



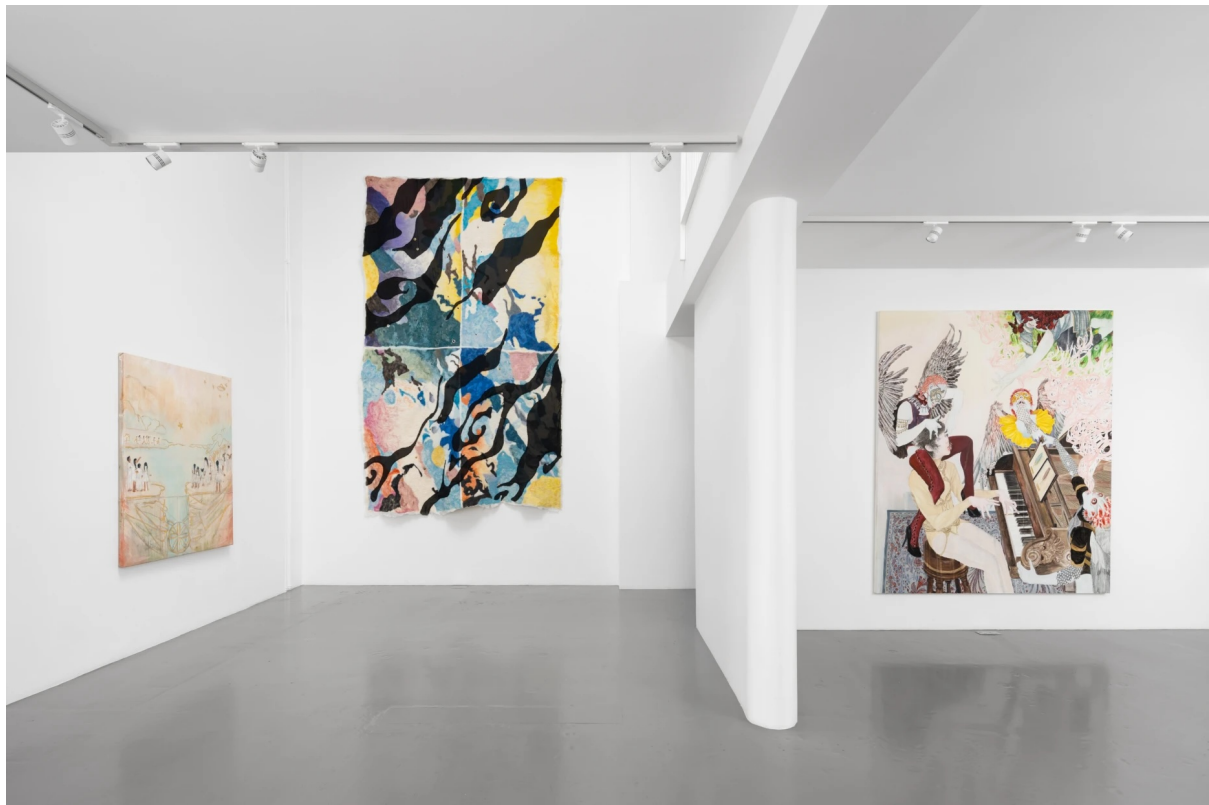
INDEPENDENT

**Art review** Reading time: 7 min.

# This exhibition made me feel a little more connected to the world and to myself.

In many ways, 'Under The Talking Tree' is an exhibition about homesickness. The artists are originally from Asia, but now live in the West, creating images from a homeland that is only partially clear to them.

**Sabitha Söderholm**



In many ways the exhibition is about homesickness, writes Sabitha Söderholm.

David Stjernholm

April 7, 2025

*Under The Talking Tree* is a group exhibition at the newly opened art center, Kunsthallen, located on Baldersgade in Nørrebro. The exhibition revolves around Asian myths and presents works by 12 artists, all of whom belong to different Asian diasporas—or at the very least, have moved from a country in Asia to one in the West. To belong to a diaspora means to be part of a people who have been dispersed from their homeland. This can include immigrants, refugees, and their descendants across generations, whose lives and cultures are shaped by their origins and the distance from them.

This exhibition features artists with roots in various Asian countries—just like myself, as I am a transnational adoptee from India. I mention this because it has a significant impact on how I experience this exhibition, in contrast to how it might be received by an ethnically white Dane. As mentioned, the exhibition deals with myths originating from the countries the artists come from, but many of the works also mythologize these homelands in their own right.

In many ways, it's also an exhibition about homesickness—about telling something remembered in order to make it real, about fragmentation, origins, but also about authenticity, about the danger of remembering incorrectly, and the risk of appropriating symbols, objects, and images from a country that remains only partially clear. It's about standing with one foot in each ocean.

All of it is powerful, moving, and lavishly beautiful—and personally, I felt just a little more connected to the world and to myself as I walked among the many works.

## **A Rebellion Against the West**

Cole Lu (b. 1984 in Taiwan, now based in New York) presents two pyrographic works (motifs burned onto linen) that I recognize as Greek in origin—but transformed or in a state of destruction. A classical arcade, perhaps from a temple, is engulfed in flames; the facade remains intact, but behind it a massive fire crackles. A muscular, athletic body, reminiscent of a Greek statue, has enormous bat wings. The figure is either being held up or pulled down by another body.

