



Chitra Ganesh, *Fingerprints*, lightjet print

## Interview with Chitra Ganesh

From classical Buddhist texts to early science fiction, Chitra Ganesh speaks of the femme body

Critical Collective

14 Jun 2021

**Critical Collective (CC):** Your creative practise draws upon a variety of formats like comic books, digital art, drawings, textual works, films, murals and installations. You came to using comic book form characters, blurb bubbles, and subverted superhero or heroic tropes nearly two decades ago, and have recently revisited the possibilities of the form. What license does the medium afford you in your practice?

**Chitra Ganesh (CG):** I see my engagement with comics as part of a larger interest in the visual languages of pop culture and everyday life - these include film posters, graffiti on the subway, and fantasy illustration. One of the wonderful things about comics in particular is that we are all equipped with the semiotic language to understand them, and it's great that people come to it with that sensibility of wanting to decode the visual grammar. To know that a certain shape signifies speech, while another suggests interior thought, or third person narrative, all of these nuances of how comics are put together and experience with the form since childhood, gives us the ability to read them. The content alongside the form has also provided an important access point for certain audiences. My early work *Tales of Amnesia*, which was based on the Amar Chitra Katha for example, tapped into a collectively held memory bank for audiences in India and its diaspora that had grown up reading the comic series. That's hundreds of millions of people for whom the form immediately evokes potent signifiers and memories. I also appreciate the flexibility of the comic form - the characters would literally come off the pages and fly around when I would read them. These comics were particularly important to me growing up; they were part of a heterotopia of narrative, myth, and history, a transmission of value, of a secular India, from my parent's to me. *Amar Chitra Katha* provided a shared frame of reference, both visual and narrative, with my cousins (and other readers) across the ocean. Additionally, ACK, at the time, included stories of Muslim and lower caste heroes, something which became less prominent with the rise in Hindu nationalism.

**CC:** How important does characterisation, story and world-building continue to be in your art practise especially in context to your more recent works such as *At Her Dream's Edge*, *Face of the Future*, or *Her Garden*, *A Mirror*, *Her Kitchen* which are larger installation works exploring identity, power hierarchies, technology and the feminine narrative through materiality and popular cultural symbolism?

**CG:** Narrative and world building - or reimagining as I like to call it, are still central to my practice. One of the things I have been interested in with my own specific kinds of utopian and dystopian narratives is the ability of that form to focus on structures, rather than individuals. I mean, there is of course science fiction that prioritises an individual character that transcends consciousness, a white male liberal humanist sort of ideal, but I do think that other utopias, for example in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* and more, they talk about structures like governance, food distribution and traffic flow.

With *Her Garden*, *A Mirror*, I wanted to focus on the idea of collective skill sharing and knowledge transfer by and for women, queer and trans folks, through channels located outside of traditional pedagogical or government contexts. For instance people teaching each other how to compost when there's no infrastructure for garbage pickup, or teaching older women how to ride motorcycles so that they may feel more autonomous and less dependent on others. Both *Sultana's Dream* and my exhibitions at the Rubin museum, *Scorpion Gesture* and *Face of the Future*, were born from an interest in expanding the mythic vocabulary and storytelling to include Buddhist texts and feminist science fiction.

**CC:** You have spoken of a "core concern" in the brown femme body, the fact that art from South Asia is considered an artefact rather than art, and the absence of the global south from (Western) canons of history. How does the absence of such histories of art, their poetic and literary imaginary in the west actually inflect your work? What kind of vocabulary of visibility do you believe you have been able to create?

**CG:** When I was in graduate school, contemporary art from the (Indian) subcontinent was barely visible in the mainstream contemporary art landscape within the United States. This has definitely changed since, albeit very slowly, and I'm really happy to have had the opportunity to share the work of peers and role models from the global south in my teaching practice. I would say these absences have more inflected the readings of my work rather than the work itself. In the US, particularly early on in my career, there was this tendency for 'Indianness' to be taken as the primary lens through which my work was interpreted. In South Asia, I feel my work is able to breathe differently and can be approached and engaged as being, for example about temporality, iconicity, science fiction, nostalgia, or mark making rather than being placed primarily within an identitarian context.

The move to represent multiple iterations of the body and femininity has always been important to my work. In the mythic narratives that inform some of my figurations, there's almost always a portion of the story that loops around how the body came to be, what it is, and the inextricable relation between creation and destruction. This is evident in stories such as that of Coatlicue in the Aztec mythology, whose body, torn asunder, gave birth to the moon and stars. Or the dismemberment of Sati's body into 51 parts that formed sacred sites across India known today as the Shakti Peethas or the refigured feminist literature that includes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (1997), and even speculative queer tales such as Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019). I am interested in how these have implications for the cerebral, shifting gender, urging us to think about expanding what we have come to know as the normative body. This isn't about the body being a site of harm or liability; rather, such narratives offer different propositions for bodily configurations. How bodies can exist, often paradoxically, embedded in misogynist stories.

**CC:** In constituting your narratives in comic form, what do you believe makes the female, queer heroic figure and how can you lend her a contemporary context?

