

ARTS ILLUSTRATED

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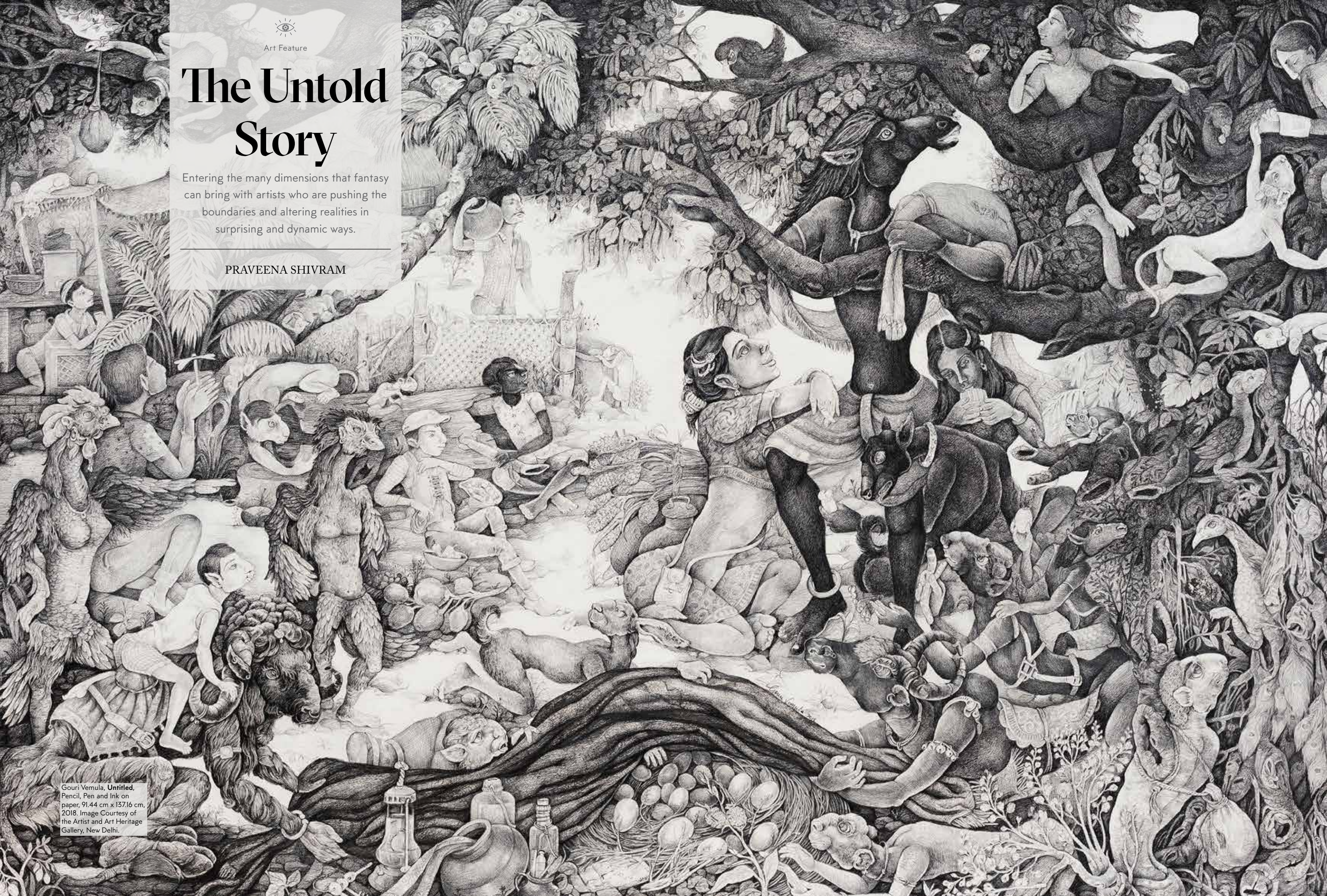
Art Feature

The Untold Story

Entering the many dimensions that fantasy can bring with artists who are pushing the boundaries and altering realities in surprising and dynamic ways.

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

Gouri Vemula, *Untitled*,
Pencil, Pen and Ink on
paper, 91.44 cm x 137.16 cm,
2018. Image Courtesy of
the Artist and Art Heritage
Gallery, New Delhi.



A long time ago, I imagine, a flustered parent (because, of course) descending into the calm of the night, decided to tell a story. This story, fuelled by the child's open-hearted listening, would soar through imaginary skies with the easy grace of an eagle, and then come to rest in silence, where another untold story would be born. Another untold story would breathe again. It's hard to describe or even delineate the stories that make up our world. Especially in today's world inundated with words and images, stories have turned into unrecognisable pulp, squeezed dry of meaning. And yet they exist, palpably so. In an unrestrained performance, in a seamless novel, in meditative concentration, and in a tired parent's voice – stories manage to rise out of the quicksand of words to find hard ground again, plant their feet and grow.

And, sometimes, they grow into beanstalks.

They take you into that moment where the unreal becomes real; where you listen to Samuel Coleridge and Rajinikanth and willingly

suspend disbelief; where you don't question the merits of reality but simply accept it as an intrinsic part of who you are; and where a different way of seeing becomes a new way of being.

