BOMB

SHE GAVE ME HER ROADMAP OF TRAGEDY, DIRTIED AT THE CREASES, & IN ALL THOSE THOUSANDS OF LINES, I FOUND NO PLACE TO HIDE...

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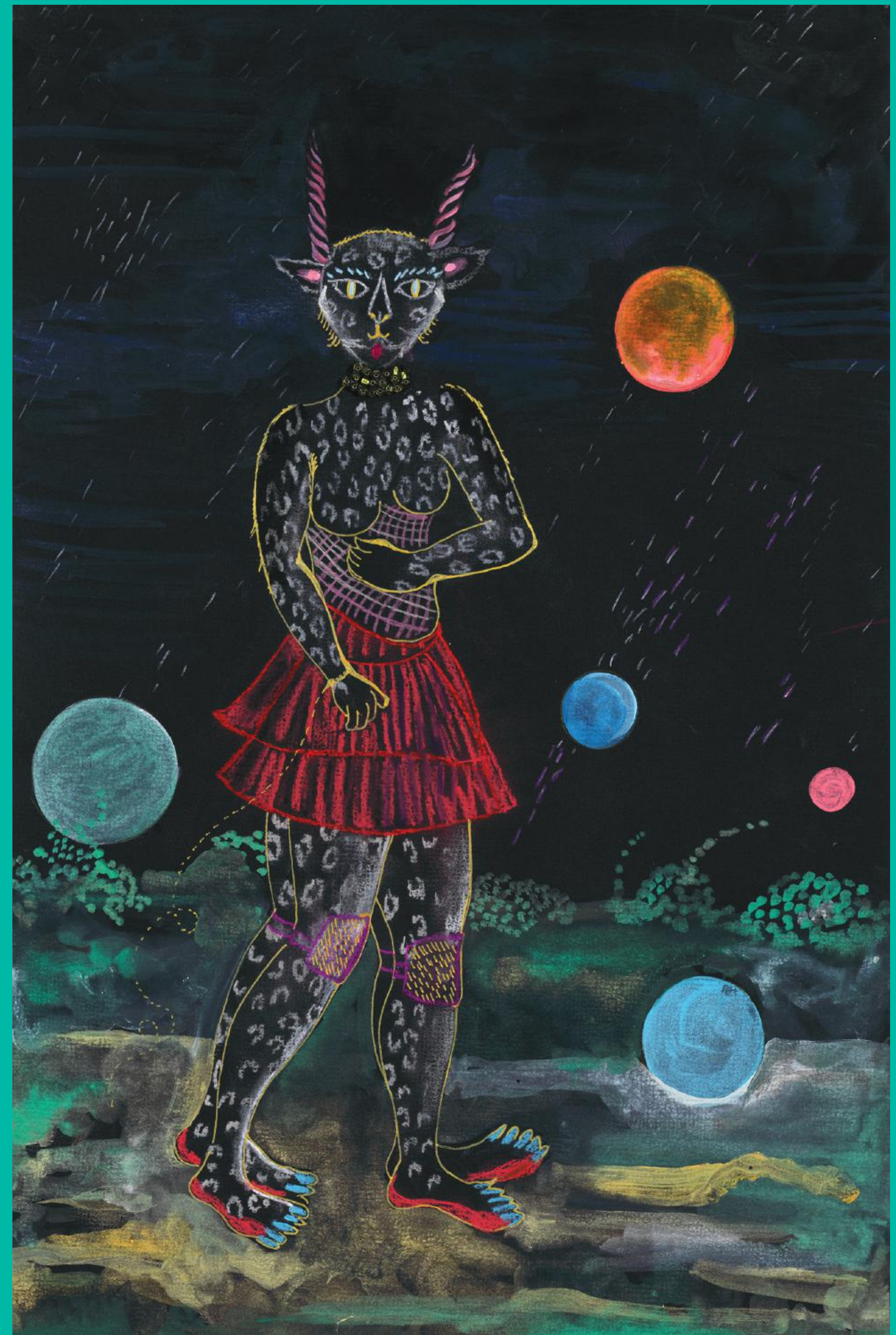
Chitra Ganesh
by Tausif Noor

Ancient mythologies, popular folklore, queer futurisms: in the art of Chitra Ganesh, these seemingly disparate elements swirl together in fantastic combinations as pathways for reconfiguring the present. The Brooklyn-based visual artist's multivalent practice—which spans drawing, painting, installation, and video—takes cues from the rich visual traditions of South Asia, as well as canonical and contemporary feminist and queer scholarship, and, crucially, her long-standing dedication to collective activism.