**CG:** When I was in graduate school, contemporary art from the (Indian) subcontinent was barely visible in the mainstream contemporary art landscape within the United States. This has definitely changed since, albeit very slowly, and I'm really happy to have had the opportunity to share the work of peers and role models from the global south in my teaching practice. I would say these absences have more inflected the readings of my work rather than the work itself. In the US, particularly early on in my career, there was this tendency for 'Indianness' to be taken as the primary lens through which my work was interpreted. In South Asia, I feel my work is able to breathe differently and can be approached and engaged as being, for example about temporality, iconicity, science fiction, nostalgia, or mark making rather than being placed primarily within an identitarian context.

The move to represent multiple iterations of the body and femininity has always been important to my work. In the mythic narratives that inform some of my figurations, there's almost always a portion of the story that loops around how the body came to be, what it is, and the inextricable relation between creation and destruction. This is evident in stories such as that of Coatlicue in the Aztec mythology, whose body, torn asunder, gave birth to the moon and stars. Or the dismemberment of Sati's body into 51 parts that formed sacred sites across India known today as the Shakti Peethas or the refigured feminist literature that includes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* (1997), and even speculative queer tales such as Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019). I am interested in how these have implications for the cerebral, shifting gender, urging us to think about expanding what we have come to know as the normative body. This isn't about the body being a site of harm or liability; rather, such narratives offer different propositions for bodily configurations. How bodies can exist, often paradoxically, embedded in misogynist stories.

**CC:** In constituting your narratives in comic form, what do you believe makes the female, queer heroic figure and how can you lend her a contemporary context?

**CG:** Both comic and mythic forms allow for a multiplicity that is central to the kinds of figures and characters in my work. I am interested in exploring how collective subjectivity can be manifested - something that was really inspiring about Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's*

**CC:** One of the effects of this present time, and possibly the lockdowns has been a re-visitation of histories and narratives that may have lapsed from public recollection. What has been your own response, given your interest in archaeology, historic narrative and the occlusion of histories?

**CG:** This pandemic has brought many of the patterns around the occlusion of information to the forefront on a visceral level - how there is a scarcity of accurate information about the COVID death count in India, or how police brutality in the United States and poverty in both places is just as much of a pandemic as the COVID-19. It also led me to think about the connection between misinformation, vaccine denial, and authoritarian governance models. For me, it's not just a matter of revisiting the past, but reorienting ourselves to it, to look back at the past differently in a way that upends ideas of teleology and progress. I feel this is the key to generating more just possibilities for our future. The future and the past are not consecutive points on a straight line, they are much more dynamically and dialectically involved. One meta-strategy would be to dislodge the many myths that structure our understanding of history and progress and have been harnessed in the service of justifying brutality.

**CC:** *Sultana's Dream* is a prequel to *Her Garden, A Mirror, The Kitchen*, wherein you have taken Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's sci-fi text *Sultana's Dream* as a point to explore feminism in popular culture. How do you believe sci-fi allows you to revisit the ground of mythology, based on your study of classical Buddhism, to create your own narrative mythology?

**CG:** I've always been interested in ideas of time, non-linear or circular time, events and memories that shatter clock-time altogether and how time itself, is often portrayed as a character in science fiction. There are also these inextricable entanglements between deep past and far future, which I've found have manifested as a dynamic connection between mythology and science fiction. More recently this is through the use of visual imaging technologies, to elucidate in more specific detail, events of the deep past.

Other ideas of mythic time, science-fiction, and fantasy within a variety of Asian mythologies offered new ways to think about society and storytelling. These are capacious enough to create new structures that challenge hierarchies of gender, caste, and femme sexuality. In researching the iconography and narrative structure of myth, I realised that the kind of ontological, cosmic questions that myths ask, and the speculative space they provide, have contemporary manifestations in science fiction. For example, Battlestar Galactica's anthem "This has all happened before, and this will all happen again" hints at how notions of mythic time resolve, and cohere, in the story.

**CC:** Lastly, your projects planned for 2020 may have been disrupted by the closure of museums and galleries. How do you plan to show your work in the months ahead?

**CG:** Yes, projects in both the US and India were disrupted as a result of the pandemic and its mismanagement by governments on both sides. I was supposed to have a solo show earlier in 2021 with Gallery Espace in New Delhi, but this is indefinitely postponed. Given the current state of the pandemic in India, and the shocking death and devastation in its wake, I am thinking much more about just governance, oxygen access, the health and safety of family and friends while mourning the loss of loved ones who have died during this time. I was fortunate to be invited to do the first QUEERPOWER commission at the Leslie Lohman Museum last year, a site specific installation in their window spaces celebrating the queer and transgender histories of downtown Manhattan and the Soho neighbourhoods around the Museum. It meant a lot to have a public artwork on view during the lockdown, and it has been extended to October of this year. I also currently have work in a group show, *Licence to Laugh*, at Shrishti Gallery in Hyderabad, and a new suite of prints up at the Bronx Museum as part of their exhibition *Born in Flames*, curated by Jasmine Wahi. I also started working with Hales Gallery (London and New York) last year, and will have my first solo show with them in November.