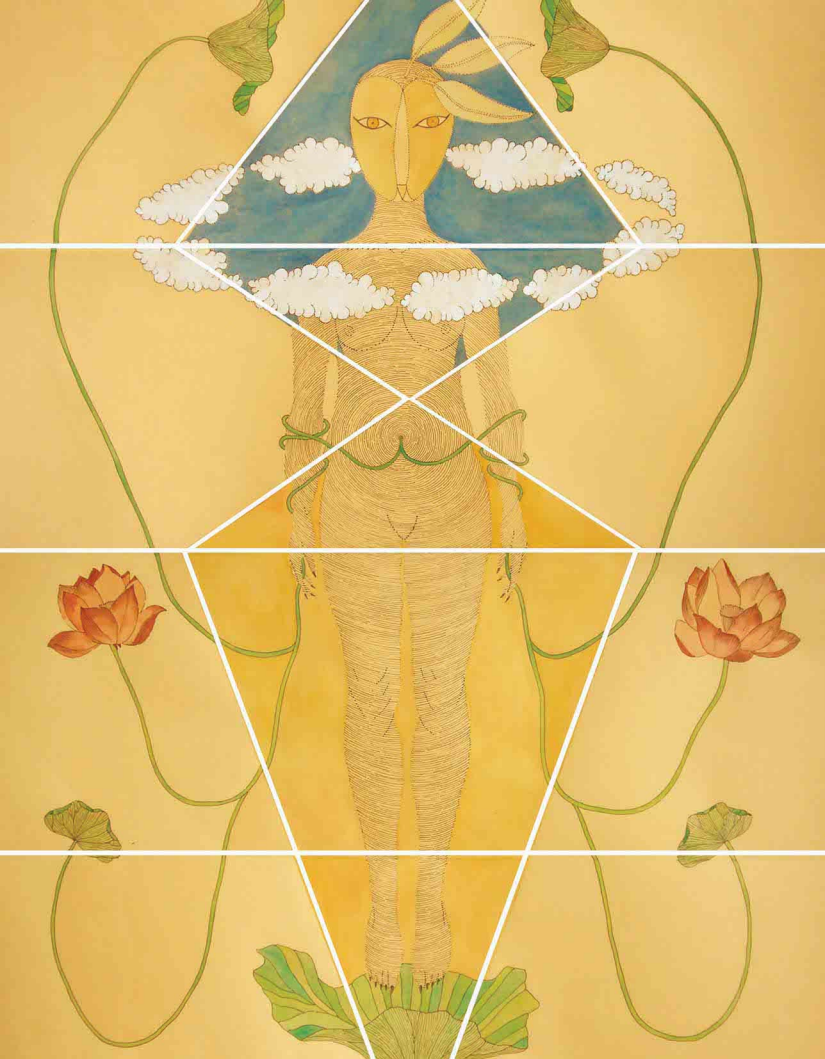
The Return

The Hero returns to narrate her epic, her boon diffuses to the others as a fragrance of wisdom, clear in its message of a bliss that arises from equity.



Master Of Two Worlds

The hero is not erased by her present, the past defines her quest, an epic arises from the need for duality, unhindered by guilt through a sacred acceptance.



Freedom To Live

Standing naked floating on the leaf of the lotus, raised above the clouds, the umbilical bloom announces our Hero's ascent. The myth of this epic raises a woman to witness the world with freedom.



Mythographies



Creation From Nothing/Within

An eruption of species, they descend from his mouth, those who agree with this evolution will come to share his faith. A myth about humans.



