

Local Arts

Destruction, creation, feminism and comic books collide in renowned Brooklyn artist's first Canadian solo exhibit

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Renowned American visual artist Chitra Ganesh in front of Wolf Watcher's Dream, a site-specific mural she created at Contemporary Calgary as part of her new and first Canadian exhibit, Astral Dance. Darren Makowichuk/Postmedia PHOTO BY DARREN MAKOWICHUK /DARREN MAKOWICHUK/Postmedia

On Oct. 3, New York artist Chitra Ganesh was supposed to begin an ambitious mural in the Ring Gallery of Contemporary Calgary.

The piece, one of the many highlights of Ganesh's Astral Dance exhibit, would go on to cover nearly 20 metres of space on the unique curved walls of the gallery. Entitled the Wolf Watcher's Dream, the site-specific mural showcases a number of the renowned artist's hallmarks. There are depictions of the female form and mixed-media collages set against an ethereal pinkish-sunset background. One ornate, old-fashioned image was inspired by the cover art of a Columbia Records album of Indian music from the 1960s that had been in her father's record collection. There's a peacock that is done in the style of a children's literature illustration. One of the figures borrows from a style popularized by 19th-century courtesans in India.

Once the exhibit ends its run on Jan. 29, the mural will disappear. This means that spectators, already treated to the first Canadian solo exhibit by Ganesh and arguably the most comprehensive ever in covering her 20-years-plus career, will get to see an exclusive piece that will never be on display anywhere else.

But the thing about creating a site-specific mural at a gallery is that the artist needs to be on-site to create it. Unfortunately, Ganesh tested positive for COVID-19, which meant she had to spend her first days in Calgary in isolation. So she didn't get to start work on the project until Oct. 7. Miraculously, The Wolf Watcher's Dream was complete by Oct. 12 for a media preview of Astral Dance.

"Unlike the crazy U.S., where people would just be like 'No, just come in. That's fine,' they (said) 'People in the institution have concerns and we think you should stay home and recover'" says Ganesh, who tested negative before starting work after the gallery staff went home for the evening on Oct. 7.



Chitra Ganesh. Pussy Riot, 2015. Acrylic, faux flower petals, textiles, tinted plastic, rope, broken mirror, faux fur, leather, glitter and glass on canvas. Collection of Tad Freese & Brook Hartzell. jpg

The artist acknowledges she had been thinking and designing the piece well ahead of time. She wanted to create the mural in part because she was fascinated by the unique, circular room in the gallery, which surrounds the old domed-ceilinged Centennial Planetarium at Contemporary Calgary.

“This one was interesting to me because of how it surrounds you,” Ganesh says. “It feels immersive in a different way. I was interested in working with that and playing with that, especially because a lot of my work is about time and cycles of time.”



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Chitra Ganesh. Architects of the Future, The Fortuneteller, 2014. Portfolio of four woodblock and screenprints with gold leaf. Courtesy of the artist and Durham Press. PHOTO BY DURHAM PRESS

It's just one of many highlights in Astral Dance, a generous, sprawling collection that gathers work from the artist and private collections around the globe and covers several mediums. The sheer volume of work was so great that pieces spill out of the Ring Gallery into the halls. The earliest pieces on display are two acrylic paintings, 1999's Girl with Skulls and 2000's Wedding Night, that borrow from street portraiture, photo-booth selfies and National Geographic images.

Eventually, her practice would expand to animation, sculptures, collages, photography and film, all of which are featured in Astral Dance as a colourful body of work showcasing the artist's interests in feminism, queer theory, science-fiction imagery, Bollywood, Surrealism and South Asian history, religion and myths.

Ganesh's father won a green-card lottery and her parents immigrated to Brooklyn from Calcutta in the early 1970s. Both her mother and father were part of large families that remained in their homeland. So as a child, the family would make frequent trips back to India.



Girl with Skulls, 1999, acrylic on canvas, and Wedding Night, acrylic on canvas, both by American artist Chitra Ganesh. Ganesh's first Canadian solo exhibit, Astral Dance, is showing until Jan. 29, 2023 at Contemporary Calgary. Darren Makowichuk/Postmedia PHOTO BY DARREN MAKOWICHUK /DARREN MAKOWICHUK/Postmedia

Her work is influenced by Bollywood films and early Indian cinema, but also Amar Chitra Katha Comics, a series published in English that were popular from the late 1960s to the early 1990s and centred on Indian mythology, folklore and historical figures. In 2003, Ganesh self-published her own comic book, Tales of Amnesia, which borrowed heavily from illustrations in the comic-book series. Astral Dance features 21 digital C-prints from the work, which offers a retelling of Indian folklore and fairy tales featuring a female protagonist who challenges “notions of compliance to explore alternative models of femininity and power.”

“I'm interested in these different kinds of graphic styles that draw from vernacular culture,” she says. “I did a little bit because I grew up in New York, but I didn't really grow up going to many museums. A lot of the aesthetic influences I had were outside the museum.”

Eventually, her work began to explore the relationship between myth and science fiction and stories where there are “both creation and destruction and both are necessary for the world to keep moving forward.” Many of the paintings depict female characters in various altered states, often with missing limbs or extra limbs or with bodies that have been slashed open.

“I was thinking a lot about how much bodies are torn asunder in creation myths,” she says. “Like the Norse myth where the father’s beard becomes the clouds and something else becomes the entrails and the limbs become the trees. They have that in pre-Columbian mythology as well as Hindu mythology, that idea of the body having to be torn apart and then reconstituted again and that’s actually what earth is made of. It seems to be a really resonant idea across many traditions.”

While her work is influenced by traditional culture and myths, Ganesh says it is also a reaction to the norms of art history and religion, where practices that reinforce patriarchal structure come to the fore.

“A part of what that is is taking both drawing forms and also characters that might have been overlooked or rendered as minimal and small and creating a world for them and giving them maximal space,” she says. “What people think of as secondary literature like children’s books or YA novels and science fiction, those are some of the most radical places where things are happening right now because the mainstream fiction industry is so tied to corporate money. I think even in terms of other pictorial forms, there is a lot of possibility in forms that we see as outside of high art.”

Chitra Ganesh Astral Dance runs until Jan. 29 at Contemporary Calgary.