

Br

Ne Wo

ave



A new exhibition by multimedia artist **Tai Shani** melds history and fantasy into a cosmic post-gender utopia

w

r | d

"I'm not really a collaborator," declares Tai Shani. "If I'm interested in someone's work, I give them free rein." The prolific multimedia artist is telling me about her hugely ambitious upcoming Glasgow International project, with a score by Let's Eat Grandma. She met the British duo when they worked together at the London Serpentine Marathon in 2015. Impressed by their music, Shani says she "loved that they were these two really young women, and their approach live, where they play like ten different instruments each. It's got a kind of chaos; there's something about it that I really responded to."

It makes sense that Let's Eat Grandma's witchy eccentricism would appeal to Shani. When we meet, her south London studio is alive with activity; a singularly beautiful mess of plaster and resin, as the artist and her assistants create a set for *Semiramis*, the latest and most ambitious instalment of her ongoing *Dark Continent Productions* project. Conceived as an experimental, small adaptation of *The Book Of The City Of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan, *Dark Continent* began life four years ago as part of London Hayward Gallery's group exhibition *Mirrorcity*.

In her medieval work of proto-feminist mysticism, Christine de Pizan "creates a space for women at a time when that would have been quite inconceivable", says Shani, "and she calls for a feminist hereafter, for women to participate in that. I tried to use the construct of this city to imagine what a post-patriarchal world could be, the organisation and values of it. All bodies and genders can be in this city of women, but not the oppressive binary conception of gender we have now."

Since *Dark Continent*'s inception, Shani has had an astonishingly productive few years. Her ongoing feminist project has grown into an expansive chronicle of an imagined world, spanning films, soundtracks, installations, performances and texts. Its narrative is built around a cast of characters including The

Neanderthal Hermaphrodite, The Medieval Mystic and The Vampyre. "In medieval conceptions of history, myth and actual factual history are kind of conflated," she explains. "All my characters are placed between slightly historical, maybe different strands of feminist and queer theory or science fiction, and in archetypal and popcultural mythologies." *Dark Continent*'s world covers the beginning and the end of the universe, even as it rejects conventional chronology and instead embraces a more cosmic understanding of time. "I grew up in Goa, in a commune, and had quite intense hippy, hedonistic, intellectual parents," she adds. "Talking about deep time or the cosmos and existence was part of our upbringing."

Shani has always been interested in "what happens to, say, the fiction of a book when the materiality isn't activated. So that when the book isn't being read, there's this whole fiction, and these pages that are kind of collapsed onto each other. How you can have a heroine that's dead, and alive."

This narrative collapse of chronology is emotionally mobilised in the final character, a piece of software called Nemesoid. "It's at the end of everything," she says, "but there's still this software somewhere, in this collapse of materiality... called the Eternal Cortex, which in the narrative of this project is a database of human experiences." It felt natural to incorporate a character with artificial intelligence. "I'm not really invested in the human species continuing forever or anything," she declares. "I don't mind it. It's fine to finish."

In April, Shani takes over Glasgow's capacious Tramway for *Semiramis*, as part of Glasgow International. She's custom building a huge stage set to present 12 performances spanning 12 characters over four days. The different characters will move around the set, she explains, "and then these are filmed which makes a 12 episode film. We are shooting some of it with a drone."

These performances will become a film, which will tour to Leeds, Nottingham and Italy. It's exciting, she admits, to be on the cusp of 12 completely new performances with a diverse cast of actors, including many based in Glasgow whom she hasn't worked with previously.

Cinema remains a huge influence for Shani, and her work draws on pop cultural depictions of body horror and sexuality as much as myth. For one character, The Siren, she extensively researched torture and the continuing capacity of humans to inflict pain on one another. "What's interested me in writing about violence is it's always real," she remarks. In Shani's creation, The Siren's voice came from myth, from the "margins of nature. This weird ambiguity between a half bird or a half fish. I thought about sounds that the human body as an instrument can produce – like screams, or the sounds of pleasure."

Shani's previous work has featured collaborations with several artists and composers. She has collaborated extensively with Chloë Herington of Valve and Chrome Hoof, and also worked with Maxwell Sterling, Daniel O'Sullivan and David Smith of Guapo. But this time, it didn't feel appropriate to work with men. "If there's a live scoring element, it's quite an authoritative position to have a man play the score and the women perform to it," she says. Let's Eat Grandma's soundtrack for *Semiramis* will be quite formal, operating as a cinematic score. By way of an introduction, Shani briefed them on her world, provided names of characters and a set of sonic references (including Slowdive, Laurie Spiegel, *Suspiria* and legong Balinese music). But, fundamentally, the most important thing has been for Shani to give Let's Eat Grandma her full trust. "I've really said to go to town on it." □ Tai Shani's *Dark Continent: Semiramis* is at Glasgow Tramway from 20 April–7 May; see *Out There*

Tessa Norton