



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





---

### Editor's note

---

As part of Bound Writers Retreat in Goa, recently, author Chandrahas Chowdhury said that as Indian writers writing in English we were already at an advantage because of the rich history of stories we carry. It seemed like it was a little more than just serendipity that I was listening to this while we were working on the Mythology issue. It seemed, instead, like some distant, familiar voice from the past was urging me to look at that crust of responsibility underneath the stories, and that the very act of being conscious of the many layers brings a certain gravity, a certain sanctity, a certain reverence to the words I use. And the words I read, even if visually.

While working on this issue, we realised just how pervasive the world of mythology is in our everyday lives, and how, most times, we are scarily unconscious of it. It confronts us when we least expect it, like a hiccup, and like a hiccup it deigns to leave only when it chooses to do so. Like when a child asks you a question about a mythic hero and you struggle to find the right words unburdened by old meanings, conscious of the remnants that linger – did I say the right thing? Or when riots tear through the country when a fictionalised account of a mythological story is about to be released, leaving behind a bitter, anti-climactic aftertaste – did I actually witness that? Or when mythology brazenly becomes a part of the politics of our time, reshaping the contours of memory and history – is this really my reality?

And yet, it is the same mythology that when viewed through the lens of art gives us its true purpose – the beauty of an imagined world, the wisdom of lives lived at another space and time, the tenacity of words to travel distances, across geographies and minds, and the inevitable truth of our future that someday we will become stories, too.

This issue is a peek into that world of myth, of legend, of a saga carrying all the different words of the stories that made us, the stories that we live and the stories we will leave behind.



Praveena Shivram  
praveena@artsillustrated.in

---

### Cover Artist

---



Winged, unbridled horses depict a sense of unabashed freedom, without inhibitions. These characters entered my paintings some time back. I cannot trace a direct influence, but there are various cultures, traditions and myths which turn into my own archetypes. Winged horses and deer have become part of my recent works, referencing an out-of-body experience.

I have subconsciously referenced Pegasus, a character from Greek mythology, where he symbolised freedom, power and victory. Pegasus is an immortal winged horse in Greek mythology. The other character is the fascinating Buraq. 'Buraq is a devotional object, theologically more akin to an archangel than to a many-headed beast of prey. She is, existentially, inseparable from Muhammad – she exists only to carry him on his journey – making her

feminised appearance all the more startling'. This is from 'A Visual History of Buraq, the Quran's Winged Horse'.

Horses everywhere are revered, as in Hindu traditions too. Mythically, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, Kalki – the machine-man, with a blazing drawn sword in his hand, would be riding a white horse named Vedavgani. The mare breathes fire and stands on the ocean floor. Here, again, the white horse brings freedom and peace.

