

Making space in outer space: Rajni Perera's sci-fi odyssey lands at the McMichael

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This show is a million light years away from the Group of Seven, and that's a good thing



As the long-time home of the Group of Seven, you could argue the McMichael Canadian Art Collection has always been a place where you could find fantasy landscapes of a sort. But the latest work to arrive at the gallery isn't another [terra nullius](#) take on Canadian history. Rather, it's a spectacular sci-fi story involving a cast of beautiful mutants, off-world explorers that have sprung from the imagination of [Rajni Perera](#).

[Futures](#), now appearing on the second floor of the McMichael, is Perera's first ever survey show, and it arrives at an already busy time for the Toronto-based artist. Last month, she accepted the \$25,000 MOCA Toronto Award, and she'll debut an exhibition at that museum in 2024. Next week, she launches *Beyond the Words of*

Earth at Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia, a show that opens on the heels of a previous solo outing in Birmingham, England.

A little more than a decade ago, things couldn't have been more different for Perera. Back then, if she was appearing in an exhibition, she probably curated the show herself, all while juggling her coursework at the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD U). And in those days, the McMichael wouldn't have been on her radar, even as a weekend getaway. "When I was at OCAD, I hated the Group of Seven," laughs Perera, cursing the memory of back-to-back lectures on Tom Thomson et al.

Born in Sri Lanka, raised in Scarborough and North York, and living in downtown Toronto (where nearly [half the population](#) is fellow immigrants), Perera saw nothing in the Group of Seven landscapes being taught. "It's historical in a certain colonial-ass way that I'm not interested in," she says, "and being shown that work over and over again, you feel completely excluded from the canon."

That canon is exactly what the McMichael is striving to open up. It's the only public art institution in the country that's exclusively focused on Canadian art, and under the leadership of Sarah Milroy, who took the position of Chief Curator in 2018, its programming is making strides toward better representing the reality of who lives here, and makes art here.

Perera's exhibition, which offers a metaphor for the immigrant experience, is one nod toward that mission. Upcoming shows will highlight Indigenous artists Meryl McMaster and Dempsey Bob, and as Milroy told the [Toronto Star](#) this fall, she intends to hire a curator of Indigenous art in the next fiscal year. "Sarah Milroy has been responsible for this whole cultural shift at the McMichael," says Perera. "If she would have been doing that work when I was in school, maybe I wouldn't have angsty feelings about the Group of Seven."

It's Milroy who approached Perera about doing an exhibition at the McMichael, and the show has been designed to go on the road. After closing in May, it's expected to appear at three more museums in Ontario (Carleton University Art Gallery, Art Windsor-Essex and McMaster University Art Gallery). The exhibition largely pulls from the artist's Traveller series, a body of work that includes paintings, textiles, photographs and "pollution wear" masks. Like so much of what Perera creates,

Traveller is set in a sci-fi universe, and like other strong examples of the genre, its imaginary world isn't so different from our own.



The Travellers themselves are climate refugees — Black and brown (and blue and crimson) Earthlings who are spectacularly outfitted in power-clashing prints and armour, survival gear that's been engineered for a world without drinkable water or breathable air. These people are thriving, not surviving; their beauty confirms it. And their sartorial splendour also hints at a Utopian vibe, never mind the grim and all too plausible premise. In an essay accompanying the exhibition, environmental scholar Britt Wray notes we're on the verge of living in the Travellers' reality: there will be as many as 1 billion climate migrants "on the move by 2050," she writes, citing estimates from the World Bank and UN. Most of those people will be fleeing South Asia, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Futures begins its run at the McMichael just as Perera's decided to end the Traveller series. After producing roughly 60 works for the project, she's ready to put it behind her. "It's relevant and timely and it's something that needs to be talked about now, but it's just a series that's really gone way too long," she says. Still, she plans to keep making work on the subject of the climate crisis, and how it relates to the lives

of immigrants. She told us a little more about that, and the origins of Traveller, when we reached her by phone in Toronto.



The exhibition at the McMichael — climate crisis is very much presented as one of the big ideas grounding the show. When did you start making art about the environment? Does it tie into the beginning of the Traveller series?

Yeah, totally. You could say that my Traveller series is the first departure point — the first time that I began to address these things — and it started with me painting the first one, which was this heavily armoured sort of mixed-textile-wearing, mutated figure. As I was painting, I was starting to realize that this is a great way for me to address immigrant issues — diasporic theory through the lens of science fiction. And of course, the climate refugee is the future of the immigrating population.

More and more, every year there is a flood; there is a drought; there's a shortage. And people are starting to move around the planet for different and more urgent and sometimes more violently displacing reasons. So it's really hard not to start to look at climate — the Anthropocene and its particular challenges. We're kind of doing it to ourselves, right?



If I don't want to paint about humans anymore, I still feel the need to paint about mutation and to paint about change and the transient environment and the species evolving to fit into this environment that's becoming ever harsher, ever more inhospitable, ever more violent toward the organism.

That's all really classic sci-fi stuff.

It's classic shit! I'm telling you, when I was painting that first Traveller I was like, "oh my god, it's a mirror." It's the immigrant experience as we know it and as it's changing. It directly reflects the science-fiction narrative of having to off-world and look for somewhere else.

