

RITHIKA MERCHANT "LUNA TABULATORUM"



Decadence Darling
Allison C. Meier - Randall Morris

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RITHIKA MERCHANT "LUNA TABULATORUM"



Queen of Life and Death, 2015 | 21 x 17 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Lilith Births The Djinn, 2015 | 39 x 27.5 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper

Humanity can look deeper into the universe more than ever before, with 2015 witnessing the New Horizons spacecraft passing Pluto, and the Hubble Space Telescope marking 25 years in orbit. Yet the closest astral object — the moon — remains a startling vision in our sky, both familiar and mysterious. It's something we can know scientifically, having sent human explorers to its surface almost 50 years ago, and still appreciate its enigmatic power. It is a place of gods, like Selene of ancient Greece; a blamed source of madness and mania, as it's rooted in "Lunatic"; and folklore that ranges from werewolves of Europe to the moon rabbit of Asia. Simultaneously, it pulls the tides, eclipses the sun, and reflects the sun into our dark nights.

The moon holds all these knowable and inscrutable identities, like the different selves contained within each of us. Rithika Merchant's *Luna Tabulatorum* evokes this multifaceted meaning of the moon through narratives that reflect the long history of its mythological influence. Like her previous series *Comparative Mythology*, these new pieces are omnivorous with their global influences, reflecting Merchant's personal journey that has covered India, the United States, and Spain, as well as our common cultural connection with the moon. In "Lycanthropy" (2015), a wolf merges with the arched back of a human, the Venn diagram of their bodies encapsulating a celestial illumination. And in "Selenography" (2014), a globe with lunar topography is at the center of a gaping eye, stars of the universe filling in the space around the oculus while plants sprout above and roots wind below. Meanwhile in "Howl" (2015), white wolf heads emerge phantasmagorically from a sun shape, their heads thrown back beneath the looming shape of that grey orb.

Cycles of life and death are throughout Merchant's work, where skulls emerge from bodies still sporting flesh, and veins course between primordial figures, the human form always in flux between the bestial and the celestial. The moon repeats as a connecting presence, just as it has gazed over centuries of human history, a shared experience of its phases across time and place.



Divine Receptacle, 2015 | 23.6 x 20 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper

Rithika Merchant's Melismatic Conversations by Randall Morris

Rithika Merchant draws us into her observations of the She-Moon. She has to. She must. She is compelled to. She is the spatter of spat pigment around the female hand in the Paleolithic cave. It is a rite of passage in her moving between the world trees of the forest of mythos. She is a brilliant woman and her take on an ancient subject has to shriek and cry and break through the self-censuring walls of her own intellect. Her most successful drawings play on the sensual edge of Thanatos, without sidestepping Bawon Samdi's Void.

The drawings are commentaries on the dark and light collusions between Nature and humanity's need to make imagery, to make secrets, to make signs that never leave their sourcepoints in the mystical body. The New Age might try to call this shamanism but it isn't. She is a contemporary artist who steps into and out of the mainstream at will, using her storytelling and meditations. She is subtle in her succinctness. There are no accidents in her drawings, even down to how the paper engages with the drawing as in the cover of this catalog.

These drawings fold themselves around mystery but always reward close examination. They are never solipsistic. They never steal from their sources because they are in a constant state of melismatic conversations with the subject matter.

Merchant has chosen to guide the flow of discourse. We never lose sight of her participation in current Indian and Western art but she has taken it to the world and used it as a burning arrow into the larger cacophony of world art. Perhaps that is indeed the most apt thing to say here; that these drawings are flaming arrows into the etheric bodies of our mythological quests and questionings. To go on, to fulfill oneself, one needs to confront, understand, and ultimately internalize the archetypes. With this set of drawings Rithika Merchant exchanges words with the She-Moon, the oneiric beginning of what the female cycles are, female before and during feminism, a dialogue that never ends, distilled to clear essences in a tight forma alembic, infusions of soul that ultimately create the Mother-web between civilizations.



Syzygy, 2015 | 27.5 x 20 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper

LUNA TABULATORUM

For nearly all of the recorded history of mankind - the moon - the brightest object in the night sky, and the only celestial body with features visible to the naked eye - has captured the imagination and interest of people everywhere. There are countless odes to the moon in music, literature, art and religion. The moon had been linked to madness, transformation, femininity and the occult.