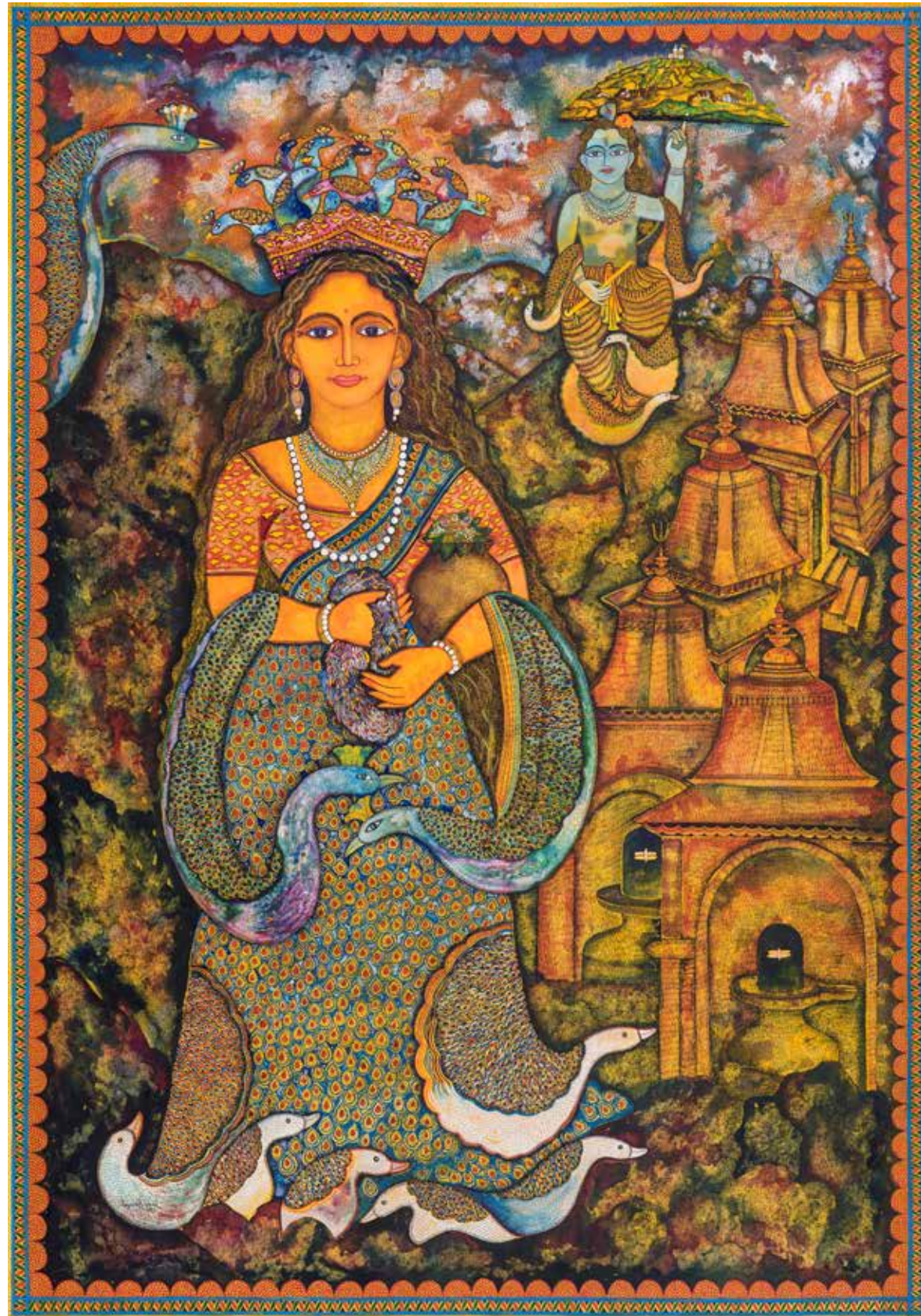
For the cover of this issue of Arts Illustrated, I am sharing this philosophy through my work with a larger audience. The cycle of creativity can only be completed when the creator creates and it reaches the viewer; it is a triangle between creator, creation and viewer.



Seema Kohli

Cover arranged by Rahul Kumar





Jayasri Burman, *Krishnaa*, 7' x 5', Watercolour, Pen and ink on Paper, 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

Q&A  
Arts

## *Stories that Speak in Colour*

In conversation with two visual artists – Jayasri Burman and Rithika Merchant  
– on myth and its endless interpretations and creative perceptions

RAHUL KUMAR

Mythology has enchanted creative practitioners from time immemorial. Folklore and stories about religion and culture, almost always specific to a community, have been referenced by dramatists, dancers and visual artists alike. Usually, the idea is to creatively contextualise the 'false' or 'imaginary' concepts (as is the definition of myth). These

become perceived reality due to the deep belief and orientation of our lives around them. It is natural, therefore, for artists to be fascinated by myths, their interpretations, and also the rituals surrounding them. Jayasri Burman creates mystical works with dream-like imagery, sourced from Indian folk elements with patterns woven in support of a

central theme. In contrast, the relatively younger practice of Rithika Merchant, who is based out of Barcelona, explores epics and myths from across geographies. We speak to them on the side-lines of the recently concluded India Art Fair in Delhi, about the idea of myth and mythology and the journey it takes on through their canvas.



**Excerpts from the conversation**

*What does mythology mean to you – is it a set of interconnected stories that represent religious and cultural beliefs, or is it an exaggerated and fictitious personification of people and phenomenon? How does this understanding of the subject guide your work?*

**Rithika Merchant (RM):** For me it is a bit of both. Personally, I feel it is a collective past, and therefore it is a ‘comparative’ myth, rather than anything in a silo. If we deep-dive, we realise that the roots of early civilisations – African, American or Indian – have stories and cultures that seem so similar. The geographical positioning is different and now they are separate countries. But is it not strange that so many beliefs and even rituals are comparable? My art practice aspires to reference these with a layer of contemporary situation. For instance, in my recent body of work I am reacting to the migration crisis.