Soccer Practice, 2019, acrylic and ink on paper, 8 × 12 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco.



While her aesthetic remains eclectic and wide-ranging, Ganesh always establishes intimacy in her work. Amid all the wondrous elements of her practice, within all the myths and legends, is something deeply affective: a sense that both she and her art will meet you, with all of your flaws, wherever you are. I had this hunch when I first saw her work as a student, and it seemed natural, a year later, for me to introduce myself. Nearly five years later, I find myself a grateful member of her community. I called Ganesh via Skype while she was in India, preparing for her upcoming work at the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh. We discussed the importance of intergenerational dialogue, our desi upbringings in New York City, and the links between erotic and aesthetic freedom. What emerged is her ability to make the mundane feel spectacular and, above all, her commitment to shaping a world into its most just and humane form.

TAUSIF NOOR: It's such a pleasure to engage with your work—your writing in addition to your visual art—because you do the important, feminist work of citation in the way Sara Ahmed discusses it: ensuring that critical voices aren't erased. Your art engages critically with such a range of historical and contemporary scholarship. How does your research inform and make its way into your visual art?

CHITRA GANESH: Research and study came to be central components of my practice in a couple of ways. One was through early studies in social theory and deconstruction as tools to access or recuperate historic cultural texts, starting with literature and film, and, gradually, visual art. Research helped me make sense of the many gaps I encountered while seeking certain aesthetic histories, representations, and modes of working beyond Eurocentric canons. These gaps were also attendant to growing up in a diaspora formation and not having the exposure to a quotidian, IRL, endlessly protean, contemporary South Asian culture.

During college in the early-to-mid '90s, this quest led me to one (maybe two) Asian art history classes—invariably focused on East Asia of centuries ago, via objects such as the jade *bi* or porcelain pot. I remember going to the Met on field trips and seeing ancient temples and bronze statues representing the beginning and end of sculpture in South Asia. Those kinds of experiences would make me feel like, Okay, this can't possibly be everything…there can't be a huge gap of thousands of years between what gets classified as fine art from certain geopolitical regions and what's happening now in contemporary art. Cultural studies and anthropology really shed light on those gaps. Two books that helped me are *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* by Johannes Fabian and *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* by Mary Douglas. My partner, who is an anthropologist, shared these with me. Fabian's text is deeply critical of what he calls the "denial of coevalness"—the Western colonialist framework that insists we exist in the here and now and the Other exists in a different era, denying our shared timeframe. Intercepting that dynamic of certain ideas and objects being located in the past and only retrievable as artifact, not as art, is something I'm keen to trouble by approaching antiquities or archaeological objects in relation to contemporary art practice. There are many productive ways in which the art object and the anthropological object can inform one another.

Another aspect of my research is fueled by the pleasure I derive from visual and textual forms outside of contemporary art—science fiction, comics, comic porn, lyric poetry, and more—and the drive to migrate structures and principles of those forms into my work by, for example, exploring drawing through printmaking and animation.

TN: What's really lovely about research and knowledge-sharing, as you just described, is that it's often social—like how the theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney talk about study as "what you do with other people." Your art often deals explicitly with this notion of collectivity as a way of learning, like in the DIY videos of women and queer and trans folks demonstrating different skills you gathered for *How We Do* (2018), which was part of your exhibition at The Kitchen in 2018.

CG: A sense of collective subjectivity and voice is something I notice all the time in South Asia. In this part of the world, the individual was never the main point of orientation in the universe. So that became how I understood subjectivity, which holds true in a lot of non-Western countries just because infrastructurally, you actually *do* need an entire group of people to procure a gas cylinder, sim card, rental agreement, medical care, or school fees—collective mobilization is necessary for basic survival. I was talking to a friend recently who remarked, "We don't come from 'throw money at your problems,' as the Americans say." Right now, I'm amazed by this iconic moment of convergence and protest, by millions, in India against the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act that the anti-Muslim, right-wing Hindu nationalist government [led by the Bharatiya Janata Party] is trying to institute.