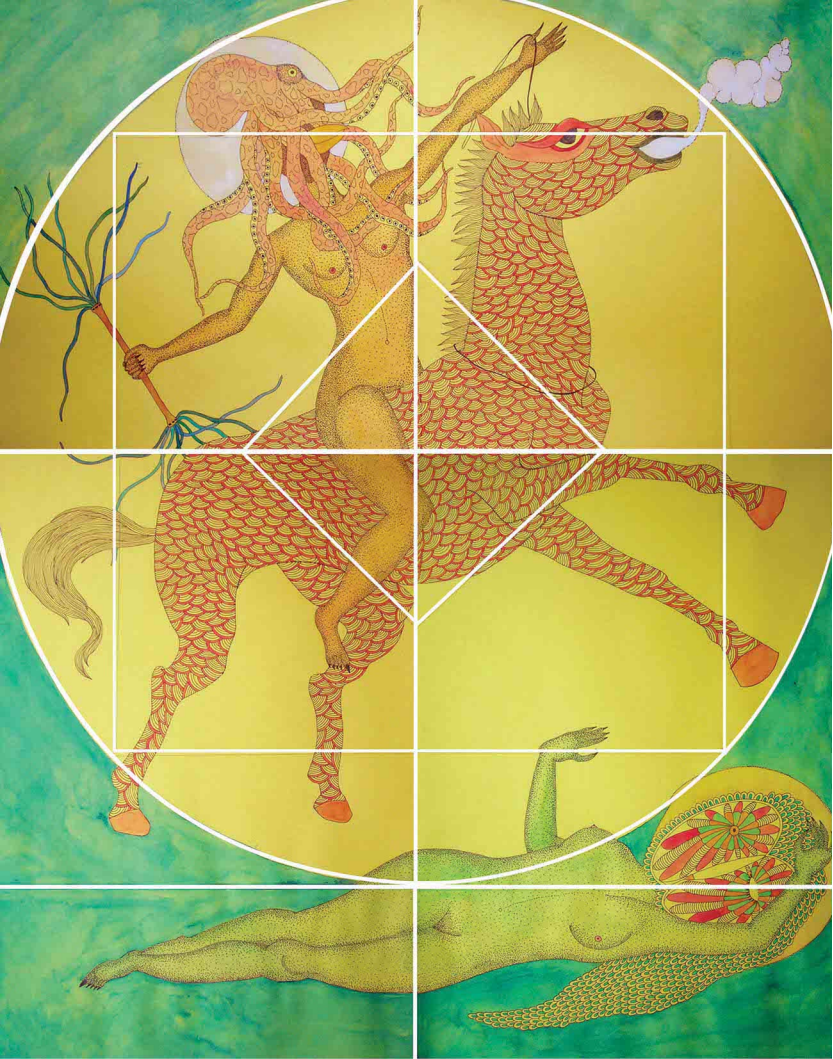
The Dying God

The eternal emu rises from it's ashes growing feathers of algae. With grasping hands, she reaches for the Sun.



Deus Otiosus

Withdrawn he meditates, nesting on
the clouds he is an island of contem-
plation, pain and a certain bliss.



Titanomachy

Reclining she thwarts the octopus on
a horse. A war ensues as the earth
awaits it's victor.