**Jayasri Burman (JB):** I loved that description, Rithika. I agree that you cannot box things in watertight compartments. This becomes even more important in creative fields. I depict the snake god in my work referencing the folklore of *Naga*, but the relation of Adam and Eve with this beautiful creature cannot be ignored. It is up to me as an artist how I choose to relate to this symbol. And this perception finds its way into what and how I make my work. Myths are universal. I realised this even more when viewers reacted to my works on Draupadi in my recent show in New York. While most had no idea of the character and



Jayasri Burman, *Ratna Kuntala*, 6' x 4', Watercolour, Pen and ink on Paper, 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

the real story, they could reference it to either something in their culture or current times.

*Jayasri, you do not usually paint a mythological story. Rather, what you include in your imagery, the motifs and overall renditioning makes your work mythical. In contrast, Rithika, you seriously react to myths by drawing landscapes with reference to history and nostalgia. What are your thoughts on these two very distinct approaches?*

**JB:** I work with a great sense of freedom. So, most often, my process is like planting a seed and then slowly I allow it to grow. My job is then, like a gardener, to provide nourishment to the seed, in this case the core thought. The work just evolves. The story gets created around the central message.

**RM:** For me it really depends on the work I am doing at that moment. I see things through



Jayasri Burman, *Cheer Haran*, 5' x 7', Watercolour, Pen and ink on Paper, 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist.



Rithika Merchant, *A Distant Memory*, Mixed media collage with Gouache, Ink and Graphite on Paper, 30" x 46.5", 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist and TARQ, Mumbai.





Rithika Merchant, *Ghost Town*, Gouache and Ink on Paper, 25.5" x 19.6", 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist and TARQ, Mumbai.

the lens of myth. For instance, in Mesopotamian culture, the gods judged if souls were worthy of immortality. I stretch that idea of judgement in the current context. After a rape incidence in Delhi or Mumbai, I had this sense of deep insecurity. Although I live far away, these cities were home to me. So, my reaction is certainly based on mythical stories but contextualised with contemporary situations.

*It would be interesting to know the process you employ to create your compositions. Are there distinct hierarchies in the configuration of your canvases?*

**JB:** There are times when I begin with the eyes of my main figure. Literally! I went to Sarnath in Central India and on return I could not get the Buddha out of my mind. When I drew the eyes, the figure of Buddha emerged automatically. I let the energy flow spontaneously. Sometimes my Ganesha is flying, I feel I do not determine this. It is some divine force that chooses to operate through me. The format of my paintings usually begins with the main central figure. It is like placing the brain first, as if it is the hero of a film. Once that is complete, other elements and characters flow into the work. But I sign off on a work only after I feel it's complete and there are instances when I make changes over months before calling it done.

**RM:** (Laughs) ...and I often reject my work when I am just not satisfied with it. As an artist you get to know when a work is really complete. It is about the mind and soul meeting. I usually have a plan to begin with, but

often it changes as the work grows. Which is why I find it strange when artists have assistants. I cannot imagine in a practice like mine to have anyone help me with even with the repetitive filling-colours-in-blocks job. It is a very personal and sensitive process.

*Talk to us about cultural sensitivity of your works with respect to your audience, which are global and from diverse nationalities. For instance, Jayasri, you mentioned the character of Draupadi at a recent show in New York.*

**JB:** Contrary to the common understanding of the character, for me Draupadi is about women

power and not suppression. She maintained her royal dignity, exercised power wisely, and she was brave and beautiful. I like to compare her to Mother Earth, who remains calm, composed and beautiful, but has the power to destroy with a fierce storm and tsunami. And this relation to nature and supreme power is rather universal. People may use a context that is different, but they always get the message in my work as I intended to communicate.

**RM:** I agree with that thought. As artists we train ourselves to be sensitive. I am not a refugee, but I try to be empathetic to the

