

Rajni Perera: *Traveller*

By [Esmé Hogeveen](#)



Rajni Perera, *Traveller 8*, 2019. Mixed media. Courtesy Patel Division Projects.
ON VIEW

Patel Division Projects

September 19 – November 2, 2019

Toronto



Rajni Perera, Left: *Traveller 6*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 96 x 40 inches. Right: *BANNER2*, 2018. Canvas, wood, steel, acrylic and acryl-gouache paint, 120 x 120 inches. Courtesy Patel Division Projects.

Sleek, yet ornate; futuristic, yet traditional; feminine, yet androgynous. Mixed media portraits of powerful figures line the walls of *Traveller*, a solo exhibition by multidisciplinary artist Rajni Perera. In addition to several icon-like portraits and canvas banners featuring mythological characters, *Traveller* includes three decorated masks; two mixed-media busts; brass talon-like finger extensions, including eight laid out on a tasseled velvet pillow in *Rings for Truth* (2019) and one affixed to a polymer clay red hand in *Revenge 3* (2019); and a large lamp-like brass-plated structure, *A Great Shift Came and Went* (2019). Moving through the gallery, one feels surrounded by avatars from a future in which traditions reflect ancestral knowledge.

Such a convergence of inherited and fantastical references has long been a part of Perera's practice. For the past several years, the Sri Lanka-born, Toronto-based artist has fused science-fiction aesthetics with fantasy, manga, Indian miniaturism, Blaxploitation, Afrofuturism, and scientific images of outer space. Her much lauded "AFRIKA GALAKTIKA" (2013-2017) series, for instance, features portraits of Black and Brown heroines in vivid, interplanetary contexts, while drawing attention to the Western art market's exotifying gaze. Perera has also used cross-genre approaches to frame acerbic commentaries on hierarchies of wealth, power, and the lingering effects of colonialism, as in her "We Come Alive Eating Your Flesh" (2016) paintings, which depict high caste individuals surrounded by macabre decadence. The "Traveller" and "Ancestor" series debuting in *Traveller* continue to evoke diasporic cultures and resilience; however, their subjects are noticeably more gender-neutral and aloof. Their stoic countenances and regal, multi-pattern garb suggest nobility, wisdom, and an arsenal of arcane tools for survival in a post-apocalyptic world.

There is an austere, all-knowing coolness to Perera's mixed media works that contrasts with the jouissance and activity from some of her earlier series. The "Traveller" and "Ancestor" portraits commonly depict individuals alone and in states of alert repose. A veteran warrior's lucid calm likewise emanates from *Peaceful Cobra* (2019) and *Seated Sentinel* (2019). In the former, a highly decorated figure faces away from the viewer and stares out toward a color blocked pastel background. The object of their attention is invisible and yet one senses that they are primed for any possible interaction: the sleek lines of their raised, reptilian green shoulder ridges, the transparent veil-like headpiece, and the tautly held sceptre evoke the coiled energy of the venomous snake which rears and shows its hood before striking. *Seated Sentinel* depicts a contemplative figure half-sitting with one knee bent, in profile. As in *Peaceful Cobra*, the sentinel appears to

scan an unmarked horizon—their checkered, tasseled, and otherwise heavily ornamented garments signifying authority and a readiness to do battle, if required.



Rajni Perera, *Traveller 5*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 39 1/2 x 59 1/2 inches. Commissioned by RBC Corporate Art Collection. Courtesy Patel Division Projects. While the subjects and vestments differ across the portraits in *Traveller*, several motifs recur: many figures have multiple eyes; extra or elongated fingers; protective, semi-transparent hoods; and features that fuse human and elemental components, such

as the satyr-like orange and red figure in *BANNER1* (2018), whose hands morph into flames or leaves, and whose head is adorned by fire and water. A connection between the characters and a radically augmented natural world is emphasized by the surreal landscape painted on some of the gallery walls. The east wall features a deep blue, half-visible orb—a moon perhaps—rising along a neon peach and pale blue horizon. Shadowy reeds dot the foreground, their gracefully swaying silhouettes implying the presence of wind and contrasting eerily with the static reserve of the portraits and busts. The mural's palette is akin to the portraits' backgrounds, which are various shades of luminous orange, pink, lavender, green, and blue. The aggregate effect recalls Y2K-era computer games, the film adaptation of *Dune* (1984), or the dull glow of a charging tablet. The flattening presentation of the bleached color fields is emphasized by the figures' composition: their bright, precisely rendered garments never appear crinkled or stretched as fabric does in more realistic modes of portraiture and their bodies are never in shadow. The resulting exaggerated two-dimensionality further distances the figures from our known, quotidian world.

Perera's bold imagery is underscored by thoughtful attention to technical and thematic details that reward sustained viewing. To wit, a series of embellished masks, perched on small shelves, exemplify the intersection of personal style and survival gear, a thread that runs throughout the exhibition. While the sculptural works, paintings, and mural mostly resound in each other's company, the gallery's segmented layout produces occasional moments of disjunction. The isolated installation of *A Great Shift Came and Went*, the brass-plated aluminum structure emitting an LED glow, in an innermost space could theoretically evoke the archetypal slow path toward illumination. The work's containment in a less spacious corner ironically casts it as somewhat of an aside juxtaposed with dazzling large-scale *BANNER1* and *BANNER2* (2018) in the adjacent area. These curatorial issues are slight, however, and the range of works embody the evolutionary characteristics of Perera's supra-human subjects, as well as her own

exciting practice. Perera's work has already been eagerly received in international solo and group exhibitions, and *Traveller* lays a clear foundation for much-deserved continued acclaim in North America and abroad.

Contributor

Esmé Hogeveen

Esmé Hogeveen holds an MA in Critical Theory and Creative Research from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and is based between Montréal and Toronto. She is a staff writer at *Another Gaze: Feminist Film Journal* and her work has appeared in *Artforum*, *Canadian Art*, *Frieze*, and *Hazlitt*, among others.