My investment in collective knowledge exchange is equally rooted in my coming of age in the mid-to-late '90s in New York. Vibrant progressive South Asian and QTPOC [queer and trans people of color] scenes that emerged through spaces like the Audre Lorde Project, the South Asian Women's Creative Collective, as well as the QTPOC party and club scenes. Reading and partying went hand in hand (and still do). At that time, the critical mass seeking new ways of thinking together was much more intimate. That was also true of my involvement with a community of South Asian artists. We were lucky because twenty years ago rents were not as unfathomably high as today, and economic stratification was less

Wise Ladies Meeting, 2018, linocut on BFK Rives Tan, 280gsm, 20 × 16 inches.

brutal than it is now. That allowed us to meet every month in a basement space of the Asian American Writers' Workshop, on St. Marks and Second Avenue. Things like that seem impossible now after twenty-five years of unbridled gentrification. Finding people to think with continues to be essential for my work.

In *How We Do*, my installation inspired by ASMR [autonomous sensory meridian response] videos, my idea was to generate collective knowledge by echoing the utopic sociality and communal governance found in Begum Rokeya's feminist science fiction text *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and make this legible in a contemporary framework. So, I combined how-to videos and media reports I found online with new clips I solicited from friends and members of my own queer and trans community sharing their know-how. This mutual impulse draws upon the ideals of self-determination and collective skill-sharing outside of received notions of how labor is gendered and organized within patriarchal structures.

TN: And that's an active process. Somebody recommends a text that's outside your field, and it opens up a whole new world. Or someone connects you to an artist working in a different format, and that widens your scope.

The discourse right now is so fixated on these insular bubbles we've created—on social media, or otherwise.

After the Storm, 2019, water-based paint, fabric hardener, archival PVA glue, and mixed media mounted on paper on linen, 84 × 108 inches.

CG: Even when you're standing on your soapbox, broadcasting to the world what you think might be radical politics, it's circumscribed by an algorithm to only reach people in your echo chamber.

TN: The algorithm also being something that stands in for capital, right? How do we fight that? I think what you're saying is to constantly and actively seek, build, and expand community, rather than passively expecting it to find you. It mirrors, for me, the way you work across a variety of media, and your practice is constantly growing. Do you ever feel stagnant at all?

Pussy Riot, 2015, acrylic, faux flower petals, textiles, tinted plastic, rope, broken mirror, faux fur, leather, glitter, and glass on canvas, 60 × 72 inches.

CG: I need all of my faculties to make sense of the political moment, to consider how it's uniquely different from, while building on, what's happened in the past. What is getting obscured by the polarization in our current moment? When I started thinking about these things as a twenty-year-old, some of my first points of entry were the politics and discourse generated by the Black British art scene. I hadn't spent time there, but I was drawn to the material. Films like *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* or *My Beautiful Launderette*, written by Hanif Kureishi, deeply affected me and opened something up inside me. Watching John Akomfrah's films, such as *Handsworth Songs*, as well as Isaac Julien's work and sketch comedy like *Goodness Gracious Me* alongside *In Living Color*, got me thinking about the idea of Black Britain and how our own parents carry a legacy related to colonialism that might inform commonalities in subject-position across regions. That was where I started, and those things are still very near and dear to my heart, but I think about where I am now, where the world is now, and I see how different the everyday racial discourse is. My interests continue to evolve with my context, and they also reflect the social and political conditions of the time.

Growing up, there was no one in our community who was a practicing artist whom I could access as a role model. I did not know a single artist besides my art teachers at school, and I'm sure this is a familiar story. There were a few Sunday painters in our community—mostly Bengali uncles who had lower level, white-collar day jobs. As I kept looking, though, slowly people emerged in the generation above me—often midcareer artists, women who had been overlooked for decades—whom I had access to and whose generosity, honesty, and patience were so important. This included artists and thinkers I intersected with through school work and friendship for many years, like Coco Fusco, Martha Rosler, Zarina, Kara Walker, Janine Antoni, Beverly Semmes, Rina Banerjee, and Wendy V. Edwards, as well as those whom I identified with across history, like Zora Neale Hurston, Unica Zürn, Ana Mendieta, Amrita Sher-Gil, Elizabeth Catlett, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Continuing an intergenerational dialogue is key.

