

Arts

BY MOLLY GLENTZER
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Is this a war? A circus? A crowded jazz club? A zoo? An orgy? Some epic about the beginning or the end of existence?

All of those things seem present in Amita Bhatt's "A Fantastic Collision of the Three Worlds," a series of monumental drawings on canvas that fill two rooms, floor to ceiling, at Deborah Colton Gallery. This is no polite little show of framed ideas on paper. It's an immersive viewing experience. A whole lot of charcoal and oil stick.

Humans and animals tumble across these walls on waves of humor, paradox and irony — a turbulent tangle of absurd characters who collectively represent some mythical truth. Two things about this realm seem certain: It is chaotic and violent.

Cycles of life, karma and nature drive the drama, although there is no specific narrative to unravel, or even a particular sequence of events to follow. Bhatt's visual trajectories may be fractured or random, drawn also from tantric philosophy, children's fables and history.

One might glimpse San Sebastian, Mary Magdalene and Bubbleman, say, among the figures. They're out of context yet contributing to the crazy whole. Bhatt often uses characters to symbolize a range of human emotions that continually morph: indifference, pleasure, fear, confusion, playfulness, sarcasm, irony, anguish, joy, anxiety, hope, hegemony, agency, resilience. Bhatt purposefully makes it hard to tell who is who. "I like the dizzying ambiguity that this heavy density brings about," she says.

Stylistically, her flat figures are inspired by

Indian miniatures of the 15th to 17th centuries, paintings that celebrated powerful people. "My work is perhaps less celebratory and more a questioning," Bhatt says.

Given her fine and sure lines, the figures' akimbo limbs and the patterned bodysuits, the three worlds colliding look like they might also owe something aesthetically to Picasso. Bhatt, who is from India, says her influences include Paula Rego, Hieronymus Bosch and Anselm Kiefer.

She notes that the pieces have no boundaries or edges, to suggest infinity. "Creating this dense space also facilitates ideas of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, empire and colony, perception-deception, aversion and desire, knowledge, catastrophe, monu-

mentality, sacrifice, passion and destruction," Bhatt says.

"Having grown up on large doses of Hindu, Christian and Buddhist stories, I have always found myself looking for life's existential (and philosophical) answers in mythology. We all carry so many layers of information and identities within us as we navigate a multicultural and transnational world, which is also very turbulent. My drawings are mirroring that."

Bhatt also paints beautifully. Colorful, surreal canvases fill the gallery's large front room, but the immersive panels steal the show. In some ways they feel as primal as ancient cave drawings. Bhatt has also sculpted a few of the figures in fiberglass, grounding

the rooms. If the characters weren't so odd, you might take them for devotional icons.

Some of the panels date to 2008 and have been shown at other venues, including Austin's Blue Star Contemporary. Others are new. Bhatt suggests that their larger-than-life characters "allow for a certain amount of awe and reverence."

"In the end, this series is an homage to mankind for surviving its own follies," she says. "But will it?"

Amita Bhatt: *Between Light and Shadow*
Is on view through Aug. 10 at Deborah Colton Gallery, 2445 North Blvd.; 713-869-5151, deborahcoltongallery.com.

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An untitled fiberglass sculpture and panels on canvas from the series "A Fantastic Collision of the Three Worlds" are on view in Amita Bhatt's show "Between Light and Shadow."

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