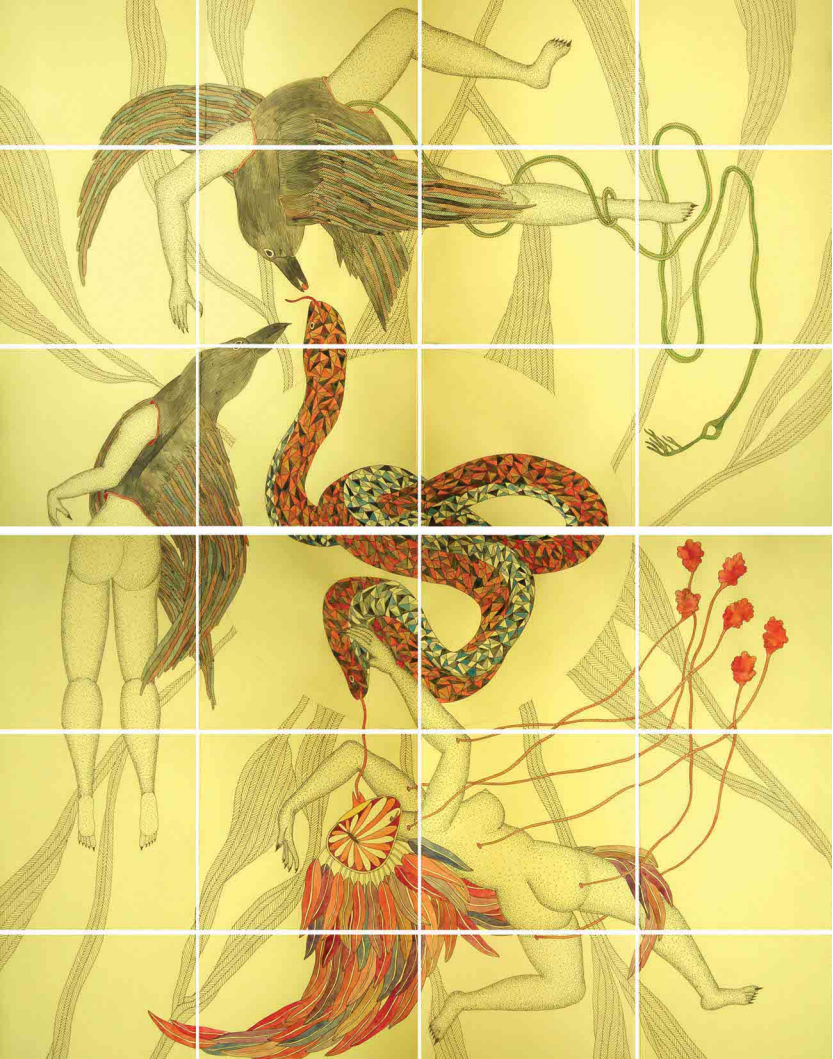
Emergence

Quote from Charles Long - "Emergence myths commonly describe the creation of people and/or supernatural beings as a staged ascent or metamorphosis from nascent forms through a series of subterranean worlds to arrive at their current place and form. Often the passage from one world or stage to the next is impelled by inner forces, a process of germination or gestation from earlier, embryonic forms."



Raven

A bird of deep black hue lays an egg
to create man, a colour man forgets
and yearns to detest, uncaring of his
origin.

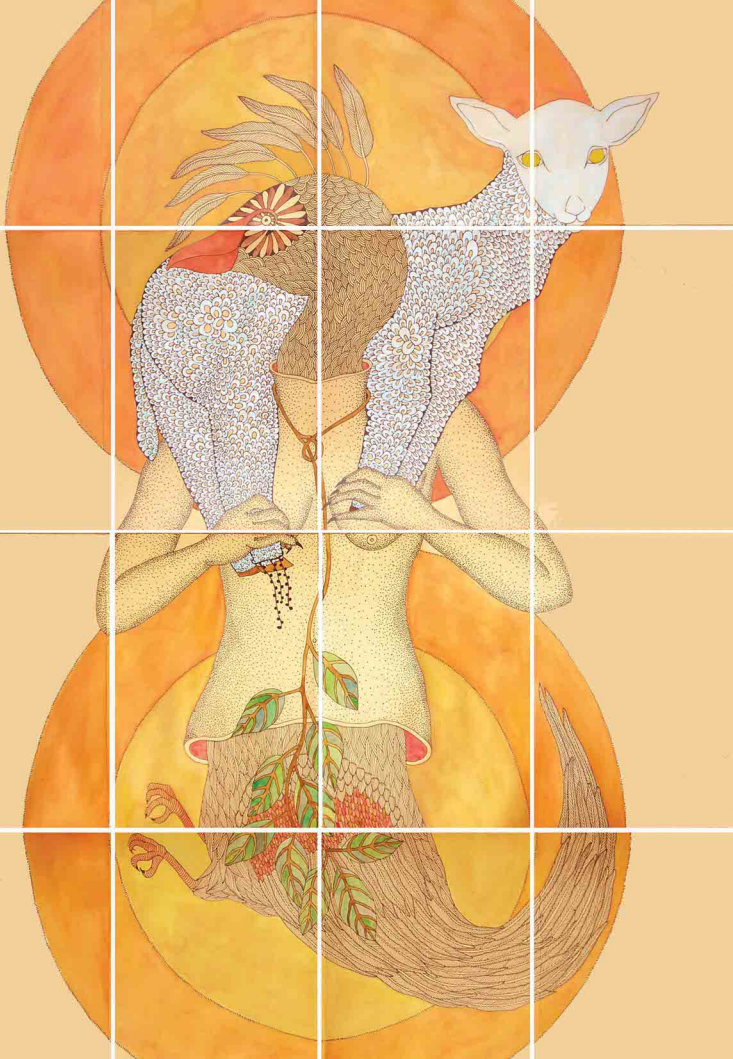


Vice and Salvation

Chaining a crimson serpent unknowingly, she holds vice close. A Raven caws forewarning disaster as it clenches the keys of redemption.