TN: That modality defines your practice: looking deeply in both directions, back toward the past and forward to the future. Working in this way, how do you remain grounded in the present and engaged with what's happening now? As a writer, I often wonder how to take stock of our current moment in a responsible way—how to cut through the noise and be attentive to present political configurations, but doing so such that I'm not just—

CG: —reacting? One of the ways that I try to open up the moment is by engaging. I've been reading Imani Perry's biography of Lorraine Hansberry, *Looking for Lorraine*, a sharp and profoundly moving read. There are a number of things in her biography that I identify with, coming from an educated background with

Tree of Life, 2019, acrylic, ink, embroidery, textiles, fur, ceramic, and glass marbles on paper; mounted on paper on linen, 71 × 52 inches.

privilege (in my case both education and caste) and going against the grain of the aspirational, upwardly mobile, idealized immigrant success story. It's important to recognize how crucial the black radical tradition has been for all of us, vis-à-vis the labor of black women within these movements, and its rootedness in the left. This really resonates with me as someone who thinks about and spends a lot of time in South Asia. Reading about Hansberry's life in the 1950s is so enriching for me right now, especially as we see a surge of authoritarian and xenophobic leaders come into power across the world. There was a new internationalism that emerged after the world wars and the collective global resistance to fascism back then, which is very relevant to today's autocratic surveillance states, essentially run by oligarchs. Learning about how other people survived a similar reactionary arc not so long ago is, for me, a way of finding rhyming moments, which helps me get out of my echo chamber and feel more hopeful.

TN: I think one of the goals of fascism is to normalize atomization or division as the primary way of being in the world. Collectivity across identity affiliations and time is a way of fighting against that alienation. As you were talking about intergenerational conversation, I thought about mentorship as well.

CG: Every generation has its own particular challenges and struggles. The older generation and the younger one can only help you up to a point to figure out the present moment—that's part of what it means to come of age in a zeitgeist. I think there's a real tension now between the individual and the collective, often reflected by focusing on feelings rather than structures, and evidenced by social media platforms. And this as a paradigmatic mode that's particular to how people today communicate and relate to one another under capitalism. So it's critical to be in conversation with people from different places and eras, where they might have had to do things completely underground, for example. Those conversations are energizing. It's not just about one generation imparting knowledge on to the next—it's a dialectical relationship.

I first started teaching public junior high school in Washington Heights in 1996. Almost twenty-five years later, I love teaching and mentoring even more—the joy and connection of being with people who are experiencing the same material world from such different standpoints, whether they're fourteen, twenty-three, or thirty-five. It's helped me to look more critically at my own generation and to see how conservative the Gen X mentality is. We grew up at a time when more people believed in America as a meritocracy, when the dominance of whiteness was barely questioned, and we were taught to be deeply invested in home ownership and having children as the ultimate markers of success. Very few people can afford to think like that now. Certainly in a world where 2,153 billionaires own more than the combined wealth of 4.6 billion people, fewer and fewer people will have a means to survive, let alone purchase a home, without being crushed. There's so much more to unpack about how my generation has been both fiscally and socially conservative—that was also very true for me around the landscape and potentiality of queerness at the time when I came out.

TN: In my limited experience, teaching has also offered a way to regroup and think about what I wish I had known, or what I wish had been imparted to me. Do you feel that as well?

CG: Absolutely. Today there are many more people writing on black, brown, and queer artists, and artists from outside the US. Now you can actually develop a radical pedagogy by accessing materials that were previously a struggle to find. This has been a game changer for teaching and learning. When I was growing up, one of the only South Asian contemporary artists that I had heard of was Anish Kapoor. Then S. H. Raza. That was it. Often that singular artist figure overshadowed everyone else. Now there's a multiplicity of information, which allows us to move beyond representation alone and approach something from the side—to write it slant, like Emily Dickinson said. I really appreciated the unexpected approaches I encountered in my education, like Kara Walker sharing Max Ernst's artist's books, which became a model for my first comic book, or Janine Antoni sharing an interview where Felix Gonzalez-Torres talks about how his initial primary audience was his lover, and how the audience grew from that point. Not all these encounters manifested directly in my art practice, but they continue to seed transformation. Teaching is like a time bomb: a spark can go off ten or twenty years later, and this goes for what my students teach me as well. The impact is not always immediate. It could have more of a sleeper-cell vibe. I want to think with people in that way.

