

Interview with Chitra Ganesh

December 2009, New York - After being wowed by Chitra Ganesh's fall mural at P.S.1, ArtSlant's Sophia Powers caught up with the artist at a west village cafe for a heady pairing of wine and conversation. The discussion ranged from semiotics to sex, and the following interview offers some of its highlights.



Sophia Powers: *One question I often like to begin with is, did you always know you wanted to be an artist? How did you get into art making, and was there ever anything else you considered doing professionally?*

Chitra Ganesh: I was always interested in art at more than just a hobby level. But I had no models of how to be a professional artist—no one in my family was an artist. That's why I started teaching middle school in New York, because it was a steady income and there was security. But then I slowly started getting to know other artists, and was constantly painting. I saw how it could be a feasible life, and thought to myself "Maybe I really could be a professional artist." It was time to try. It was really getting to know a

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community—particularly a creative South Asian community, and a community of peers from college who are still practicing artists-- that helped me to do this.

S.P.: Speaking of the years before your art career took off—I couldn't help noticing from your resume what a good student you were! (Ganesh graduated magna cum laude from Brown University with a B.A. in Semiotics and Comp. Lit) How would you say this academic erudition enters into your work?

C.G.: Well, I think for all artists having a critical framework is necessary. My exposure in school to social theory and contemporary literature from around the world continues to influence my work profoundly – I'm especially thinking about authors like Clarice Lispector, Roland Barthes, Catullus, and Gayatri Spivak. Having said that, I remember feeling in college that everything I was reading about Indian (or so inspired) art was at least 5,000 years old – bronze or temple sculptures, or historic architecture such as Taj Mahal, Angkor Wat, etc. I think the American academy at that time was still focused on teaching Indian 'classicism' as some kind of authentic expression of Indian art. I would have done more in the South Asian contemporary art context at that time if it were available to me. While this has started to change in some important mainstream art contexts, I think Western discourses about contemporary art practices in the Global South still rely on national markers to describe a very broad set of practices. For example, what is "Indian" about "Indian art"? It would be wonderful to be a part of a conversation in the West where we talk about art produced in South Asia and by South Asian artists with the same depth, breadth, and specificity that we talk about American artistic movements and modes in the U.S.





S.P.: Even though you were born in Brooklyn, you are often included in “Indian” art shows. Is it strange to be thought of this category? Was it a challenge to fit into these conversations?

C.G.: Initially it was a bit strange, because I would be one of the only U.S. born participants in a big group show of mostly Indian-born South Asians. But while I know that that sort of grouping is largely a function of the art market, being considered part of the “Indian” art world has been very important for me, both artistically and intellectually.

The market, which I would describe as being historically Eurocentric, picks up cultural products from what it sees as the geographic (or cultural) “fringe” and constantly attempts to incorporate them into the mainstream. I think this is essentially the process we’re seeing with the profusion of geographically centered shows: “Latin American Art,” “Korean Art,” “Iranian Art,” etc. These shows reflect a dynamic that I experience in my own ethnically and historically defined context, where the term “Indian” does not only signify a geographic location. While the politics of location have by no means disappeared, I think their meaning has shifted since the beginning of economic globalization. There is no longer the same sense of a “center,” and the artistic elite are generally so geographically fluid. The people I meet in Bombay I also meet in London and New York, and this certainly impacts the way these categories of place and identity function for us. But, of course, that’s not to say for a second that these markers don’t mean a great deal. There’s still a rigid vocabulary in so much of the art world that that marks the “other” through negation. So often there is this elephant in the room—unmarked whiteness. This should not be ignored.

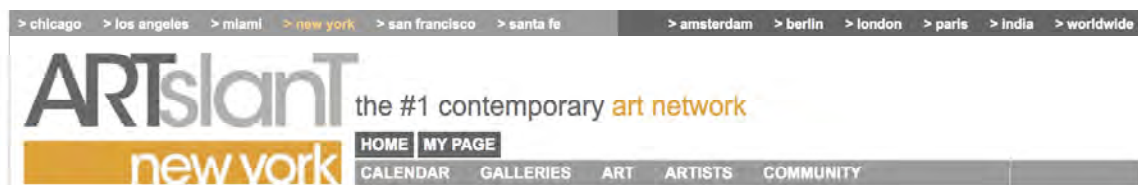
S.P.: Did you grow up visiting India, and how often do you return these days?

C.G.: Yes, I did used to go as a kid—to Calcutta, largely, because that’s where most of my family was at the time, although we are originally from Tamil Nadu. Eventually, a lot of my family moved away from Cal, and I visited other cities such as Hyderabad, Jamshedpur, Coimbatore, and Bangalore. At one point in my adult life, I realized there had been a gap of about 6 years when I hadn’t been back. Now when I go to India, I visit my family in Cal, Bangalore, and Hyderabad, and I go to Mumbai and Delhi as well for work and to visit friends and colleagues.

S.P.: How does your family understand your work?

C.G.: They have always been extremely supportive. They don’t always connect strongly with the content of my work, but there are other things that they have come to appreciate about what I do, like the work ethic it requires, and the recognition I’ve been fortunate to achieve.

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S.P.: I know that you found a lot of support for your work in the South Asian Woman's Creative Collective (SAWCC—pronounced "Saucy"). Can you tell me some about this community and what influence it had on your practice?

C.G.: Well, there was this moment for art in the late 90s when there was a much smaller South Asian community in New York, and it was really an intimate space where everyone knew one another, showed together, and supported each other's work. Now, that's all changed. Today the South Asian art scene in New York is more mainstream, and people have come to expect an array of events to consume, rather than creating spaces and planning events on their own. Who would have ever believed that there would be something like twelve galleries in New York City focusing on South Asian art?

S.P.: Your work has also been discussed a great deal in the context of queer identity. A few years back in Delhi I remember being told that there were not enough artists working with queer themes in order to provide material for a serious study. But today that's clearly not the case. Can you talk a little about this both in the context of your own work, and the Indian contemporary art scene at large?

C.G.: I like the notion of 'queer themes' because it highlights a sharply critically minded engagement with sexuality in art history. I think there has been this pressure on openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender artists to produce identity-based work, but I've also seen this change a lot over the past ten or fifteen years. As the LGBTQ movement in India has grown over that time, there is more space to be 'out' in India, and I think this impacts cultural production at many levels. In both the U.S. and Indian contexts, I've noticed a number of LGBT and queer artists using queerness as a staging ground and a lens to explore a broad range of 'queer' themes in their work, including the theme of political and art historical absence, intimacy, queer sex. Many of these artists are also exploring more oblique ways of queering a subject. For me, it's often about re-configuring the sexualized figure. I use naked figures and penetration, for example, in order to critique power, while specifically aiming to decenter the availability of 'eroticism' as an interpretive trope. In working with this kind of figure, I am commenting on the absence of sex in the art world, unless it is contained in some way.

S.P.: We've covered a lot of ground, but before we wrap up I'd just like to ask about your process—do you work quickly, slowly, in bursts, on one thing at a time, with music? Tell me about your experience in the studio.

C.G.: I always have a lot of things to juggle at any single time, and I always take inspiration from many sources at once as well—illustrations, textiles, psychedelic posters, reading, and music. But some of my most rewarding work has simply happened organically—out of the studio. Ironically, as one becomes more successful as an artist, and has more and more deadlines to meet, the challenge becomes making time to see something slowly, slowly take shape.

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