Virtue

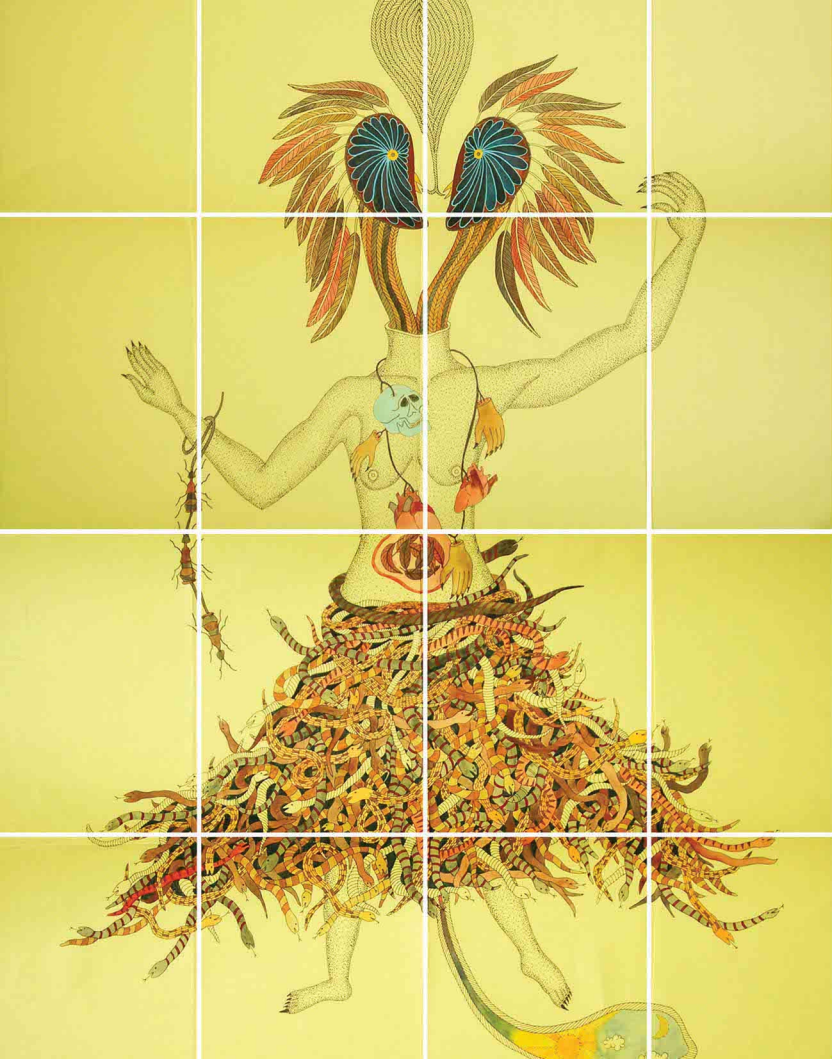
A trusting lamb is carried to it's sacrifice. A duality of dependence occurs, erasing judgements.