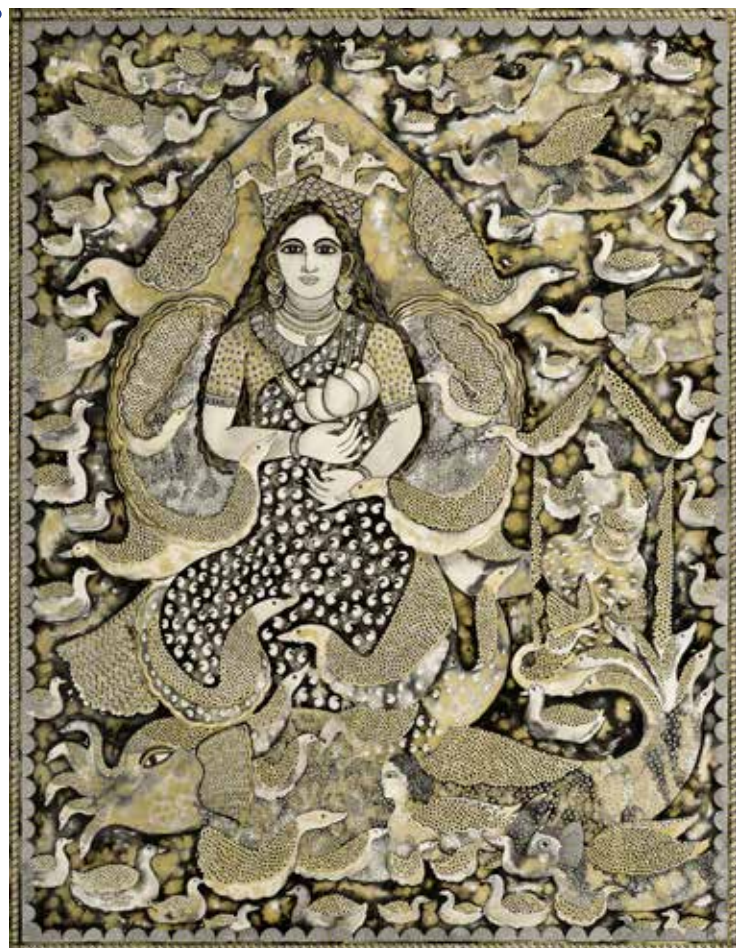


Jayasri Burman, *Siddhartha*, 7' x 5', Watercolour, Pen and ink on Paper, 2018. Image Courtesy of the Artist.





Rithika Merchant, *Where The Water Takes Us*, Gouache and Ink on Paper, 30" x 83", 2016. Image Courtesy of the Artist and TARQ, Mumbai.



Jayasri Burman, *Iravati*, 72" x 55", Watercolour, Pen and ink on Sikisi Board, 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist.



Rithika Merchant and Jayasri Burman at the India Art Fair 2018. Photograph by Shantanu Prakash.

happenings around me. The purpose of art, I feel, is to bring attention to certain issues and make people ponder over it. The issue of migration and movement and settling down and uprooting again has universal appeal. We all can relate to it even though at different levels.

*Interestingly, while your works are intricately detailed, you use vivid colours Jayasri, and Rithika chooses earthy tones; your style draws parallel to folk traditions while Rithika's works look like Gaudi's mosaic. How does the rendition impact the narratology?*

**JB:** I grew up in Bengal in a traditional family. Colour was all around me, right from the morning walk where I would do sun-salutations and absorb the light-yellow sunlight that turned into deep orange within seconds,

to the red vermilion powder used in festive times. So, use of colours comes naturally to me. But how you do it forms the sensibility of a practice. There are layers, cross-hatch patterns and textures. There are folk references, contemporary elements and imaginary symbolisation. By the end of it, it truly becomes my work.

**RM:** I have always admired the style and narration of folk art. My own work is influenced by that of Gaudi's mosaic since I live in the city and experience it all the time. Then the process of my creation sometimes involves folding paper. It creates subtle lines that are part of the final work, and also renders a mosaic-like pattern. Mark making itself is meditative. Drawing lines and then filling colours. It is repetitive and laborious, yet therapeutic.

*Are there personal references, or to your own affiliations, in what you make?*

**RM:** There are no direct references of my own life or beliefs as such, although the reactions are very much mine to the happenings around me.

**JB:** In my works, the process is very personal. I have had a traumatic life. With several aborted pregnancies and still-born children, I was on a war with life. I was unhappy because people around me, my family, were unhappy with all that was happening with me. So, I had to learn to be happy. I took it upon myself to love, to be peaceful and in harmony. The art I make, therefore, takes this message forward. It is a happy image. It is about fantasy. It is about dreams.





PUBLISHED BY VINCENT ADAIKALRAJ AND OWNED BY VINCENT ADAIKALRAJ AND PUBLISHED FROM  
#127, TTK ROAD, ALWARPET, CHENNAI - 600018 AND PRINTED BY SRINIVASAN K AT SRIKALS GRAPHICS  
PRIVATE LIMITED, #5 BALAJI NAGAR, 1<sup>ST</sup> STREET, EKATTUTHANGAL, CHENNAI - 600032. EDITOR - PRAVEENA SHIVRAM  
RNI reg no. TNEG/2013/51944

