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Powerful Women, Desirable Men: Burmese Painter Richie Nath Revamps Mythology

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In the colourfully alluring world of Burmese painter Richie Nath (also known as Richie Htet), the artist presents us with archetypes fit for our times. His acrylics show us powerful women exuding that hard, action-focused *yang* energy and male characters not afraid of melting into a softer, more compassionate *yin* expression.

For generations the pervading culture has tended to portray women as passive objects of desire, as opposed to males as active subjects, powerful heroes. But the times are changing – from Disney cartoons to the white walls of the contemporary art galleries, the old paradigm is being reinvented. And artists like Richie are taking up the role of putting these ideas into fierce, yet relatable, images.

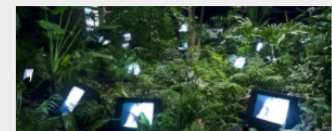
The body takes centrestage

The kind of anti-patriarchal worldview that Richie subscribes to does not deny the flesh. The sexual and sensual element is always at the forefront of his oeuvre. How could it not be, seeing as the artist is interested in mythologies in which the body takes centrestage, and where desire is the fuel for action.

There is not only gender equality in the way the artist looks at his subjects, but also in the way that Richie endows his figures with a strong sense of self. His women proudly display their breasts and hips, just as the men parade their perky butts and give us luscious stares.



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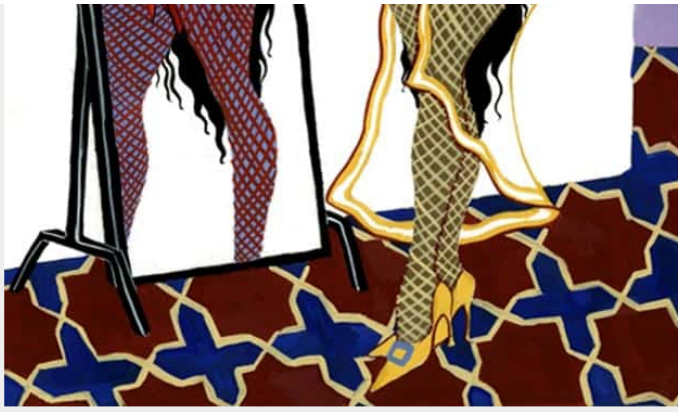
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Richie Nath, *Untitled*, 2021.

To the artist, the body is not something to hide, and his characters are not worried of becoming prey to unwanted attention. Whether nude or covered up, the women wield weapons and wear fashionable shoes with a sense of unapologetic self-expression. In their attitude they are both femme fatales and powerful individuals fighting against oppression. Men openly surrender to the love and lust for one another, unchained to the need of having to prove themselves to society, or hide their most tender feelings.

Who is Richie Nath?

But who is Burmese painter Richie Nath? He might have been a diplomat, had it all gone according to his mother's plan. Yet his art is all but diplomatic. Growing up as a creative soul, homosexual, half-Burmese half-Indian in Yangon – where being gay is a crime – the artist decided that pussyfooting around was not for him. His style is excessive, powerful, erotic, and simultaneously refined and elegant. His stylised lines remind of an Aubrey Beardsley meets Georges Pichard's Ulysse – albeit back from a Holi Festival.



Richie Nath, *Untitled*, 2021.

Speaking of his influences, Richie says, "There are many artists whom I look up to, but I'd say I don't reference them directly. They are all digested by me. In the contemporary realm I can think about David Hockney, but it's really ancient art, in its view of the male body, that inspires me. I look a lot at the miniatures from Hindu scriptures and Greek sculptures."

Richie grew up in a household where venturing into an artistic or creative career didn't seem like an option. "My mum wanted me to do international relations, but I didn't feel it was right for me. I always wanted to be an artist," he explains. "When I was a child I would make my mother and father draw images for me. I was obsessed with circles for some reason, and if the circle wasn't perfect I'd cry."

He went to boarding school in the UK, and then studied fashion illustration at The London College of Fashion. Studying fashion illustration was seen more as a doorway to a 'normal job' for him. "Back in Yangon I even had a stint as fashion magazine art director, but from that experience, I understood that I don't enjoy working with other people that much!" he laughs. He then decided to put all his energies into his art.

While the content of his paintings comes from childhood stories, related to the mythology rooted in his own South Asian culture, his first artistic obsession was Botticelli's Venus, which imprinted upon his artistic imagination ever since: "From there I got into a lot of early Renaissance art. And that's also when I decided to keep growing my interest towards the naked human body. Botticelli was a gateway, as I was already very much into Greek statuary."

For periods of time in Ancient Greece, homosexuality was perfectly integrated into society and was even an aspect of the student-teacher relationship. This was mirrored in Greek mythology, where we have plenty of warriors/lovers, such as Achilles and Patroclus, Theseus and Pirithous – and not to forget the incorrigible old Zeus kidnapping pretty boys in the weirdest of disguises.

Queerness in Southeast Asian mythology

The artist points out that queer elements also exist in Southeast Asian mythology, albeit less on the forefront: "In Indian and South Asian cultures we do have stories of trans women, and even in Burma we have a religious ritual called Nat Gadaw, where priestesses try to become vessels for possession of the Nats – which are god-like spirits venerated in Myanmar and neighbouring countries in conjunction with Buddhism. While both women and men can participate in this ritual, it's mostly men who dress up in female clothing and dance. Many trans and gay men take part in this. There is also another similar ritual in India and Pakistan, focused on the Hijras. These are seen as mystical figures and are said to bring good luck" he explains. "So you do have some elements of that which you can pick and choose from, but I'd say in my art a lot of it is just my own creation. I wanted to take these mythologies and make them my own, adding a queer element."

