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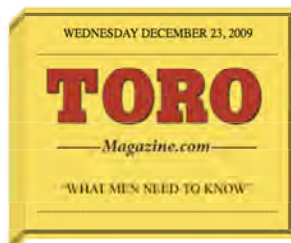
## CHITRA GANESH: EROS IN MYTH

“Chitra Ganesh is an artist based in New York who works in various media, including drawing and installation. She incorporates marginal Hindu/Buddhist icons, botched love stories and lesser-known mythic female lore into her work. She often uses the framework of comics to emphasize narrative layers, including text messages, anecdotes and love letters. Her colourful illustrative style continually examines *junglee* desire, loss and mutability.”



**Q: What do you think of your approaches to the social and sexual qualities of certain 1970s Indian comic books?**

**A:** I think most cultural narratives contain strong social and sexual currents that shape the characters, as well as the narrative arc of a story. I am interested in pulling these out. I was especially drawn to this particular era of comics ... because I grew up reading them as a child, alongside *Archie*, *X-Men*, *Doonesbury*, etc. In returning to them as an adult, I saw much more clearly certain disjunctures in the visual representations of race and gender. For example, many characters in the *Amar Chitra Katha* – the name of the series with which I primarily work – a comic book promoting South Asian history and culture, are coloured in peach-ish flesh tones. And their clothing seemed as much influenced by *I Dream of Jeannie* as by what might be considered conventional Indian attire.



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**Q: What do you think of the title of your show, Evidence of Past Lives, conveying a sense of erotic reincarnation or genealogy?**

**A:** Evidence of Past Lives signals the untold stories that may swim in the subcurrents of our consciousness or collective memory but remain unarticulated. I think of such narratives not as being the primary narrative focus, but as a more complex collision of memory, desire and loss, where the erotic is deeply embedded in every aspect.

**Q: It seems you've long incorporated en fleshed mythological forms and flesh-like elements in your paintings. How do you see the figure of Rakshasi in this mural and her milieu?**

**A:** The Rakshasi in many is an iconic articulation of a *junglee* girl. Frequently featured living in a jungle herself, the Rakshasi's appearance also reveals some of the social and sexual norms of the past mythological contexts in which she was born.

Rakshasi is a she-demon who stands in opposition to conventional ideas of beauty that are uncannily still operative today. She is often depicted or described as large, dark, wily and with uncombed hair. The Rakshasi is usually a minor character who somehow catalyzes the hero saving his woman, or whose presence otherwise moves along the mythic plot. In *Evidence of Past Lives*, a character such as this one, frequently relegated to the margins, comes to the fore, and articulates a complex subjectivity and sexuality.

**Q: You're exploring the *junglee*. How do you see this concept, the notion of the untamed woman?**

**A:** Much of my visual vocabulary across media engages the term "*junglee*" – meaning savage or literally "of the jungle" – an old colonial Indian idiom used to describe women who were perceived as defiant or transgressing social norms. I interweave several very popular tales to create mythological hybrid tableaus that fuse contemporary expressions of femininity with traditional Hindu content.

The term contains a compelling intersection of gender-based norms, as well as the legacy of colonialism. The *junglee's* defiance of patriarchal authority makes her a savage. I think the idea of an "untame woman" functions as both a seductive and repellent category.

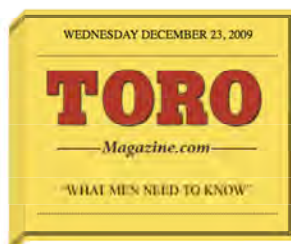
I'm interested in fleshing out this word, as it invites an exploration of how our notions of beauty and the grotesque are inextricably linked, and can only coexist side by side – a core inquiry of my work.

**Q: Would you describe some *junglee* narratives that's influenced your work?**

**A:** *Junglee* narratives that have influenced my work come from all walks of myth and storytelling. They tend to involve female protagonists whose bodies refuse to remain contained within the space in which they are expected to stay. So these span the gamut, from *Alice in Wonderland* to Josephine Baker, from the Rani of Jhansi to Surpanakha.

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**Q: You bring personal aspects to work, for example, in *Hidden*. What was the process like posing yourself as a demon goddess, mostly exposed and engaging in a ritual and finally being mutilated?**

**A:** *Hidden* was a departure from my primarily drawing-based practice. I was interested in bringing mythical characters I depict in the picture plane to the domain of "the real," and so photography seemed like an ideal medium.

This work is not a self-portrait, and incorporates two different models. The triptych is meant to provide both a fractured narrative, as well as encourage the viewer to consider multiple narrative possibilities. In that vein, there is no coherent story, with a beginning, middle and end, as such. I wanted to bring together aggression, ritual and the blurry surreal qualities of a dream. I was thinking as much about girl rock album covers of the 1970s as I was about 16th-century Tibetan painting.

**Q: You've noted that many of the mythic narratives of the past tend to exclude the voices of the women depicted, while assembling excesses of sexuality and violence around them.**

**A:** In my work, sexual female figures function predominantly as a metaphor and repository for cultural, social and personal conflict. So it is not about that particular female figure, but about what she and her tableau represent in larger arenas of sexual codes and storytelling...

In my work I hope to enact transformations that don't simply occur in the service of a particular task or cause as they might in a traditional fairy tale – being polluted, seeking a husband, conquering evil. I'm interested in thinking about why the traditional male gazes upon a naked female body and automatically invests it with pornographic content, and how to subvert that.

**Q: Thomas Erben Gallery recently released a portfolio of your work called *A Delicate Line*. Some of these images involve exposed forms, in yoga asanas. When you've drawn from aspects of the mythological past, are you interested in how contemporary Indian figures are sensualized in yoga or through Bollywood film?**

**A:** The prints in the recent portfolio *A Delicate Line* share a focus on presenting the viewer with a fragmented body in the midst of transformation or rupture. Some of these contortions are inspired by acrobatics, dance and body work, though not specifically yoga.

Certain aesthetic and cultural references may trigger the viewer to reconsider how certain South Asian cultural forms, such as yoga and Bollywood, have soared in popularity and marketability. In this process, the images I make and embodiment I'm interested in seek to shift the visual referent of the South Asian female figure away from the realms of yoga or Bollywood alone, into a more complex representation.

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