The moon was also thought to be the resting place of the gods, hence the moon's earliest significance was sacred. The moon and the sun are the foundations on which many of the world's ancient religions have been founded.

Islam follows a lunar calendar. In Kabbalah Judaism the moon is the symbol of King David. In Hinduism, Shiva is symbolised by the moon. Many well known mythologies feature lunar deities as well, such as greek goddesses Artemis and Selene and male gods such as Sin of Mesopotamia and Ibis of Thebes.

The monthly cycle of the moon has also been linked to the menstrual cycle by many cultures. There are links between the words for menstruation and moon in many languages.

I see the moon as a meaningful universal object that links humanity by its importance, its presence and its significance. Being particularly interested in creating links between cultures the moon has been a very enlightening muse.

Rithika Merchant: At The Dusk of Identity by Decadence Darling

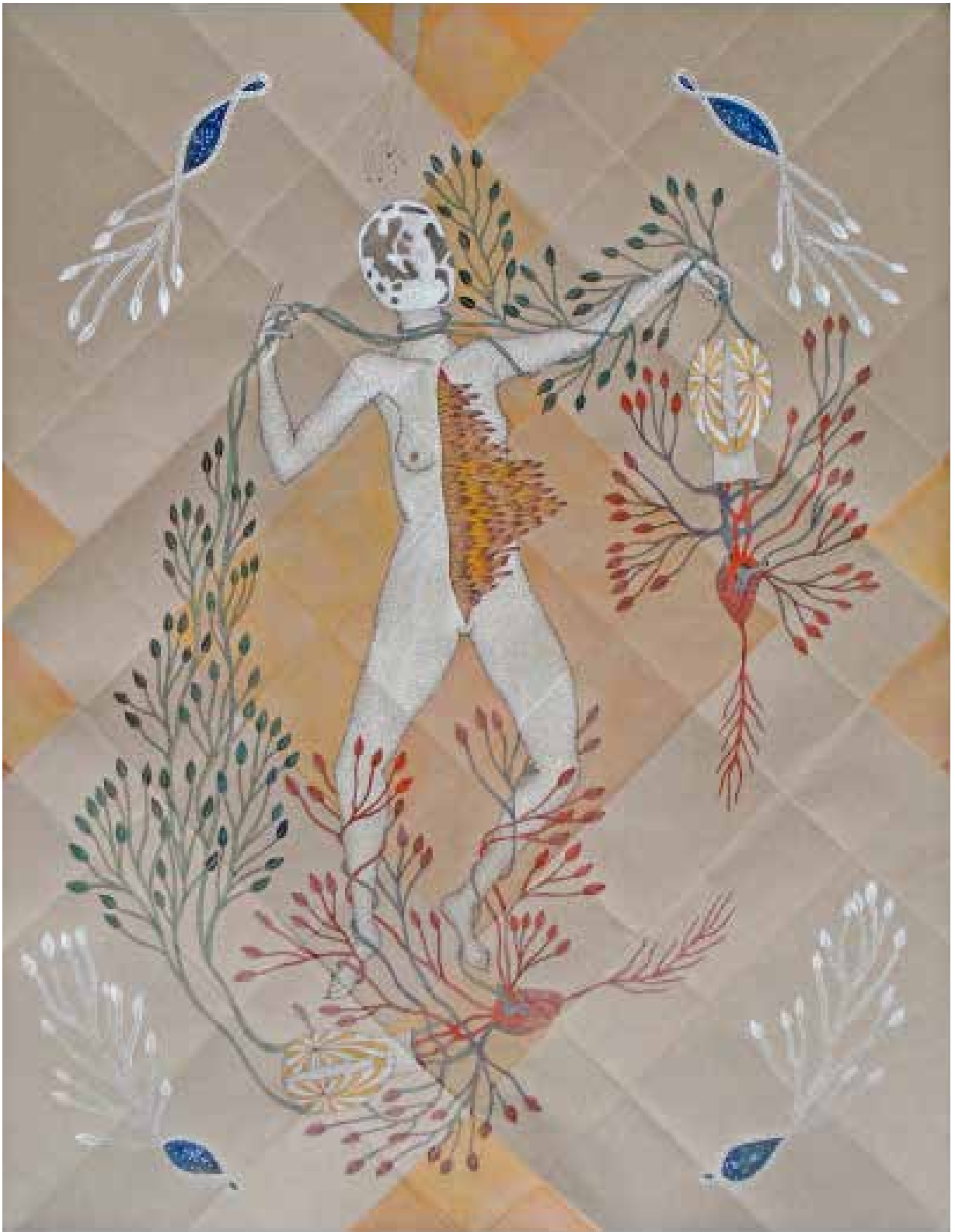
Division requires a line whereby our minds process an object or concept not based on its entirety but upon independent qualities separated from the wholeness. Spirituality in its varied traditions throughout time is essentially to realize how you identify independently from the wholeness, while simultaneously crossing those intellectual lines of division to identify as part of the wholeness. It is a process of unifying duality while maintaining individuality. It is a process where one will find darkness in the light and light in the darkness. That glowing spectral satellite in the night sky reveals a host of mysteries beyond the shadows, it reveals the partitions within our psyche. It is that relationship with our individual mind and the wholeness of the universe that Luna Tabulatorum establishes a narrative to explore how natural phenomena has an effect on humanity and how division is both instituted and transcended.