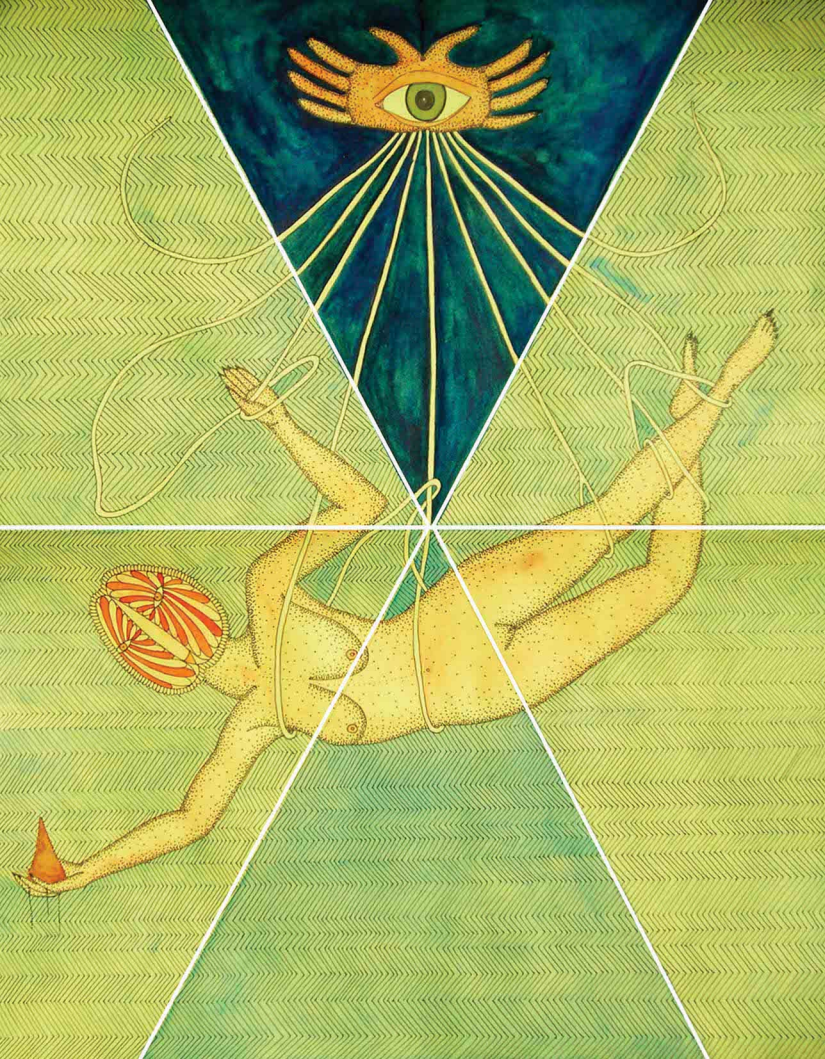
Creative Dismemberment

Her flowers announce her death, her
ashes are the fruits and seeds of new
life, in death she nurtures.



Mother

Born feathered she guards evil as her
child, manifesting in serpents that
cover her naked desire for destruction.