In 2011, when an earthquake in Japan caused the Fukushima power plant to explode, artist Takashi Kuribayashi, who was always concerned with boundaries and the spaces they create, suddenly became aware of invisible boundaries, things we don't see, or choose not to see. 'When the power plant exploded, there was so much invisible radioactivity diffused into the air, and yet, a boundary line was drawn within 50 km of the power plant and another at 25 km. I found that ironic and contradictory, and wanted to respond to invisible spaces through my work,' he says. For Kuribayashi, this new way of being and seeing, so immediate and personal and yet so far-reaching and omnipresent, became the lens through which he navigated reality. 'Through my work I intend to make people think about what they do not notice or perhaps pretend not to notice and make

them aware of it. But also, I feel, the work must always be beautiful. I don't mean it has to only be a positive experience, but often a thing that defines many problems. I want people to feel the human saga, the story, the destiny, as a place of beauty,' he adds. In one of his recent works titled *Entrances* (2018), strips of one-sided mirrors are shaped like the trunk of trees – three of them in total – the strips moving with the tranquil fluidity of wind chimes on a quiet afternoon, allowing you to step right in, into the middle, and to look up and gaze into the image of an open sky, shot as a reflection on water. Just that one sentence opens up so many different perspectives, all embedded in beauty, that you realise Kuribayashi's ideology and deep investment with the invisible is not idle preoccupation but simply a way of life, a way of, well, seeing and being. Clearly, he has climbed up that beanstalk.

With Canadian-artist Megan Rooney, the experience of the invisible is different – if Kuribayashi's works bring our attention to the invisible, the unknown, Rooney's is about making the invisible tangible, making it known. In ways that are completely fluid and organic, whimsical and layered. 'My work expands across painting, performance, written and spoken word, sculpture and installation. My practice engages with materiality and the human subject, deeply invested in the present moment: the festering chaos of politics with its myriad cruelties and the laden violence



Takashi Kuribayashi, **Volkenmeer (sea clouds)**, Black soil from Towada, Wood, Mist and Mixed Media, 7 m x 6 m x 10 m, 2012. Image Courtesy of the Artist.



Takashi Kuribayashi, **Entrances**: The connection between the sea and the sky, 7000 5-mm sheets of one-side mirror, tape, light box, mixed media, 600 cm x 90 cm x 3 trees, 2018. Exhibited at Saison Enfance, Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Image Courtesy of the Artist.



Takashi Kuribayashi, **Entrances**: The connection between the sea and the sky, 7000 5-mm sheets of one-side mirror, tape, light box, mixed media, 600 cm x 90 cm x 3 trees, 2018. Exhibited at Saison Enfance, Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

of our society, so resident in the home, in the female, in the body. My work hovers somewhere between identification and critique; each iteration of my work is merely a fragment of a larger whole, a *gesamtkunstwerk* that is ordered by no single framing mechanism,’ she says. I looked up that delicious German word and the ever-helpful Google tells me that it means any work of art that makes use of many art forms. And I thought that would work for fantasy too – a world that is made up of many different kinds of realities. In Rooney’s work, at least, that aspect of the ‘many’ in ‘one’ is constantly playing peek-a-boo with you – you think you have it figured out and then something pops out and shifts your perspective again. In one of her recent performance pieces – *Sun Down Moon Up* – a group of female magpies invade Mount Athos in Greece. Mount Athos, home to 20 monasteries, allows only men to visit and not women. Mount Athos by any other name would probably be Sabarimala (although we refrain from venturing into that volatile situation, for the moment at least), but in Rooney’s work, it is interesting to see how such invisible boundaries become urgent, shrill cries for action, for retelling, for reimagining. ‘The characters in my work are drawn from many sources. I am in a continual state of observation, a relentless kind of looking at and processing of people in public spaces – like shopping malls and restaurants, on public transport, while jogging or at a party. But most

of the looking happens in private scenarios, in the homes that I find myself in and also the homes I grew up in. The characters are not true to memory or reality. They don’t profess to be accurate depictions of people I know and they are not honest or complete. They take bits and pieces of different stories and lived experiences, some are my own and some are not. The characters are then woven into new stories and find their way out of those stories and into materials,’ she explains.

Materials with a capital M do become central to Rooney’s work, not by virtue of their materiality but perhaps more by the stories that materiality carries – for the artist and for the viewer. In one of her works titled *The Lament*, a profusion of materials are used – garbage bags, nets, mop, rope, tubes, rubber gloves, cleaning brushes, paint, plastic bags and sponges – and they come together for a powerful story of loss, anguish, helplessness and a murky darkness that somehow, to me, even seemed to carry a distinct sense of mirth. ‘I’ve always had a strong impulse to tell stories. Storytelling is central to human existence – it is the common link between every known culture. Sometimes I find the words and they stay as words, later translated into audio recordings or performed live. Communication with or without words, because sometimes the story can also exist in a smear of dirty pink directly on the wall. I don’t make a hierarchy between materials, I feel there isn’t any inherent truth in materials

alone – materials are what you make them do. I’m interested in how materials can be destabilised when combined in the context of an exhibition,’ she says.