Inspired by ancient mythology and religions the works of Luna Tabulatorum pays homage to classical lunar archetypes by removing the lines that divide time and culture in the form of iconography, and fashions contemporary allegories that reflect Rithika Merchant's personal individuation. As the artist explains, "Even though I am interested in myth and stories from the outside world, I use a lot of my own personal symbolism and my personal visual vocabulary in my work and essentially it is my perspective on these existing ideas."

Rithika has created a contemporary mythos that places a woman, the moon, as the protagonist of the narrative. "So few stories are told from a woman's perspective and/or place women as the protagonist." Her work opens "up a discussion about how women are viewed within society and the role that they are often forced to play." Historically it has been through myth that women are liberated from social roles, albeit, their mythical depiction is often demonic. The witch is a woman divinely connected to a realm beyond the material, and is therefore above the social construct of duality. She does not live by the same laws of good and evil like the ordinary man, and because of this her union with the wholeness is deemed a perversion by those who cannot visualize the greater picture.



Selenography, 2014 | 23.6 x 20 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Lunatic, 2015 | 23.6 x 20 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper

The feminine lens through which we view the narrative of Luna Tabulatorum, though subtle, is significant. In the paintings Selenography and Orbiter the feminine lens is most noticeable by the vulva shape in which we view humanity and the universe. Furthermore in Luna Tabulatorum the order of life is not a realist depiction. Lines aren't straight, bodies are irregular. This is an intuitive perspective showing the creativity of creation, not the science.

“One rarely sees a straight line in nature. The circle is a more organic shape. Circular shapes are also reminiscent of eggs, birth and cosmogony. The straight line and by extension a phallic shape represents causality or viewing a situation as purely getting from one place to the other. The circle by contrast expresses the idea that there is interrelation and more than one way to express an idea. It also holds the sum of many different parts.”

This femininity is further expressed in the color washed paper and the light application of gouache and ink that leaves a stain. The artist controls the space in which to apply the color but the pigment settles in a cloudy impression, making each mark of the brush solely unique. Both line and color define the strength of female intelligence and creativity.

Through her paintings Rithika is inviting us to look deeper into our feminine nature. But what does feminine mean? Going beyond the behavioral characteristics we associate with being feminine, and referring to the nature of the moon, we can begin by associating the feminine with darkness. Now, what does darkness mean? Due to misunderstanding the mysteries of darkness many women have been persecuted due to this association, as it was and still is with witches.

In the painting The Moon Devours Her Children the relationship between corporeal form and the unbound cosmos depicts how the universe is living and personable. The organs of the humans are externalized and branch out into the universe, showing that our true life force is linked to the universe. However, in this particular painting the moon withdraws the life force, thus representing the moon as destructive. Light is associated with life, and therefore night, which brings an end to light, is associated with death. But without night, without death, there would be imbalance. This malefic feature of darkness is what people fear, and out of fear they feel they need to protect themselves from darkness, rather than embrace it.

In Queen of Life and Death, a bird carries crowned Death into the air. The bird is an animal that can go from the ground to the air at will and is therefore transcendental to the laws that bind other creatures to the earth. This connection with limitlessness symbolizes death as a transcendental process. This painting is the moonlight of Rithika's narrative that illuminates the hidden nature of the darkness of Luna Tabulatorum, for now our perspective shifts to a broader lens as we realize that death is at its lowest point a grotesque biological process, and at its highest point spiritual emancipation, and somewhere in the middle it is the catalyst for transformation. Death becomes light.