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One of his favourite stories from the Ramayana is *The Chase of the Golden Deer*, a story of love and transformation: "The Ramayana wasn't originally part of the Burmese tradition. It was Thai and when the Burmese kingdom conquered Thailand, this story was brought along with the theatre performance of the Ramayana."

Responding to the coup in Myanmar through art

Richie is currently in Paris, where he is doing a residency for six months. As such he's managed to escape the extremely dangerous situation in Myanmar. "Most of the artists had to leave the country after the coup. The art scene was quite vibrant before, and I was able to exhibit my works in Yangon, despite the potentially controversial content," he recounts. "But many people have been arrested and tortured. My brother is currently in prison and my mother was arrested and then released."

As an artist working abroad, he feels compelled to take a political stance with his art. That's what he is doing with the new series of larger works that he is presently working on for an upcoming show. "My work wasn't overtly political until the coup happened on February 1st. That's when I decided to do a lot of political work relating to the history of the country, to support the resistance against the military. I'm weary because my family is still in the country, but at the same time I feel the responsibility to let people know what's happening in Myanmar."





Richie Nath, *Bitch better have my democracy*, 2021.

An example is the painting *Bitch Better have my Democracy*, which is based on two sets of imagery. The first is the goddess Durga slaying the demon Manisura and the second is St Michael defeating Satan. To the artist, the protagonist of the painting represents the personification of Burma and the ogre is the personification of the Tamadaw (the armed forces of Myanmar).

Another subversion of religious iconography is *Maya and the Burning Village*. The painting is based on the image of Queen Maya, the mother of Buddha, giving birth to the buddha under a sal tree: "I first conceived the idea during the Rohingya genocide, but have since expanded it to represent displacement and the desecration of villages and communities of ethnic minorities," explains the artist. "The painting depicts a woman and her child, the women resting her hand on a barren sal tree (much like how queen Maya is depicted holding the sal tree for support), a cowering child next to her as the village burns behind them. This is a direct inversion of a sacred image heralding the birth of the enlightened one."



Richie Nath, *Maya and the Burning Village*, 2021.

Finally, one of his latest works with political content is *Autopsy of the Irrawaddy*. The artist explains this was conceived in the first weeks after the coup, when many members of the democratically elected government were arrested. "Several National League of Democracy party leaders, as well as common civilians were abducted from their homes, then tortured, dismembered, cut open, their organs were taken out, and then stitched back up again, their bodies dumped on their doorsteps the next morning. The images were shared on the news and social media, and they are burned in my memory forever."

The artist painted their autopsies, the body stitched up in the shape of the Irrawaddy river. The paintings deals with the concept of exploitation, both of human bodies as well as nature: "The government has decided to sell the natural resources of Myanmar, especially the controversial building of the Myintsone dam at the confluence of the Mali and N'mai rivers, which is the source of the Irrawaddy river, the biggest and most powerful river in Myanmar," says the artist. "The building of the dam will have severe environmental and human impact (displacing many local indigenous communities)." Above the dead figures the artist represented a hovering sorcerer demon monk, implying the complicity of the religious elite.

Magical Realism: a balm for our times?

Looking at Richie's painting, the association with the magical realism comes quite naturally. This way of looking at reality was originally created by literary works from Latin America, but spread throughout different art mediums – including painting – and regions across the world. Magical realism comprises a provisory suspension of reality, and the introduction of "magical" elements, seamlessly knitted into the fabric of everyday life, often full of political innuendos.

This is perhaps a much-needed balm in today's overly consumerist society, where there seems to be no room for sobriety, the unexpected, or the poetic amidst the mundane. And yet, the magic realist dimension

for enchantment, the unexpected, of the poetic amongst the mundane. And yet, the magic realist dimension was where the ancient cultures were constantly living in. In traditional cultures each and every object was imbued of divinity, and even the natural elements were a manifestation of the divine.



Richie Nath, *Untitled*, 2021.

What Richie Nath's paintings seem to ask is: "Could this moment of revelation of a higher realm happen in the front of our mirror, whilst dressing for a vernissage, or getting ready for a night with a lover?" To the artist, of course the answer is yes, *especially* then.

As Richie sees it, the holy and the divine has never left us. That's why when his women look at themselves in the mirror they see themselves as powerful fanged goddesses. The art of Richie Nath helps us kick to the curb the dry, boring vision of the world, and rediscover that sense of wonder, potency, and possibility within ourselves.

Works by Richie Nath will be on view at the group show, *Notes from the Motherland*, at *Aicon Contemporary, New York*, from 16 December 2021 – 22 January 2022. For more information, go to: <https://www.aiconcontemporary.com/exhibitions/notes-from-the-motherland>.

Follow Richie Nath's practice via his Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/richiehtet>.

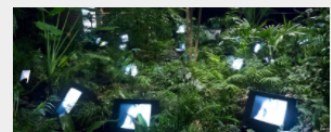
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Portrait of the artist.

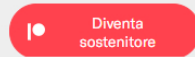
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