I'm a huge fan of sci fi, but I grew up watching all this white science fiction because that's what's available. It's the richer, sort of white countries that are putting out the blockbusters, right? Other than Will Smith in *Independence Day* it's like, where are we?! (laughs). Of course, it's starting to very incrementally change, but yeah, that was kind of a mission of mine. As I started to show in more and more prestigious — and as a result, whiter venues — I wanted to address the disparity, this weird nonsensical thing of science fiction being extremely Caucasian. Like, I didn't understand it.



So tell me about the Travellers. Who are they?

They're mutants. There are different races of Traveller, the Traveller species. It comes up as a result of interbreeding between immigrant displaced nations. So, you know, it addresses the idea of the border — dissolving borders, the politics of the border.

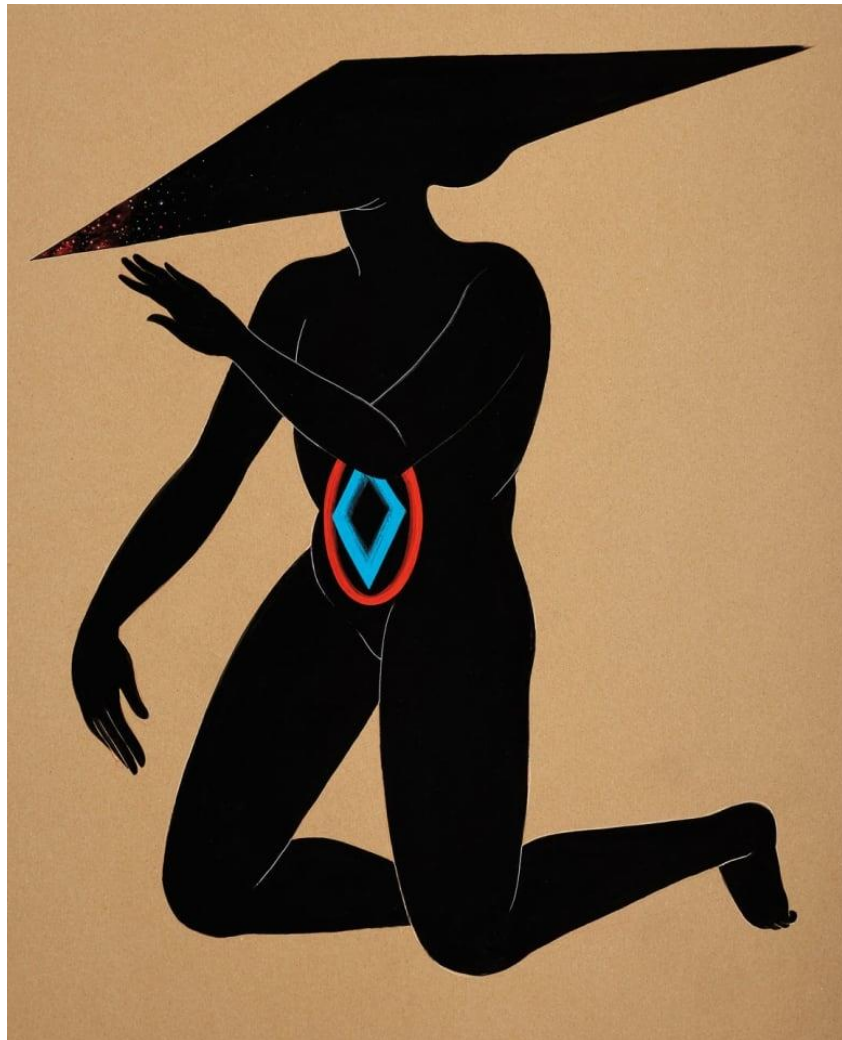
They're a hardened, interbred nation of immigrants who are better adapted by way of adversity — better adapted to the changing planet. And they're able to survive the Anthropocene. The end of the Anthropocene is the end of white supremacy as we know it, it's the end of neo-colonization and late-stage capitalism — and these are the people who have taken it down. These are the people who can survive it as a result of surviving adversity for millennia.



What sort of process do you go through to do your world-building? Are you writing about the Travellers' universe?

I just make. I went to art school, and yes, I studied lots of cultural theory, blah blah blah. But I'm just much more of a craftsperson. I make and I'll think as I'm making. And when the time comes to engage writers such as yourself, curators — conversations like those are really valuable. I give reason to that world when I have those conversations. But you know, it's only as rich as the amount of things that I make — like, tangibly, with my hands. It's like a kid building a little Lego universe.

I really like reading scientific research and articles. I follow the latest photos by the James Webb Space Telescope and Hubble Deep Field and the rovers on Mars. That's the stuff that I like to read and study.



What is your vision of the future? Is it an optimistic future?

You have to be optimistic. If you look at all of the data, there's no reason for us to be hopeful or optimistic. Fine. That's fine. Optimism and hopefulness is a choice. I haven't had an easy life, but I'm a hopeful and optimistic person. And I insist. I do insist. In the tone of my own work I insist on hope and optimism. At the end of all this is victory.

What do you mean by victory?

It's survival by way of resilience. It's balance being restored to the planet. It's a more egalitarian society where we take colonies apart and we're able to rebuild something that makes much more sense to everybody who's involved: every nation, every immigrant nation that's left.

The whole Traveller series is about not being at the mercy of your surrounding environment. It's about the ability to live together in a way where you are resiliently and opulently surviving and you're in control of your future.



This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Rajni Perera. Futures. To May 7, 2023. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont. www.mcmichael.com