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TOGETHER: PEOPLE

Rajni Perera is the artist Toronto needs right now

Rajni Perera's art offers a vision of hope for the future. Through her work, she imagines new — and better — ways of being human.

By [Sadiya Ansari](#) Special to the Star

 Sun., March 14, 2021 |  3 min. read

READ THE CONVERSATION

At first glance, [Rajni Perera's](#) art is otherworldly. The painter, sculptor and mixed-media artist explores dream worlds, the immigrant identity and multiverses. All of these themes are present in her recent series, "Travellers".



The images feature androgynous figures in a rich colour palette — bright blue, ochre and gold — set in a time period following the fall of white supremacy. The subjects are diasporic people, those who are left to create a new world.

“It gives hope to the displaced,” says Perera, 35. “It gives me hope as a marginalized person.”

Perera is the artist Toronto needs right now: her work permeates boundaries, drawing on influences from Indian miniaturism to manga, and while her expression is ever-evolving, she’s laser-focused on producing work that acts as a “restorative force,” one that transcends oppressive models to reach a more just place. Over the past few years, she has steadily been exhibiting in Toronto and across the country.

But it was through sheer grit that Perera paved her path, one that earned her praise abroad before she enjoyed it at home.



Born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Perera came to Canada when she was nine. She lived between North York and Scarborough, and when she landed at OCAD, she commuted four hours a day to get to school. Perera then moved downtown and worked two part-time jobs while in school full-time to make ends meet. It still wasn’t enough — she needed to start selling her work.

Perera started to curate shows. The first place she hung her work was Moonbean Café in Kensington Market. By the time she graduated in 2011, Perera was three months pregnant with her daughter, Sayuri.



She sent her daughter to daycare at seven months because she couldn't afford not to work, and when Sayuri was with her, Perera worked with her daughter strapped to her chest. It was a tough time. "I had a little kid, I didn't have any money and I wasn't really able to make my work," she says.

But then Perera ran into Zanette Singh, a friend who runs the Parkdale-based Margin of Eras gallery. Singh encouraged her to apply for a micro-grant, and her bid was successful; she used the grant to create a small body of work that was exhibited at the Gladstone Hotel. "Without [Zanette], I probably wouldn't have a career," Perera says.



Ultimately, Perera's DIY approach outside of institutions made her art more accessible. When she produced her own shows, she created tiers of work for purchase: a digital print, a fine art print, an original work. People who were only able to afford a digital print in earlier years have come back to commission original work.

"If I had gone into a gallery with representation off the bat, I would not have been able to retain those clients."



Perera is happy to see how artists finding their audiences on the internet is changing the model of representation, redistributing the power gallerists had in selecting artists and implementing exclusive contracts. “We have many platforms now [where we can] put our work and our ideas forward,” says Perera. “When a gallerist comes to us, we have more cards in our hand than we used to.”

She also sees another possible world through the lens of the pandemic. The tragedy of how it ripped through marginalized communities has created “clear and utter transparency” about how vulnerable these communities are, she says.



It's meant that people in power are listening to activists that Perera admires, like artist and BLM organizer Syrus Marcus Ware and carpenter Khaleel Seivwright, who builds tiny shelters for the homeless.

"When I feel shitty, I think about what these activists have done and then I think it's going to be fine," says Perera. "We just have a lot of work to do."

Being a parent only amplifies Perera's voice when it comes to advocating for change. It's less about activism and more about necessity, she says: "It just has to be better."



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