NOB HILL Gazette

"Artist Rupy C. Tut Reinterprets Alice and Her Wonderland for Arion Press"

By Jennifer Massoni Pardini
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Artist Rupy C. Tut stands in front of the Heidelberg single-cylinder relief press that printed all 45 Deluxe and 230 Fine Press edition copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* from Arion Press.
Craig Lee

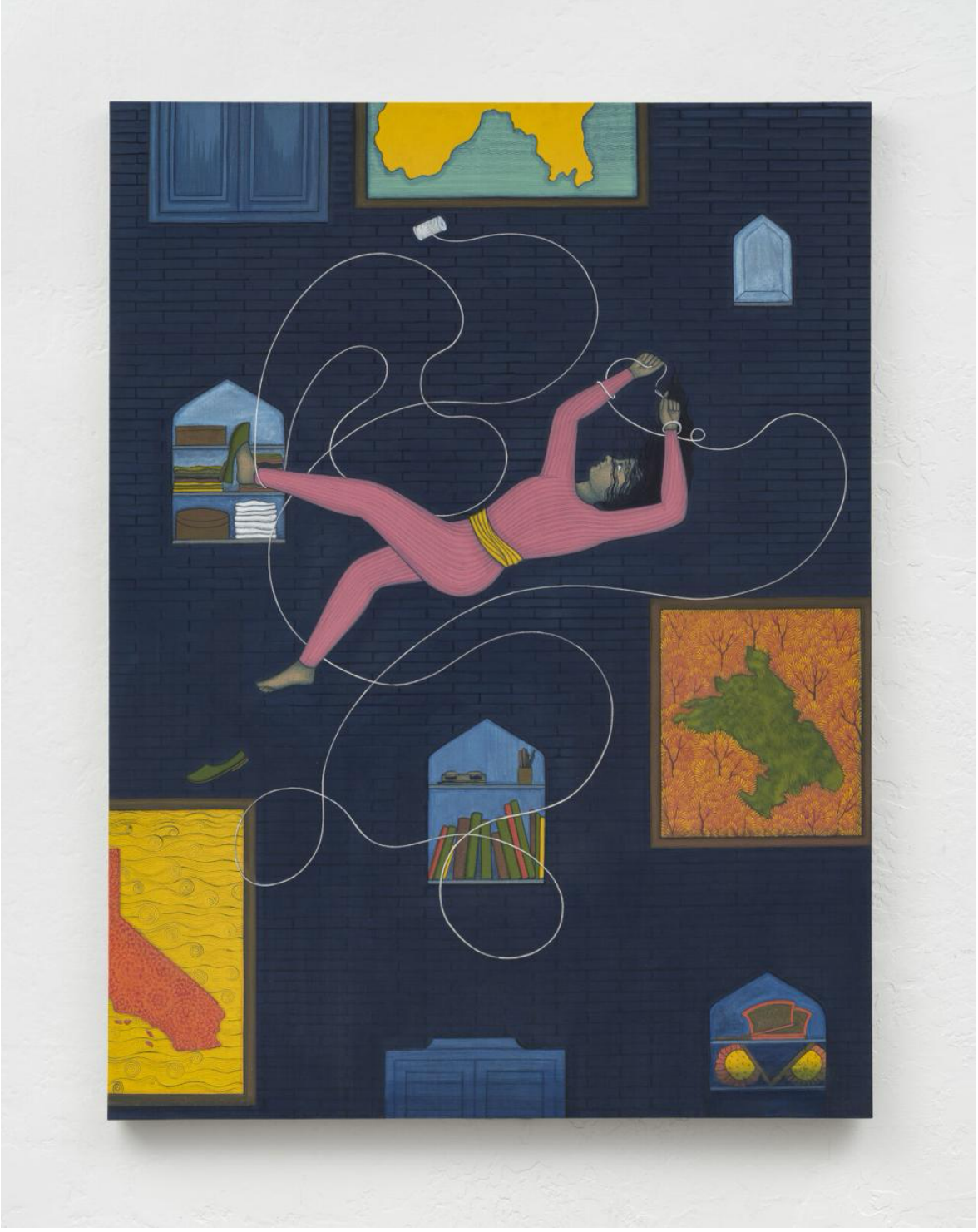
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Picture the title character from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. What does she look like? And what informs what your mind's eye sees? Perhaps the 1865 book written by **Lewis Carroll** with 42 wood-engraved illustrations by Sir **John Tenniel**. For many of us, it is likely Disney's 1951 animated interpretation that left a lasting imprint, punctuated by Alice's black-bowed headband and aproned blue frock floating down the rabbit hole.

Arion Press, the fine-book publishing company and letterpress printer now located at Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, commissioned Oakland-based artist **Rupy C. Tut** to illustrate its 2026 edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which launched publicly in November as the 136th book the press has produced by hand for its catalogue over the last 52 years. This year, the press — the only in the country in daily operation with a foundry, pressroom and bindery located on-site — also produced **Barry Moser**'s *Postscriptum: Revisiting Moby-Dick in 21 Portraits and Scenes* and **Laurie Anderson**'s *Black Fire on White Fire*, which publishes in December. *The Prince*, *Brave New World* and *Pinocchio* follow in 2027 with artwork by Tammy Nguyen, Cannupa Hanska Luger and Marcel Dzama, respectively.