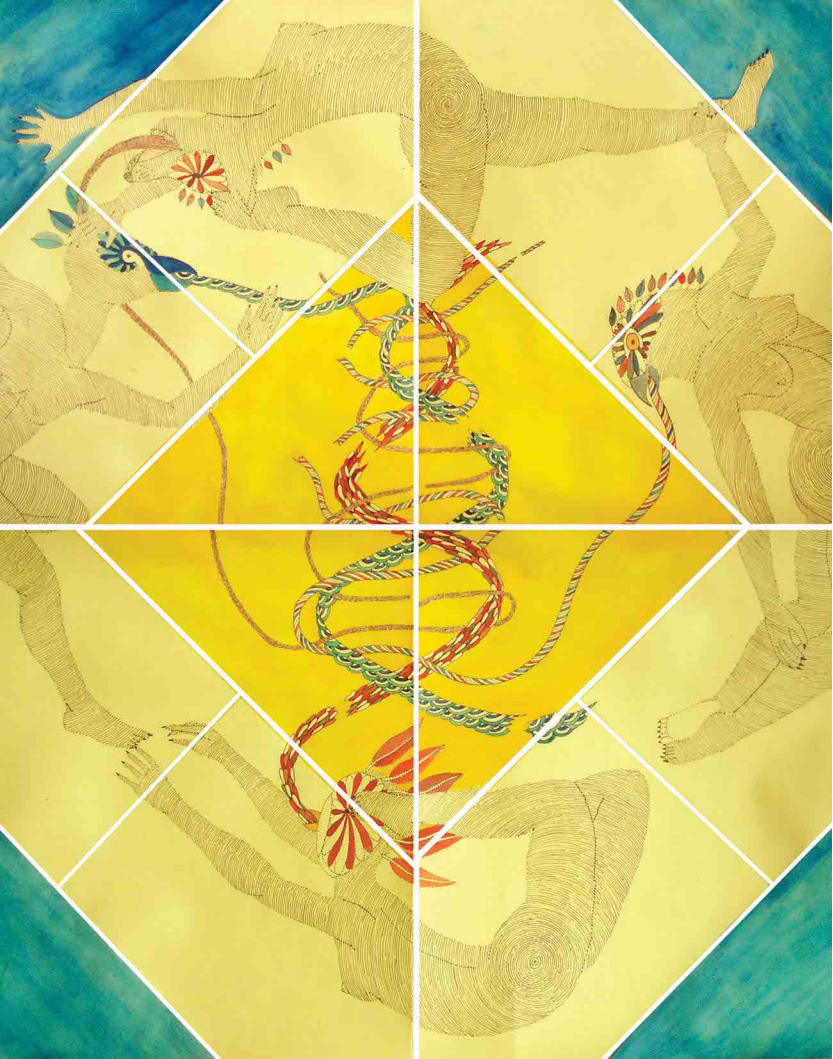
Earth Diver

She reclaims a few grains of sand
from the womb of the sea, sand that
would harvest into land for her
progeny to inhabit.



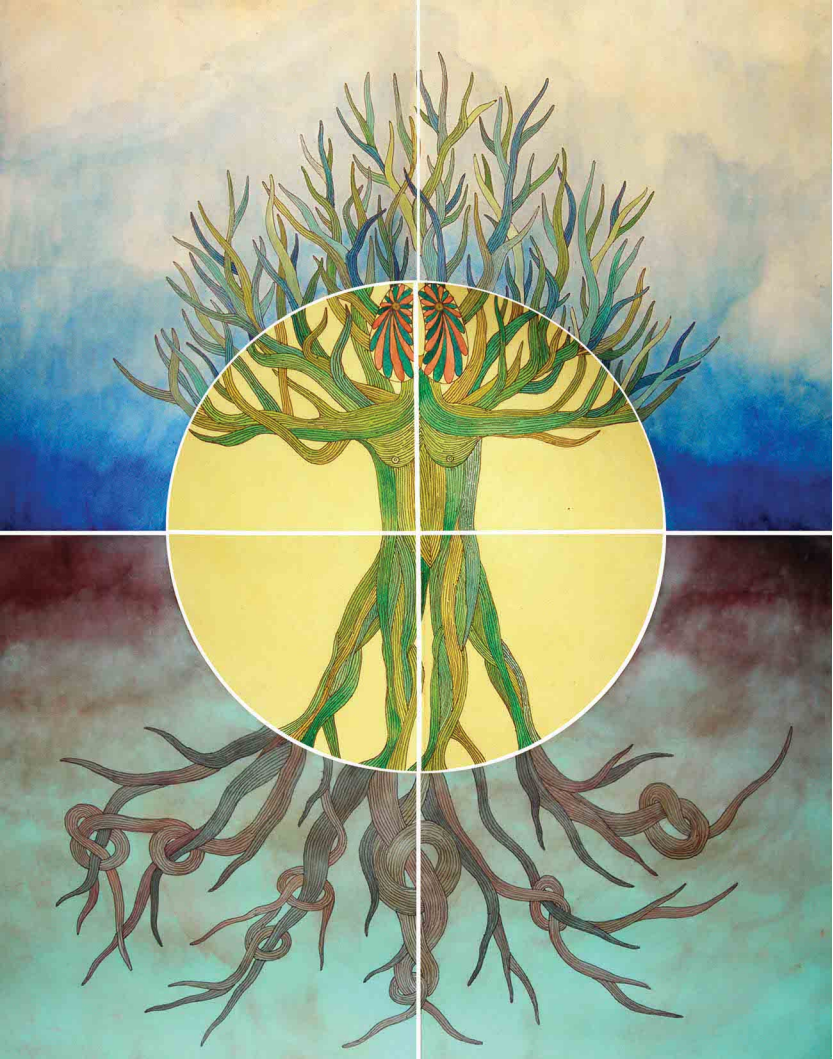
Matsya

She emerges from a gigantic carp,
the carp that inhabits deep rivers.
Much like the carp that swims to
flooded people, sacrificing itself
for their hunger, she takes form to
nourish and forewarn of greater
floods.