My upcoming installation for the Leslie-Lohman Museum spans twelve windows and wraps around the corner of Wooster and Grand Streets in SoHo, one of the first neighborhoods in downtown New York City to witness the kind of gentrification I mentioned earlier. For this work, I wanted to draw a queer urban imaginary in order to explore how we navigate gentrification and the possibilities for queer life in the city. In my experience as a lifelong New Yorker, queer people, trans people, people of color, and people living in poverty have been pushed to the city's margins, or expelled altogether by gentrification. And yet, queer and trans life persists, and marginalities of all kinds continue to assert themselves. My work inhabits these contradictions by expanding on imagery I developed in response to the South Asian feminist-futurist fable *Sultana's Dream* and through photography and video of queer and

Tiger Robot, 2018, acrylic, glitter, collage, and digital print on paper, 39 × 53 inches.

Overleaf: installation views of *The Scorpion Gesture*, 2019, the Rubin Museum of Art, New York.

Troops Out
NO

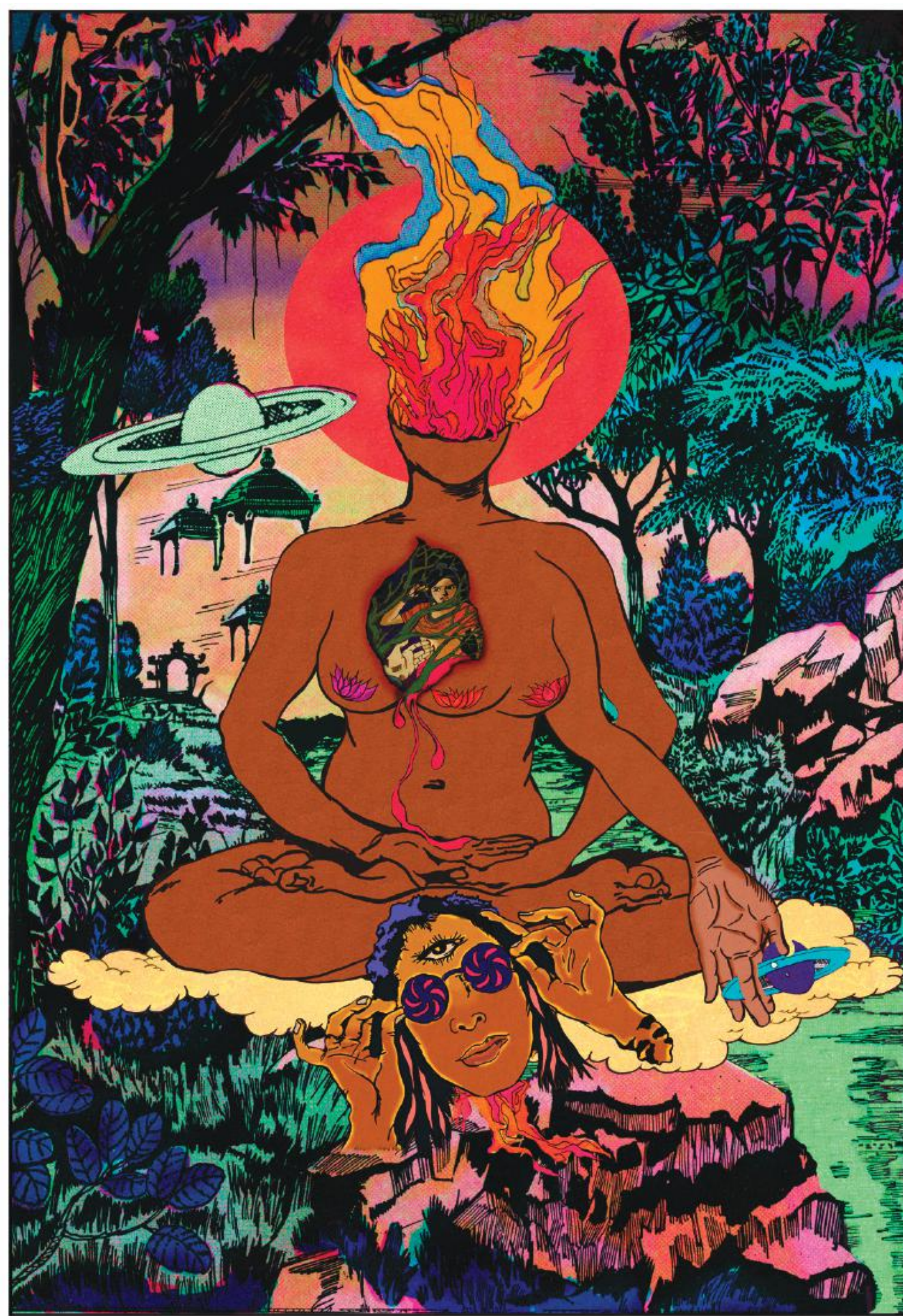
transOsubcultures. The work will incorporate the history of architecture in SoHo, where the museum is located. I am hoping to create a panoramic meditation on queer histories and queer futurity in a rapidly changing and increasingly stratified urban environment.