That state of destabilisation, of subverting experiences into the new norm is probably what artist Sunanda Khajuria would agree with, when the culture and flavour of China became deeply ingrained with her own story. She recalls Andy



Megan Rooney, *Sun Down Moon Up*, Performance view at the Serpentine Pavillion, London, 2018. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

Megan Rooney, *Old baggy root*, Series of 36 paintings, Acrylic, Ink, Pencil, Charcoal and Pastel on paper, 229 cm x 354 cm, 2018. Installation view at DREI, Cologne. Image Courtesy of the Artist.





Sunanda Khajuria, **Moving Landscape**,
Acrylic on canvas, 125 cm x 153 cm,
2015. Image Courtesy of the Artist and
Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi.



Sunanda Khajuria, **Cold Mountain**,
Acrylic on canvas, 125 cm x 153 cm,
2014. Image Courtesy of the Artist and
Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi.

Goldsworthy's words – 'Time and change are connected to place. Real change is best understood by staying in one place' – and talks about the profound impact Chinese traditions had on her practice. 'In 2009, I travelled to China for the first time. China was an

entirely different geographical, historical and cultural entity, at least from what I had seen till then. That visit to China certainly changed my perception and I produced an entirely different plethora of visual elements, social surroundings and cultural

practices in my works,' she says. In fact, Khajuria stayed on to pursue an advanced research programme at the China Academy of Fine Art, Hangzhou, where she learnt the Chinese language and Chinese traditional art forms. 'My purpose is not to be

concerned with reconstituting a subjective fact, but with constituting a symbolic fact. When I see or listen to a story, I imagine myself in that story and that moment in time is frozen for me. I start a conversation with myself or a discussion with the world. Elements of the different stories can give me new inspiration, but through my art practice, I have the power to convert this inspiration. For me, this process is nothing more and nothing less than the creative ability of personal expression of my understanding of some aspect of life. The fact that art is quite connected to the human experience makes it unsurprising because it has always been a part of our life,' she adds.

She describes her work as 'surrealistic figurative' and that she likes to use one 'sharp, unnatural colour'. To me, however, her works seemed more psychedelic, with a hypnotic quality to it. The surrealism in her work didn't seem deliberate, but more natural, like this was simply who she was, these were her thoughts with no undue embellishments or complications, but with patterns that seemed to swirl in and out like breath. 'The language of art for me is a way of sharing my experiences with the world. Sometimes I am left speechless, and find that art has the power to communicate where words are not enough, that it can make visible the unsaid. Sometimes, art is not meant to be merely decorative or beautiful; instead, it can be a question, an argument or a

personal resolution,' she says. The colours in her works, each one defying the other with an almost regal presence minus the entourage, would probably agree.

At the other end of the spectrum with subdued, sepia-tinged colour is Gouri Vemula, whose works inhabit mythical landscapes with propriety. There is something correct, moral and ethical about this world, even if we find it unrecognisable, with elements of nature merging with the elements of humanity. There is movement, empathy, compassion and a quiet surge of hope, and there is also a feeling of being uprooted, of belonging and yet not belonging, of companionship and loneliness. If Georgette Heyer had ever created a fantasy world, it might have looked a lot like Vemula's paintings. 'My works are what I call "illustrative intensive". I love working with imagery with an ethereal feeling in monochromatic or ancient relics – the pencil becomes the key for the overall mood. I usually work on a preliminary sketch of perfect locations with impeccable detailing of the environment, of real life. And then I enhance, imagine and encompass elements of fantasy in movement, emotion and anatomy; a conscious choice combined with an eye towards a continuous spread throughout the frame,' she says. And it is there, this detailing, that brings the story – stories – alive. You see even the shadows of the story – stories – lurking just beneath the surface.

It could become overwhelming, this capacity of the human imagination that is always exponentially larger than the physical space it inhabits. And perhaps this was why Anant Ahuja and Tarini Sethi decided to launch the Irregulars Art Fair last year, now in its second edition. A space that allows all kinds of stories – and shadows – to exist, and to exist freely. 'Anti-art fairs take place all over the world and India has really needed a space like this, what with the excess artists we have but dearth of places to showcase work,' says Tarini. 'As an anti-art fair, which automatically is anti-establishment, it is in a sense, outside the periphery of normal everyday life. That being said, our policy of open-to-all call for entries and zero booths makes it a more equal space than most other art platforms. We want every kind of person to apply, and not feel the dread and anxiety that we usually feel when we see an open call or a stuffy art show. What we have also noticed is that the artists who apply are doing new and more rebellious work; we are all protesting in our own ways,' she adds.

Ultimately, maybe, it is that which the story has become today – a form of protest. And storytelling, a form of allowing thoughts to rest. Somewhere in between, the realms of fantasy – real and imagined – are still soaring in that sky with the grace – and keenness – of an eagle. And the beanstalk flourishes.



Gouri Vemula, *Untitled 1*, Mixed media on canvas, 186.7 cm x 124.5 cm, 2017. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi.

