

Chitra Ganesh

Former planetarium a perfect place to view complex cosmologies that bend myth and gender stereotypes.

by Lissa Robinson

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Chitra Ganesh, "Architects of the Future, The Fortuneteller," 2014, portfolio of four woodblock and screenprints with gold leaf (courtesy the artist and Durham Press)

A circular gallery at Contemporary Calgary that surrounds the former planetarium's dome is the perfect space to contemplate the complex multidimensional cosmology created by Chitra Ganesh. Whether it's a mural, charcoal drawing, mixed-media painting or animation, Ganesh skilfully bends myth and gender stereotypes to

create her own unique universe.

Astral Dance is the first show in Canada for Ganesh, who lives in New York City, and has shown widely in galleries across Europe, South Asia and the United States. Her work, while deeply influenced by early studies in art semiotics and comparative literature at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, is also intuitive, inquisitive and brazenly honest. Ganesh uses the visual languages of surrealism and expressionism, mashing them up with South Asian iconography and pop culture references from comic books, science fiction and Bollywood posters, interweaving imagined pasts with speculative futures in non-linear narratives populated by women who are masked, sprout three breasts or have a tree in place of a head.



Chitra Ganesh, "The Wolf Watcher's Dream," 2022, site-specific mixed-media mural, installation view (photo courtesy Contemporary Calgary)

This sprawling exhibition, a 20-year survey, includes a temporary site-specific mural, *The Wolf Watcher's Dream*, which bends around three walls. Completed in just five days, after Ganesh spent time in isolation recovering from COVID-19, it will be painted out once the show wraps up on Jan. 29. Its three female figures, along with flora and fauna, inhabit a world awash in an ethereal pink sunset. A woman on the first wall gazes at a starry galaxy through a virtual reality headset, her torso seemingly emerging from a wolf's head. A loosely looped rope runs across the wall, connecting her with two other women. One has cerulean hair made from feathers and wears a sleeveless shirt constructed from collaged wrapping paper. She gazes at the third woman who shares a visual story that floats above her in a cartoon-style speech bubble.

As you wander through the exhibition, it becomes obvious that Ganesh loves to use her hands. Found materials appeal to her, not only for aesthetic reasons, but to weave in more meanings and histories. For example, *Guardian*, a mixed-media painting, portrays a ghostly squatting cat-like figure with a gesturing hand instead of a head. Its body is embellished with bits of coloured rope, and it has a slim rainbow-hued tail. A tea-wash stain makes the linen background shimmer, an ideal setting for Ganesh's beastly queen.



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)

What stands out across all the work is how figuration – brown female bodies, in particular – can be transformed into a mythological site to challenge long-received representations of femininity, sexuality and power. In *Pussy Riot*, five brown women are lined up in front of a white flower, perhaps a lotus. Faux petals are scattered in the foreground. The women, who wear hooded masks made from leather, fake fur and shards of glass, radiate power. Their bodies shapeshift into a five-headed being with multiple arms and legs that recalls Kali, a powerful Hindu goddess.



Chitra Ganesh, "Astral Dance," 2022, installation view at Contemporary Calgary (artworks © Chitra Ganesh, photo courtesy Contemporary Calgary)

Born in Brooklyn to parents who immigrated from Calcutta in the early 1970s, Ganesh has taken regular trips back to her family's homeland. Indian icons and symbols recur throughout her work, particularly in her comics and animations. Her reincarnated comic-book melodramas, *Tales of Amnesia*, are quirky portrayals of mythical worlds filled with mutilated, multi-limbed and bare-breasted nymphs and lesbian goddesses. It's her riff on a popular comic books series from the 1960s, *Amar Chitra Katha*, that centred Indian mythology, folklore and patriarchal history. Ganesh's works are daring, vibrant and brutally raw with their commentary on the politicized female psyche, wounded but still raging. Similar themes are explored in delightful animations projected inside the dome. Its dark and intimate space is perfect for viewing lyrical worlds where stories unfold through kaleidoscopic imagery.