TN: I'm wondering whether your artmaking is motivated mostly by inspiration or whether you find yourself reacting against what you might have been taught. What's the force that drives you—is it inspiration or *anti*-inspiration?

CG: It's a little bit of both. I've always bristled at the idea of a singular voice or a few voices being adequate to describe a whole region of the world or a set of practices—be it via the lens of native informant, assimilable translator, etcetera. Honestly, I feel like there was more of a chasm than something to react against. For example, as a queer teenager, you inhabit alternative narratives and fantasy through metaphor via pop music. If you look at most love songs, nobody expects the subject of the lyrics to be the same gender as the singer of that message. Inhabiting certain narratives or realities by way of metaphor was always motivating for me. I've learned so much from earlier generations of women who were unapologetically feminist and political, who saw how radically disparate and unequal their treatment and their economic prospects were, and they reacted against that. I feel lucky that I was able to see their struggles and their successes and how these shifted over time. I'm thinking of Joan Jonas, or the artist Zarina, whom I interviewed and wrote about when I was twenty-five, and she was still laboring in relative obscurity, considered forever foreign. Zarina's radical feminist thought and praxis wouldn't have been legible to the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s and '70s, which was predominantly American and white.

I've been thinking about how intergenerational queer dialogue might be possible even as we globally move into a more right-wing, stratified zone. In this current iteration of fascism, in India and in other places, there is an effort to manipulate and co-opt the minority subject—whether that is the queer subject, or the poor subject, or any marked subject—while simultaneously concealing the reality of fascism and oligarchy. An example here in New York is the City wanting to put up monuments to queer figures like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, while evacuating any space for homeless queer youth on the very same street corners where they once found shelter and community. Rivera and Johnson would likely be turning in their graves if they saw that today these young people, whom they treated as their children, are being disappeared and replaced by monuments to them. It's chilling.

TN: The neoliberal project is so preoccupied with reducing the complexity of these identities to a checklist, flattening any political subjectivity in service to what's touted as social progress.



She the Question, Head on fire, 2012, archival LightJet print, 70 × 50 inches.

CG: It deflects attention from their responsibility to actually address practical, unsexy concerns, such as getting tuberculosis medicine to everybody who needs it, or providing bathrooms where homeless people can shower. This kind of superficial representation, in concert with obscuring the everyday violence of material inequality, becomes a false marker of progress and reminds those of us who see this that there's much more work to be done.

TN: It's very divisive because once you're fighting for just representation and recognition from the white supremacist, capitalist society, you lose sight of the goal, which is mutual aid and modes of collective care. That would actually be moving from a neoliberal understanding of politics to real ethics.

CG: That's where art can be so powerful because it's through the development of a distinct formal language or mode of expressing oneself—a vocabulary or iconography—that you can interrupt the previous language of monuments, or the idea that one's work, especially from a minoritarian community, is a transparent window onto a reality for which you are providing a voice.

TN: As you exhibit in different parts of the world and work with different groups of people, how do you think through the circulation and reception of your work and labor? There's a tendency to view artists and their work as constitutive of a brand, and I wonder if you feel a pressure to brand yourself.

CG: Since I work in a project-based mode and across media, at times my work does not have an immediately apprehensible visual consistency. I have wondered whether it's a challenge or even a detriment. The pressures and expectations of branding are more prevalent than ever, in part because of social media. Plus, there's a lag between when an artist thinks of an idea and when an audience might finally experience and understand it. This is more evident in fiction and film, where it might take seven to nine years to make something, and by the time it's finished, a practicing artist would have moved beyond that head space. That manifests in contemporary art via problematic framings, like that of the "undiscovered" female artist. Such language minimizes the role of the critics, gallerists, and curators who upheld the very systems that silenced and erased the artist in the first place. A lot of these artists are asked to revisit earlier bodies of work decades later, as audiences finally catch up with them.