Confusion of Tongues

Many tongues confuse us, we don't hope to build together, but a tower of plenty comes from the acceptance of that diversity.



Axis Mundi

The Tree holds the soil. Uncertainty takes root, it encroaches like a parasite. Certainty nestles in its shade, life arises as the tree rises towards the eastern horizon, he is our ancestor.



Dyeus Pita

The eagle with its mane prides over
the horizon in survey of his progeny,
as they inhabit the land below.



Prithvi Mata

In the land below, life arises from her womb as she allows the moon to wane, guarding its fragility from a scorching Sun.





Posthumans

Beaks strung as weapons, finding
alternative sources of energy and
propulsion. We wage war.



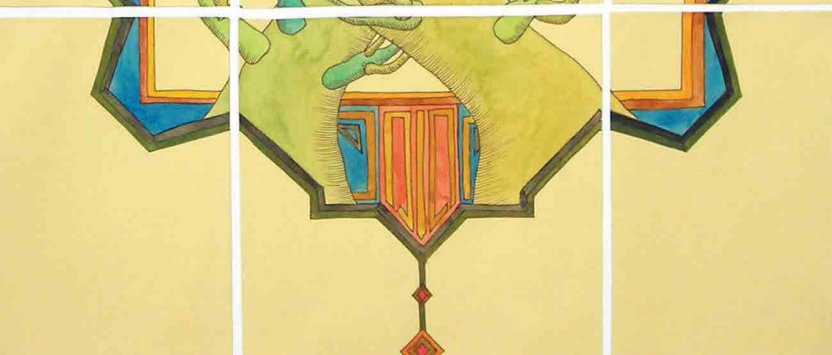
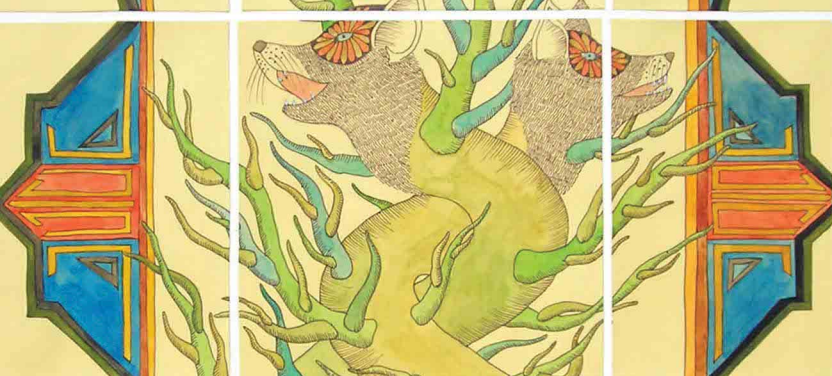
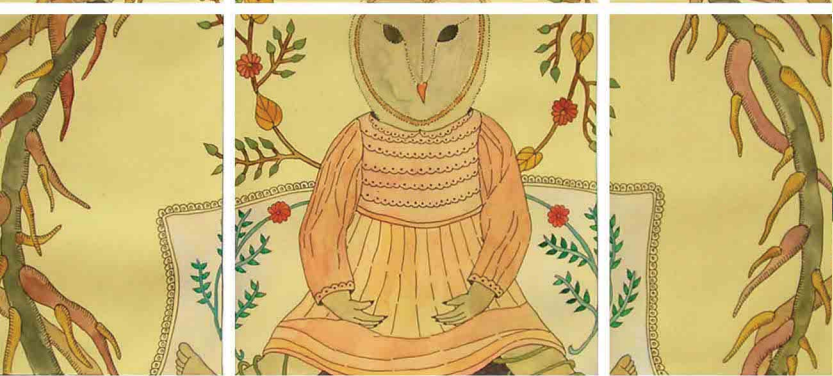