Life becomes dark. The creative side of female nature is inherently dark as it is internal, but it is within the darkness of the womb that life is manifested. That same darkness that was once malefic is now benefic. As shown in Genesis it is through the blood sacrifice of menstruation that woman creates life. Mystical traditions have taken this biological phenomenon to understand how all individuals must enter an internal state of darkness and to make internal sacrifices to create their manifest destiny. The microcosmic human experience of fertility and the process of birth is projected philosophically in order to understand the macrocosmic universe.

“I have found that often creation comes from a dark place, which is why I find creation myths so compelling. These myths are found in almost all human cultures. There are numerous myths and ideas which speak of creation by the dismemberment or out of some body part or fluid of a primordial being.”

The pentagram pointing upward signifies invoking divine power down into the material elements, or pointing downward signifies evoking divinity from within the elements. Evoking divine power within/below oneself has been classified as evil, for it is posited that divinity should be invoked from above/outside oneself. Rithika expresses the concept of power from the higher Divine/masculine reflecting in the lower Material/feminine, much like the moon receiving light from the sun, by crowning her subjects and illuminating their hands and feet with halos. Notice those symbols of divinity are circular and recall what Rithika previously mentioned about circles.

“The use of crowns and halos are to draw attention to the importance and power of a character rather than its divinity. For me putting halos on the hands and feet of the beings is all about elevating and making their actions divine or powerful.”

Through deconstruction, revolutions, and transfigurations the individual experiences an identity crisis. The divisional lines between body, mind, and spirit begin to evaporate. In Lunatic, the individual is tangled by multiple personalities learning how to balance their natures.

Lyconography shows us we need not fear our animal nature but to embrace it, for divine works can be made. It is by denying this animal nature that we divide our self and identify with only the aspects we do not fear, thus separating our identity from the wholeness of our being.

“The Moon teaches us to balance different aspects of our personality. It teaches us that to be whole we have to accept the darker side of our selves—be it the destructive aspects or the more taboo (as judged by society) aspects of ourselves.”

The answer to spiritual emancipation has always been right above us in the night sky. When we learn to unify our spirit to our mind and our mind to our nature, our bodies become the painting the Divine Receptacle. We become a vessel for amrta, the nectar of the gods, for which the universe is sustained. Rithika Merchant's Luna Tabulatorum curves those straight lines of division within our mind and transmits light to the darkest aspect of our being—our Self. Luna Tabulatorum is the illumination of Self undivided by identity, nor eclipsed by the narrative of scientific enlightenment.

“In modern times and for the foreseeable future, science gives us a complete explanation for most things. However, it places humans as part of a greater scheme rather than the centre of our own narrative. As much as science gives a more accurate description of humanity it takes away the spiritual power given to every human to understand their own destiny. The moon and its legends and symbolism allow us try to bring humanity back to the centre of concern.”



Lycanthropy, 2015 | 20 x 27.5 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Howl, 2015 | 23.6 x 20 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