In terms of branding, I could have been the artist who made comics forever; often artists become known for a certain body of work at a particular time because it connects to something broader in the culture at that moment. In my case, a few overlapping generations, not just in India, but across the diaspora, read *Amar Chitra Katha*, so the vocabulary of my work drawing inspiration from the comic book series [*Tales of Amnesia*, 2002] tapped into a huge collective memory bank shared by hundreds of millions of people. While that wasn't at the forefront of my work with comics, it informed the work's legibility.

Showing my work in South Asia is necessary and a relief. One of the main ways my work is characterized in American contexts is *as* South Asian, whereas in an Asian or subcontinental context, the narratives I draw upon are understood in relation to narrativity, time, and unconscious material. For example, *Sultana's Dream* is a well-known text in Bangladesh. It's not like I'm excavating an extremely obscure text, which is how someone in the United States who is completely unfamiliar with the materials might think about it. I am beyond thrilled to be showing this work for the first time in South Asia, at the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh. Exhibiting in Asia has been very generative and joyful for me. That different kind of engagement also allows me to see that I'm thinking with and through popular ideas that are very much alive and well, rather than working with minoritized subjects, as they are considered in the US.

TN: What that suggests to me is that creative freedom isn't something the world is going to just hand you. It's something that you make for yourself, so if you were to only think about a white or American or Western audience—

CG: Or my own work in relation to whiteness, which I don't—

TN: Right! Knowing that audiences exist outside of this capitalist, hegemonic framework is a way of opening up aesthetic freedom or potential, which is an ethos I see in your practice.

CG: To me, there's also a deep connection between aesthetic freedom and erotic freedom. I can't explain it, but it's *both/and*, and one informs the other.

TN: Yes! I've been thinking about this connection; the link between aesthetic and erotic freedom is so present in your work. To me, what they share is an introspective or meditative quality, and because nobody will just offer you that freedom; you have to dig for it. It's not easy to get to. And it has to be self-generative.

CG: This relates to how I think about time and history: not teleologically or in a straight line. Science fiction has an altered notion of time—one that isn't straightforward. Sometimes it's circular, troubling the boundaries between self and other. And the beginning and end of a story can touch in ways you might never have imagined. Alongside science fiction, works like Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses*, the poetry of Rumi, the erotic implications of spiritual devotion in Sufi *qawwali* music, and Audre Lorde's meditations on the erotic have been incredibly important for me.

Lorde's notion of the erotic as a signifier of unclaimed and unattended forms of knowledge resonates for me in the multiplicity of visual languages that continue to lie beyond, outside, or beneath Euro-American

contemporary art discourse. These are idioms I have always gravitated to, growing up in a household where my first encounters with art—before Art with a capital *A* or visiting museums—were with the beauty of fridge magnets depicting Hindu gods and goddesses, children's book illustrations, the melodrama and excess of Bollywood movies, and the graphic design on the packaging of my dad's cigarettes—*Alive with Pleasure!*

There is a messiness about powerful erotic and affective experiences, a simultaneity of subject positions and experience. For example, an artwork that stuns you into silence or stops you in your tracks, pulls you out of your body for a second, only to send you crashing right back into yourself, has the potential to disrupt your perceived boundaries and reconvene them in more pluralistic, polymorphous ways. It could even be that you look at a work of art, and it stares right back at you, touching you with its piercing gaze, as you touch it with your eyes, and you and it, for a moment, become one.

Accessing the capacity of the erotic to form a bridge between sharers could also offer a potent exit strategy—where we can gather ourselves and exit stage left from the polarizing set of discursive terms that shape art history and contemporary art: inside/outside, theory/practice, conceptual/figurative, abstraction/decoration, drawing/illustration, genius/unrecognized, invisibility/hypervisibility, and so forth.

TN: And not only exit strategies from the dominant discourses of art, but also the confidence to establish new pathways.

How do you deal with doubt in your process? Some people say that doubt is generative—that if you're not sure of something, lean into it and something will come through. Do you ever just give in to doubt?

