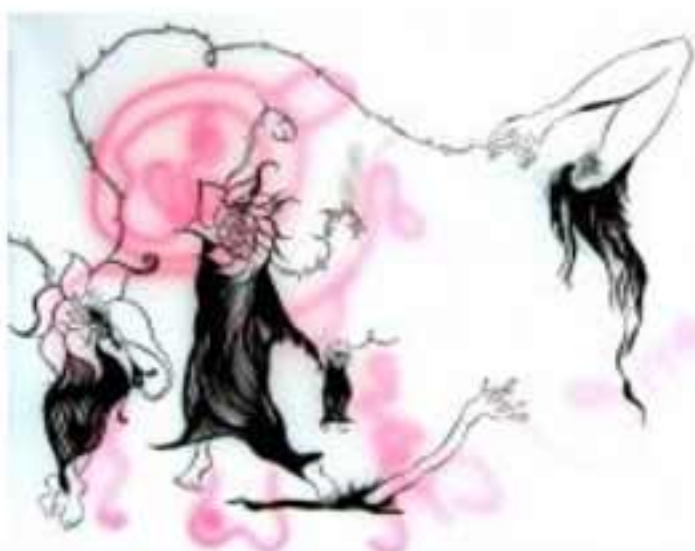


FEATURE

Chitra Ganesh: Subversive Myths

She lets gender roles clash with fears and longings. In 2006 Chitra Ganesh participated in the exhibition "pa.per.ing" at the 60 Wall Gallery of Deutsche Bank New York. Afterwards, a selection of her works was purchased for the corporate collection. Achim Drucks introduces the Brooklyn-based artist.



The queen is dead. In her silvery shining armor, the **Rani of Jhansi** lies in the bloodstained snow, her enraptured gaze directed heavenward-like **Joan of Arc** on a 19th-century martyr picture. **Chitra Ganesh** titled this photographic work from 2004 *Awakening*. It is the artist herself in the role of the rebel who spurred the Indian uprising against the British colonial rulers in 1857. After her death in the battlefield at the age of just twenty-one, Rani became the epitome of female bravery. But the artist's issue is not the apotheosis of an Indian national heroine. Instead, Ganesh enacts the queen, as she says, "at the moment of her death, where her rebellion and failure collide." At the same time, she transfers the event from the summer of 1858 to a wintry present, with numerous shoe prints in the snow thwarting any kind of nostalgic sentimentality.

The *Rebel Queen of Jhansi* embodies a counter-model to the conservative Hindu female image. In an advertising copy of a comic on her life it is specifically stressed that "she was not aggressive by nature and it was only when the British threatened to annex her small kingdom that she took up arms." For Ganesh, however, Rani is interesting precisely because of her aggressive potential, for the paintings, drawings, wall pieces, and films of the artist, who was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1975, can be understood as a single, ongoing examination of the theme of female strength. "Much of my visual vocabulary across media engages the term 'jungle'-meaning savage or literally 'of the jungle,'" the artist explains in an interview with the poet **Louise Bak**, "an old colonial Indian idiom used to describe women who were perceived as defiant or transgressing social norms.(...) The jungle'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."

Comics play a pivotal role in Ganesh's visual cosmos. Beside *X-Men* and *Archie*, *Amar Chitra Katha* belonged to her favorites when she was young. The series, today with a print run of more than 90 million copies, was initiated at the end of the 1960s to teach children in India and the Diaspora about Hindu myths and the history of the country-and, of course, to propagate specific role models and patterns of conduct. Between 2002 and 2007, Ganesh used pictures of the *ACK* comics to create the 21-part work, *Tales of Amnesia* (2002/2007), which was recently shown in the exhibition *The Empire Strikes back - Indian Art Today* at London's **Saatchi Gallery**.

As a cross-cultural medium, she finds comics ideal for addressing different groups of viewers. When taking a closer look at the pictures, however, uncertainty sets in: Instead of seeing texts and speech balloons that would explain the story, one is confronted with mysterious sentences reminiscent of "écriture automatique," the writing technique of the surrealists aimed at bringing subconscious images and thoughts to the surface. The beautiful heroines in Ganesh's digital collages move about in typical comic-book sceneries, yet their nonchalant violence reminds one more of **Lara Croft** than the gentle women in the *ACK* books. With an innocent bat of the eye, they slaughter their way through a surreal storyline, the choreography of which is repeatedly undermined. And when they're not fighting, we see them in scenes in which the artist parodies exotic harem fantasies à la **Ingres**.

Ganesh's oeuvre is populated by female figures who elude social stereotypes and definitions. They are at once beautiful and brutal, desirable and mutilated. **Salome** and **Pandora** can be found alongside Hindu goddesses, icons of Bollywood cinema, or Riot Girls. Ganesh's temporary, wall-spanning installation for the lobby of **P.S.1** in New York was inspired by a lesbian superheroine from the 1980s comic novel *The Watchmen: The Silhouette*, who after her coming-out is murdered along with her lover. Ganesh merges the two women into a two-headed femme fatale with tusks and tentacular arms, surrounded by moths and severed heads. In her installation *Untitled (Her Accident)* (2007), as well, she blends motifs of violence and dismemberment with aesthetic refinement. Female torsos connected to each other by umbilical cords, oversized eyes or a bong with wings hover like images from the unconscious against a lavender background. Drawn braids and eyelashes are extended to three-dimensionality-a psychedelic universe in which dream logic prevails. "Layering disparate materials and visual languages, I suggest alternative narratives of sexuality and power in a world where untold stories keep rising to the surface. In this process the body becomes a site of transgression, both social and psychic, doubled, dismembered, and continually exceeding its limits."

Whether in her large wall installations or paper works, for example, *Another Script* (2005) in the **Deutsche Bank Collection**, Ganesh's motifs have the appearance of hybrids: everything proliferates and mingles, defying any type of categorization. Her work is equally influenced by her Indian roots and life in New York or her self-understanding as a member of the queer community. Street art, the image world of the Hindu temple in Flushing, Queens, which she often visited with her parents as a child, album covers of girl rock bands such as **The Slits**, hand-painted posters of Bollywood movies, or the visit to a **Max Beckmann** exhibition-the most various influences have shaped her art. And not to forget her studies of comparative literature and semiotics, which she finished magna cum laude.

The references to the culture of India or South Asia are an important element in her artworks, but Chitra Ganesh does not want to be attributed the role of an Indian artist dealing with Indian themes. "A frequent mistake that people make in the reading of the work is, in part, influenced by how South Asia is represented in the mass media and has been for the last thirty years," she elaborates in an interview with *Art & Deal* magazine. "They look at my work and they think it seems to be about the so-called plight of Indian women or about women's powerlessness in non-western societies. I am definitely making a critique on gendered representations and gendered power but just because the imagery has South Asian connotations, that doesn't automatically mean that I am referring to a South Asian community. My work is more about using different tropes and visual languages like comic books and iconic goddess imagery and figures to talk about things that are broader than being located within the South Asian framework."

That's why it's not really important whether the Hindu goddess **Kali** or **Pippi Longstocking**-or both-comes to mind when looking at the girl sticking out her tongue. Ganesh's hybrid imagery offers the viewer a wide range of possible associations: "I'd like to create a mythology that poses questions rather than gives clear answers." And these questions related to power and powerlessness, desire and punishment, arise in both New Delhi and New York.