In Yongqi Tang's (b. 1997, China, lives and works in Seattle) two paintings, we encounter Venus. In the first, she is seen from behind, lounging and gazing toward three women who strikingly resemble figures taken from Botticelli's *Primavera*. They are naked—stripped even of their skin—they are red, fleshy, like the inside of an open wound. A pair of floating black hands stitches their bodies together. In the second painting, Venus lies flat on the ground with a hole in her back. Behind her, the red, skinless women dance—one appears to be entering Venus, or perhaps

digging something out of her.

There is a sense of confrontation within these works and the way they have been curated—something has been set ablaze. There are other myths besides the Greek and Roman ones, and here they are left behind in fire and ruin, as open wounds, while we move forward.

## **Looking at the Stars**

In Maya Sea's (b. 1991, USA) work *Look Into the Sky* (2025), a group of people has gathered by the water, a large lake that flows out into the sea. The figures stand on two cliffs, and in the background, a group seems to run toward the water—or rather, toward the sky. They are all gathered to witness something together, a spectacle that turns out to be the night sky. A large golden star shines at the center of the painting, and I can feel the joy and anticipation of the people all the way from this side of the canvas. I'm there on the shore with them, excited to spot all the stars.

And then—a sting of homesickness. The thick, black hair of the children and women, woven into long braids, immediately carries me to the beach in Tuticorin, where my Indian mother lives, where the coast is alive. Cotton candy and popcorn, music from crackling speakers, crying and laughter and voices.

In the upper right corner of the painting, we see a cluster of stars forming the Pleiades constellation—the seven celestial sisters, admired and worshipped by so many cultures throughout history. And so we stand in different places across the world and throughout history, looking up at the same night sky. We see the same thing, but it means different things to us—and also the same. Seven sisters dancing through the night, from the Roman Empire to Tamil Nadu, from antiquity to today. Anyone who has gazed at a starry sky understands why myths exist.

## **Mythic Matter is Present in the World**

Manjari Sharma (b. 1979) was born and raised in Mumbai but now lives in Los Angeles. In her large-scale photographic works from 2013, the Hindu gods Maa Saraswati and Hanuman are portrayed. These are two images from a whole series titled *Darshan*—a Sanskrit word meaning “appearance” or “glimpse.”

The photographs recreate very classical portrayals of the deities. Hanuman, carrying an entire mountain in one hand, symbolizes his strength to bear the burdens of the world. In one specific myth, he lifts a Himalayan mountain and carries it to someone who is injured. He had been told that a particular plant growing on the mountain could heal the wound, but since he couldn't identify the exact plant, he brought the entire mountain with him.

## **The Photograph of Saraswati**

The photograph of Saraswati is also very traditional—she is seated with her large veena, also known as a *Saraswati veena*, a classical Indian string instrument. There's something peculiar about seeing photographs of gods, since photographs usually depict something that exists tangibly in the world. But gods, on the other hand, are generally regarded as beings we cannot simply look upon—we worship and revere them through symbols. By photographing mythic material, there's also an insistence on the presence of that material in the world.

The images are full of detail—more than portraits, they are entire scenes. One senses the immense labor behind each photograph, how many hands must have been involved. Thirty-five Indian artists and craftsmen contributed to the creation of these intricate scenes, and I can't help but feel frustration over how we still, even today, cling to the myth of the lone genius artist—and relatedly, who gets to be called an “artist” and who is “merely” a craftsman.

The thirty-five Indian workers who helped create these works are not mentioned in the exhibition materials, and on the artist's own website, they are only acknowledged as a number—nameless.

## **Orientalism and Re-orientalism**

Orientalism is the West's exoticizing, racist, and romanticized construction of what we now call the Global South. It served, for instance during colonial times, as a tool to separate the two, and to elevate the West as scientific, orderly, and superior, while casting the Global South as submissive, erotic, wild, exotic, and other.

Re-orientalism is the cultural representation of the Global South in the West—through art, film, and literature—which often seeks connection or authenticity, but in doing so can also end up reproducing the West's biased constructions of the countries it seeks to connect with.

One example might be the South Indian diaspora's obsession with the mango—a fruit that may symbolize a longing for an entire country, but is also one of the few tropical fruits known in the West, due to its mass export.

Another example lies in the creation of important and beautiful works, where many of the hands involved in the making are erased, simply because those hands exist far away from where we can see them. This is a widely practiced habit in the Western art world—outsourcing labor to the Global South while crediting only oneself.

In fact, this is the first time I've ever seen an artist even mention the other hands involved in the creation of the work, as Manjari Sharma does.

## Recognition and Homesickness

When I mentioned at the beginning that I was adopted from India, it was to underline that the way I experience these works will differ from someone for whom these mythologies are entirely foreign. For me, there's a resonance of recognition and longing—a need for the myth itself as a place to connect with my origins.

I've long been critical of large institutions' often failed attempts at inclusion, which usually result in a handful of non-Western works being brought in to act as a mirror and absolution for the West.

It feels monumental—and liberating—to experience an exhibition that fully commits to engaging with this material in and of itself, not just as commentary or footnote.

*Under The Talking Tree* is a moving, beautiful, and powerful exhibition, with works so extraordinary that I found myself wishing for solo shows from every artist represented.

*Under The Talking Tree*, Kunsthall N, until August 3

[Read the full article here.](#)