

## Artist Statement

*Churning of the Ocean of Milk* presents a series of works on paper that are a 'compost'<sup>1</sup> of intersecting mythology, cultures and ideology. The works present new symbols that promote the importance of women and animals from a previously marginal space. While each individual work in the series has its own point of reference, collectively, the series re-tell the traditional Hindu Myth *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, from the subjective position of a foreign artist immersed in Malayalee culture. In order to make sense of the complex workings and layering of inter-cultural experience, this series portrays "mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings,"<sup>2</sup> that stay with reality and attempt to imbue the present with a sense of hopefulness.

Traditionally the myth the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* is a story that is fundamentally linked to caste in India and so it carries with it the history of the social and political. My point of reference for engaging with this story is an intersection with my own heritage in which the goddess Danu from Irish Celtic mythology (traditionally the Mother of the Tuatha De Danaan) is also the Goddess Danu (a representation of the unchurned ocean) in the Hindu myth. From this point of commonality, I have disinterred evidence of the Goddess from the Hindu myth with symbols from my heritage and popular cultures, merging visual results to re-configure the mythological story and perhaps present a cross-cultural 'Herstory' of sorts.

Coming from a heritage that has worshipped a Mother Goddess for countless generations, I was fascinated to discover a practice of live art theatre known as Theyyam in Kerala, which is a several thousand-year-old tradition that honours a Mother Goddess. This point of intersecting mother goddess devotion, is a place from which I navigated myself in Kerala, as well as a visual reference to shared culture and the rise of the power of women (particularly in the middle-class) in India; as well as the resurgence of the women's movement in the West, post-Brexit and since the election of Trump and other conservatives.

During my residency in Kerala I rescued a female street dog I named Seema. Female street dogs are the lowest of the low in Kerala society and so I named her 'Seema', which means 'border' in the local language Malayalam—as a reference to her social position and the journey of relocation she was to embark on. Several of the works in *Churning of the Ocean* follow this sub-plot, in which I insert my dog into the mythology as a 'Haraway-esque' speculative fabulation but also as a representation of love and struggle. Rescuing Seema and relocating her to Australia has been my primary focus outside of my artistic practice since 2014. I hope she can come home to Australia from Malaysia where she is currently in quarantine, later in 2017.

In physically making the works I appropriate from both Irish and Hindu illuminated manuscripts using metallic inks with a palette inspired by the Arabian Sea; as my residence in Fort Cochin, Kerala, was situated directly on the beachfront. I collected communist posters from the streets in Fort Cochin that are collaged in many of the works in the series, as subtle reminders of the political atmosphere there. I took inspiration from my physical surroundings with many of the animals represented in the series found in my backyard. I hope the viewer can experience the myriad stories in the works and through these have a sense of the rich, culturally diverse and fulfilling time I spent in Kochi, India.

Marnie Dean, February 2017.

1. 'Leverhulme Lecture', School of Fine Arts, University of Leeds, 2014, Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev describes her theory of the 'compost', as a visual methodology alternative to the archive. Online available <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=F8J8xvdHKM>
2. Author Donna Haraway describes in the first paragraph of her introduction to her new book with the same name her method for *Staying with the Trouble*, inside the parameters of her speculative feminist methodology, specifically addressing companion species in Haraway, Donna, J. *Staying With the Trouble*, Duke University Press, 2016.