CG: There's doubt, and then there's also self-doubt, and each feels different. If I feel some doubt about a project, I tend to give it more time and just try to think about the function or importance of putting that idea into the world. And by thinking about it, sometimes I realize that I want to work with this idea but maybe not in this form, or maybe it would be better if the project was actually done by a different kind of artist.

When I was younger, I remember reading Mahasweta Devi's biography of the Rani of Jhansi, which was actually more like a collection of oral histories because there was no definitive written history of her life. I was excited by these messages of revolution and sedition being passed around in food, for example. It was something that I thought a lot about and that really excited me, but I never made it into a project because I couldn't see myself making a "fortune cookie chapati," for instance… All this was before the institutionalization of social practice.

I've had many moments of doubt and self-doubt, especially seeing how little space was given to certain subjectivities in contemporary art. Eventually it made me lean harder into my work. My partner, Svati, and I often talk about this, and people have done this throughout history—using our work as a refuge and still going deep into our interests and inner life, even though it feels like space is shrinking before our very eyes and our thoughts could not possibly be urgent. Toni Morrison also talks about this—the dangers posed by racism as a distraction from one's true work. Having relationships across disciplines, as well as affinities across history, has been really helpful.

TN: Even when there are mythical, fantastical elements in your work, it's grounded in the people who make up your communities. There's a sense of celebrating the everyday—that heroes and heroines can be real people.

CG: A healer and practitioner of Tibetan medicine whom I met recently reminded me that gods and goddesses were brought into being to acquaint us better with our own humanity and the limits of being an ordinary person who experiences rage, injustice, betrayal, and all those emotions. I first became interested in science fiction because I was in a very rowdy English class with a first-year teacher, and the only thing that would keep us quiet was her reading Ray Bradbury and Stephen King to us. That was my first orientation to science fiction. I also remember seeing *Star Trek* and realizing that including characters like Uhura and Sulu doesn't mean you have to make it about their ethnic journey; they just are. There's an embeddedness of the Other in fantasy and in science fiction that's profoundly refreshing, which was very different from the assimilationist narrative of togetherness that was happening in fiction in the late '80s and early '90s. There is a lot of the ordinary in contemporary science fiction and comics. I love Ms. Marvel because I spent a lot of time in Jersey City when I was growing up, and, ultimately, she's a Muslim "Around the Way Girl" from JC who's a superhero, which is kind of incredible.

TN: It's great, right? She's someone you might know. It might mean that the people you're friends with are worth celebrating. They're larger than life in some way, and giving that time and attention to them—giving them dimension beyond your perception of their image—is an ethical stance. It's how you learn to empathize and not be a shitty person.

CG: I really hope that statement makes it in there. My work isn't actually about the world of gods and goddesses but about how mythic and superhuman iconographies are woven into the cellular structures of our contemporary everyday.

MARK McKNIGHT

In Mark McKnight's photographs, the material of the terrestrial world luminesces with a celestial aspect—dark bodies, asphalt, oily birds, decomposing stone, and dimpled flesh all radiate from a field of tarry shadow. The literal darkness corresponds to a figurative one, a subtle intimation of the entropic path of matter—what McKnight calls, after Simone Weil, its "decreation"—into lower states of order. Yet the terms of this rebirth are distinctly non-hierarchical. Animate and inanimate matter mutually inscribe upon one another. His images propose a queer ecology that eschews the boundaries of a reductionist or essentialist biology and look poetically at the ligaments—a stream of piss into water, the pucker of a cave's opening—that bind the living and nonliving. The effect is to animate both his personal circle and inert matter with the vital and revitalizing fecundity of mothering.

While the gesture of McKnight's work is heavenward, the vantage is downward, turning to the cleft, nook, pile, or crease. These are chthonic images, inflected internally toward a charged, private space: not the springlike *locus amoenus* of the pastoral but an intimate enclosure created within exchanges of empathy and care.

McKnight's gaze is attuned to the transcendent but not inured to the politics of how bodies and lands are abused, policed, and degraded. His photographs look lovingly at stretch marks, scars, blotches, and burns, at marred landscapes and fleshly bodies in repose. They propose a counter to the history of erasure and violence that's been visited upon bodies like his own, and they find a redemptive beauty in the land despite our breaches of the natural contract. The threat is not trivialized but rather put in context beside the main event: the alchemical feat of turning matter into light, which McKnight looks to as an emancipatory act.

—Nich Hance McElroy