Late last year, the Arion team didn't know that Tut had not read Carroll's book nor seen a film adaptation. For all intents and purposes, Tut's imagination offered a blank slate or, rather, "a dream come true" in the words of Creative Director **Blake Riley**. "I think in this world of, why make another edition of *Alice* or who needs another *Gilgamesh* [released in 2025], it's always helpful for us to have some way into all of that," Riley says. "For her, it really had to do with her clearly having a feminist perspective and also this very unique and rich palette and kind of fabulist approach to image making. Then on top of all that, we discovered that it was just not part of her upbringing."



"A Curious Dream" is a 2026 work of handmade pigments on linen by Rupy C. Tut and measures 48 by 36 inches. It depicts Alice's fall into a dreamy wonderland amid symbolism that reflects the artist's heritage.
Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

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Tut is represented by the Jessica Silverman gallery in San Francisco; she trained in evolutionary and ecological biology and earned a Master of Public Health before committing herself to traditional Indian painting. She mixes her own pigments from raw materials such as powder, rock or burnt wick and later employs fine, intricate brushwork, often to depict the natural world and feminine subjects. Her work is in the permanent collections of, among others, the de Young Museum, the Asian Art Museum, the Cantor Arts Center and SFMOMA, which awarded her its SECA Art Award in 2024.

Ever the scientist, Tut stationed Carroll's tome — minus Tenniel's illustrations, which Arion removed — on her dining room table and went about reading *Alice* not once, but over and over to amass distinct layers of understanding. "There was an actual solid purpose for each of the reads, whether it was color, shape, narrative, quotes, foliage, animals," Tut says. "And any visuals that sparked or jumped out, I would make a note of it and then, like how I filter my pigment to make it really fine and smooth, that's how I filtered all those notes."

Once Tut visualized the environments and characters she would construct, sketching began. Over four months she then painted a work on linen or handmade hemp paper for each of the book's 12 chapters, a process she completed in June. The color palette comprises yellows, blues, greens, raw linen and the artist's first use of rose madder, a vibrant pink. (Post-*Alice*, Tut has continued working with the new pigment.)

It was critical to Tut that Alice look like the characters she paints. "I needed her to be a brown Alice, who was Punjabi, who lived in her grandmother's home, and that was her place of wonderment," she says. Tut, a self-professed "stickler for words," also needed Alice to reflect the character portrayed in Carroll's book. "What's written is what's truthful," she says. "Like the Cheshire Cat. The way it's written is not scary." Neither are Tut's interpretations of the book's omniscient, nonbinary guiding light. "This is the only face I've ever painted where you see both eyes," Tut says.




Tut turns to "Sleeping Queen," one of 12 paintings in the new Arion Press edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Caroll. Her original painting on linen with handmade pigments measures 12 by 24 by 1½ inches.
Craig Lee

One of the larger works, "It's Always Tea O'Clock," offers an overhead view of the famous tea party's tablescape, including a plate of samosas, overturned blue-lined teacups that resemble the durable dishware from Tut's youth, and the extended hands of Alice, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. "Whenever I paint tea scenes or any scenes where there's a conversation that's significant, I always paint them on a square paper on a circular table," Tut explains. "Tea is one of those things in my life that is part of every single occasion, happy or sad. So I like to have that be the canvas or the space for it." (Each of the 45 Deluxe edition copies of the book comes with a custom teacup by Bay Area ceramicist Zoe Dering.)

"Sleeping Queen" shows a powerful Queen of Hearts at rest. "The oranges in the back are because I played cards with my grandmother every Sunday until the age of 12 when I left India," says Tut, "and I cannot think of a deck of cards without thinking of that moment."

Tut's grandmother surfaces in much of the symbolism — and the artist knew early on that Alice, wound in the silver thread of Time, would fall through her grandmother's home, which offered Tut her own dreamscape as a child. "A Curious Dream" shows "stitched fans made by Tut's grandmother, the calligraphy inkwell that belonged to her grandfather, a shelf of books, a stack of folded cloth — and, between them, framed maps tracing the family's migration from pre-partition Punjab to California and Oakland," as is written in Arion's *Alice* prospectus. "The fall is reimagined as a descent through inheritance."

"I have a very positive relationship to tradition because I had these amazing people in my life who allowed me to play with tradition and change it and make it my own or evolve within it," says Tut. "Within this context of being a contemporary artist, using a traditional technical knowledge and form as well to tell my stories, it's very much about also innovating within it, changing it, reframing it, challenging it a bit also."

As Deluxe and Fine Press copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* continue to be delivered to Arion subscribers, the Alice they now see in their mind's eye may not be Carroll's, nor Disney's — but Tut's, reframed.