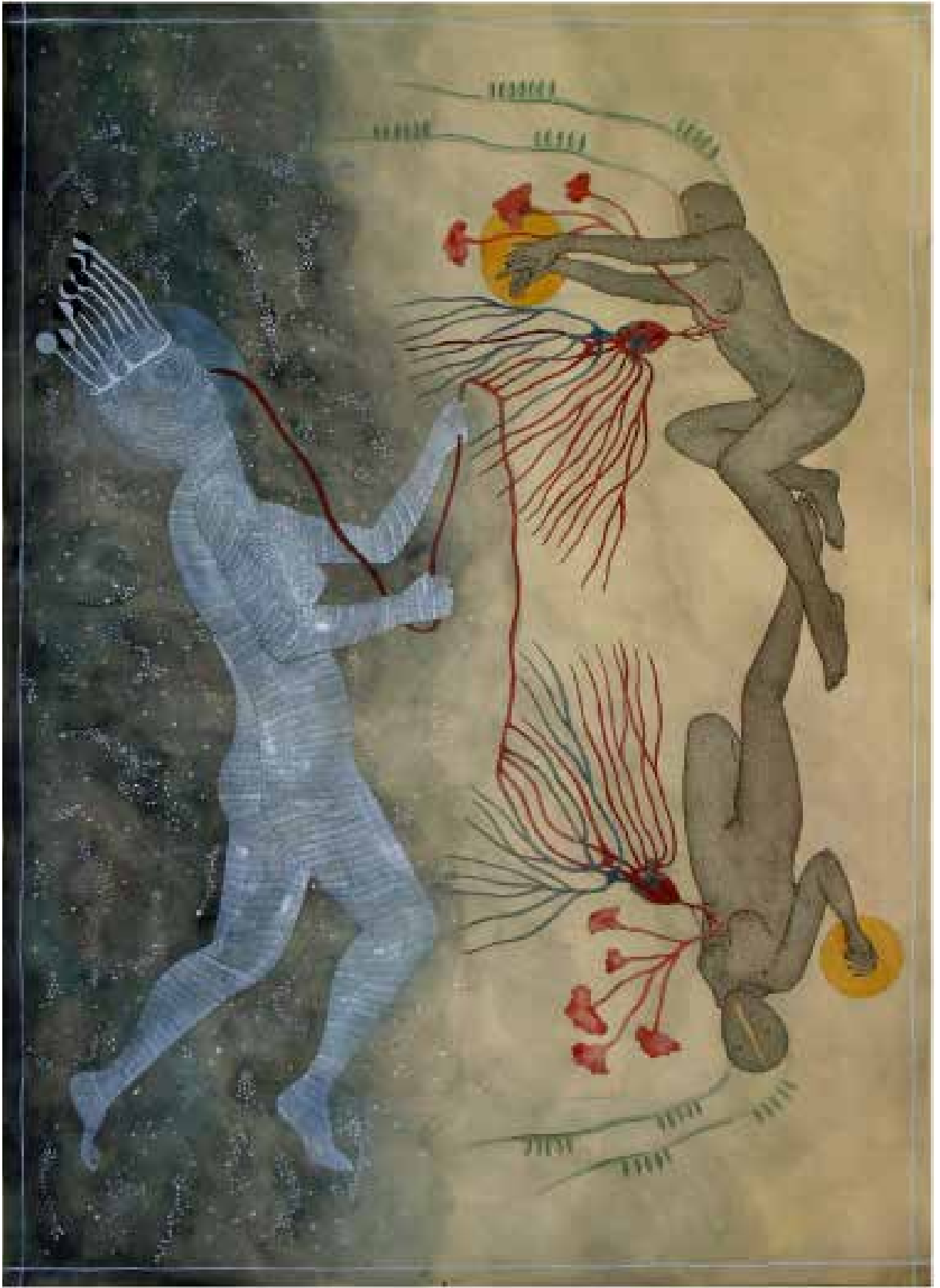
Council of Choice , 2015 | 20 x 33, 4 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Orbiter, 2015 | 20 x 23.6 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Genesis, 2015 | 27.5 x 39 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



The Moon Devours Her Children, 2015 | 20 x 27.5 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Sacred Moon (FertileCrescent), 2015 | 20 x 27.5 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper



Time Keeper, 2015 | 39 x 27.5 in | Gouache and Ink on Paper

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Contributors

Decadence Darling explores the esoteric elements of chaos, death, and transformation in art, philosophy, and society as a means to redefine our understanding of darkness. Through written word and conducting interviews with artists such as Kazuhiro Tsuji and El Gato Chimney his work has been published online and in literature in Beautiful Bizarre Magazine, as well as his personal blog, "Manifesto of Decadence".

Allison C. Meier is a writer on overlooked history and visual culture. Based in Brooklyn, she works as a staff writer at Hyperallergic, a senior editor at Atlas Obscura, and has contributed to the New York Times, GOOD magazine, Narratively, Artinfo, Artnews, and other publications.

Randall Morris is a writer and curator and the co-owner of Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, which mounts more than a dozen exhibitions each year. He taught the first in-depth classes in the United States on art brut and self-taught artists for the education department of the American Folk Art Museum, New York, and has organized exhibitions of the work of Jamaican intuitive artists and Justin McCarthy. He is the author of numerous articles and catalog essays on ethnographic art, contemporary ceramics, basketry sculpture, and non-mainstream artists from the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, and New Guinea, including African American artists, Emery Blagdon, Martín Ramírez, and Joseph Yoakum.

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Rithika Merchant 2015

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