

ArtSeen

Chitra Ganesh: *A City Will Share Her Secrets If You Know How to Ask*

By Amber Jamilla Musser



Chitra Ganesh, *A city will share her secrets if you know how to ask*, 2020. Site-specific QUEERPOWER public art installation. Courtesy Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art. Photo: © Kristine Eudey, 2021.

As this year's QUEERPOWER commission, Chitra Ganesh has filled 10 panels of Leslie Lohman's façade with images of queer activism, joy, and meditations on history, possibility, and gentrification. As the title indicates, the city, New York, is the subject matter under investigation and, indeed, Ganesh provides a plethora of urban landscapes—a skyline, several park scenes, an African burial ground, and sketches of traditional Lenape settlements and Seneca Village. With this historical sweep, Ganesh acknowledges that New York is on unceded Lenape territory, was embedded in the slave trade and the displacement of Black communities, and had an eerie quality under lockdown and curfew in 2020. This is not just a history lesson, it also speaks to Ganesh's investment in archives and commitment to foregrounding the ways that the city itself is implicated in the lives and histories of BIPOC.

ON VIEW

Leslie-Lohman Museum Of Art

A City Will Share Her Secrets If You Know How to Ask

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New York



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It emerges quite quickly that the city, as in N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020), is constituted by people. And, while the pastel tints that swirl around their outlines are subtle, Ganesh's emphasis on queer and trans people of color is unmistakable. Each pane features assemblages of queer and trans people—from the past and now—living. A well-attended march snakes its way through the fourth window where people gather under the sign of Marsha P. Johnson, the Black trans woman who self-identified as a drag queen and was central to 1969's Stonewall uprising, a founder of S.T.A.R. (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), and a prominent AIDS activist. One panel features DJ Rekha, who launched Basement Bhangra downtown, alongside people dancing and letting loose—joy is clearly marked on their faces; and another repeats the iconic *Gran Fury* image of artists Julie Tolentino and Lola Flash kissing. Helpfully, Ganesh has assembled a thorough guide to the windows, so viewers can learn more about the specific people inhabiting them. Another set of histories comes together, then, but what is important about these is the interplay between politics and pleasure. Ganesh shows us how the collective action of activism is inseparable from the collectivity of dancing, making out, and having fun. These actions are part of what keeps people and the city going.

Looking more closely at Ganesh's archive, we can also see the specificity with which she highlights queer femininity. This is evident not only through the people already referenced, but also in the figures in the crowds, many of whom are trans and gender non-conforming people who were murdered in 2020. Drawing from selfies or images that these women self-published, Ganesh captures their quirks and individual style for posterity rather than dwelling on their violent demises. These portraits celebrate—although given the circumstances of their gathering, the shadow of this violence hovers. Despite this precarity, this is a queer femininity that is strong, curious, and active. Ganesh bolsters this sentiment by dispersing mythological imagery throughout—something that adds a layer of “always” and eternal temporality to the project, which anchors Ganesh's work in an epistemology that centers and celebrates this femininity and its ability to make a world through ingenuity.

A City Will Share Its Secrets If You Know How to Ask is dense with meaning and in our current moment induces a sort of vertigo with all of these layers. You can see the multiple ways that the past touches the present. You can feel the valorization of feminine strength even amid deep violence. You can find the queer and trans people whose presence in the city is imperiled by gentrification. You can trace the outlines of lives lost.

In a context where we are still being asked to avoid crowds, this collectivity is welcome and overwhelming. This brings me back to the vertigo. It is not incidental, I think, that Ganesh has included an illustration of the vagus nerve in one of the windows. It is the longest nerve of the body and it connects the brain to the digestive tract. Ganesh's drawing shows the brain connected to the lungs, kidneys, stomach, and heart. This set of connections offers a key to thinking about the way that embodiment is central to how we might understand the life of the city. Her secrets might be in the archives of collectivity offered by Ganesh, but we experience them as nourishment to heart and mind.



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