

Chitra Ganesh

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

As part of the Rubin Museum of Art's yearlong exploration of the "future," Brooklyn-based artist Chitra Ganesh took inspiration from the institution's collection of Tibetan art to examine how the dystopic present can be changed for a better tomorrow in two separate, yet connected, exhibitions. The title of the core exhibition, "The Scorpion Gesture," for which she created five animations (her first and, by my lights, rather successful foray into the medium) refers to a Tibetan Buddhist hand gesture, or mudra, that represents the endless possibilities of transformation embodied metaphorically in the scorpion—a creature the Western imagination typically casts as threatening.

The apocalypse is made a spectacle in Ganesh's videos, all of which are projected on the walls of the second- and third-floor galleries. *Metropolis* (all works 2018) ends with the resurrection of Maitreya, a bodhisattva who will appear at times of conflict to become the next Buddha and mark the beginning of a new age. In the video, Maitreya is a multi-limbed female cyborg, as formidable as she is seductive. The goddess is an amalgamation of the bronze Maitreya statues in the museum's holdings, the female robot of the titular 1927 film by Fritz Lang, and the protagonist of the movie *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (1924) by Yakov Protazanov. Here, Ganesh mobilizes a sexy palette of vibrant colors and sometimes incorporates animated bursts of glitter for good measure. Yes, the end of the world is scintillating—death, after all, is more palatable when it's all wrapped up in Broadway sizzle.

Of course, Ganesh is known for marrying a Pop-inflected playfulness with horror. For instance, the figure in *Silhouette in the Graveyard*, outlined with hot-pink neon, sits in a lotus position, then morphs into a standing body with three breasts. Images of contemporary protests, such as those connected to Black Lives Matter and the Free Palestine movements, fill the silhouette. Around the figure plays a montage of footage from forest fires, torrential storms, and other ecological catastrophes. Installed directly between the animation and the viewer is a gilded statue from the eighteenth century of the Future Buddha, who quietly demands that the observer be an agent of change. The animation, like two other videos in the show, is motion-activated, lending the work an element of surprise that makes it hard for the viewer to disengage.



View of "Chitra Ganesh," 2018. Foreground: Artist unknown, *Maitreya the Future Buddha* ca. late 18th century early 19th century. Background: Chitra Ganesh, *Silhouette in the Graveyard*, 2018. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle.

In "Face of the Future," a related exhibition installed in the Rubin's basement, Ganesh commissioned film posters from seven emerging artists who revamp traditionally white, heteronormative science fiction films. Tuesday Smillie's *A Way Out of Noway*, 2018, advertises a movie that doesn't exist, titled after a lecture by the American trans activist and filmmaker Reina Gossett. Smillie's über-camp poster features Gossett as the main attraction. On the surface of a celestial body rendered in soft pastels is Gossett, looking defiant while blowing a raspberry. She wears a peekaboo-style black negligee and is festooned with a garland of red roses; she holds up a dildo/scepter made of purple crystal. She is not unlike Jane Fonda in Roger Vadim's interplanetary sex romp of 1968, *Barbarella*—but Smillie's star, unlike Fonda's character, is nobody's plaything.

Ganesh has turned the museum into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that tweaks out traditional notions of time, sex, gender, and history. The Rubin offers up a perfect context for the artist to limn the divine and countenance the dangerous, as good art made with a big heart and a sharp mind should always do.

—Alpesh Kantilal Patel