The Creative Sacrifice

From encyclopedia Britannica -
The most widely quoted example of the dema deity complex is the version of the Ceramese myth of Hainuwele, by the Danish anthropologist Adolf E. Jensen. According to this myth, a dema man named Amenta found a coconut speared on a boar's tusk and in a dream was instructed to plant it. In six days a palm had sprung from the nut and flowered. Amenta cut his finger, and his blood dripped on the blossom. Nine days later a girl grew asexually from the blossom, and in three more days she became sexually mature. Amenta named her Hainuwele, which means Coconut Branch. During a

major religious festival Hainuwele stood in the midst of the dance grounds and excreted valuable objects. After nine days of this activity, the dema men dug a hole in the middle of the dance ground, threw Hainuwele in, and danced the ground firm on top of her. Amenta dug up her corpse, dismembered it, and planted the pieces. These pieces gave birth to plant species previously unknown, especially tubers, which have since been the Ceramese's chief food. Another dema goddess forced the dema men to go through a labyrinth. Some became ordinary mortals; others changed into animals and spirits.





Family, Home, Return Of The Wolf

In the forests of Garana wolves return to a land once populated by the Swabians. Reversing a history of extinction, that was once brought upon them. An enclave of language within a nation that remains an enclave of Rome in the land of Slavs. The Swabians dwindle in number leaving behind a visual residue of ritual and culture. Ingredients to the myth of their existence in the future.

Biography

Rithika Merchant (1986) deals with creating mosaics of myths that question received histories that are available to us throughout culture. An inherent feminism exists in her decoration undermining the minimalism of modernity that views a woman just as a muse.

In 2008 she graduated with a Bachelors in Fine Arts from Parsons the New School for Design in New York. She has studied painting and conceptual practice at the Hellenic International Studies In The Arts in Paros, Greece. In 2008 she was a resident at the Convento Sao Francisco Mertola in Mertola, Portugal.

Her recent projects include an international residency where she researched the folk culture of the native German speaking Swabians in Garana a village in a Banaat region of Romania as a part of Arthouse Wolfberg/Garana where she was commissioned for a triptych for the regional art museum. She was a participant at the Swab Art

Fair in Barcelona. In 2011 she had a solo showing at Gallery Art and Soul, Bombay. Born in Bombay she now lives in Barcelona.

www.rithikamerchant.com

Gallery Art & Soul

Gallery Art & Soul established in 2003 is an art gallery based in Bombay. It was established by Dr. Tarana Khubchandani and since it's inception has been a space for feminist visual thought. Women constitute most of it's represented artists and since 2003 has supported an annual breast cancer charity. The Gallery's activities extend to the promotion of young and emerging artists in addition to established ones. The genres of art showcased and supported span paintings, lithographs, photographs, sculptures/sculptural installations and ceramics. It is by conscious thought that the Gallery opens its doors to debut art events annually and endeavours to support these young

artists thereafter. Such perspectives in art allow the Gallery to have a wide audience and reach unhindered by constraints of the market. Gallery Art & Soul has an independent programming that works primarily with artist solo shows alternated by curatorial offerings. The vision of the space is to offer a neutral space within Bombay's contemporary art space with a more democratic art practice.

www.galleryartnsoul.com

Clark House Initiative

Clark House Initiative, Bombay, is a curatorial practice about a place, which in sharing a junction with two museums and a cinema, mirrors the fiction of what these spaces could be. It was established in 2010 by Zasha Colah and Sumesh Sharma as a curatorial collaborative concerned with ideas of freedom. Sumesh Sharma's practice is informed by cultural perspectives on political and economic history. Histories of

communities in India, language religion and politics in francophone Africa, and immigrant identities in Europe, form part of his research. Zasha Colah is interested in cultural sovereignty, and in the way that art addresses injustice and legal frameworks. Her curatorial work focuses on instances of collective imagination under situations of political exigency, political and philosophical motivations for choreography, and under-represented art historical narratives.

www.clarkhouseinitiative.org

