

# ARTFORUM

NEW YORK



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**Chitra Ganesh, *Guardian*, 2021**, ink, paint, fabric, pastel, paper, rope, and tea on linen, 60 × 48".

## Chitra Ganesh

HALES GALLERY | NEW YORK

Through a practice anchored in (though not limited to) drawing, Chitra Ganesh has developed a sophisticated iconography and lively illustrative style that synthesizes myriad references to South Asian mythology and religion, comic books, pulp and science fiction, Bollywood posters, and feminist and queer history and theory. Ganesh's exhibition here, "Nightswimmers," processed and responded to the profound shifts experienced during the widespread lockdowns that characterized the pandemic's early months, when life suddenly came to a terrifying and isolating standstill. In contrast to the unruliness of past work, from science fiction-inspired feminist utopias to scenes of violence and body horror, this show felt altogether calmer, offering up moments of respite and reflection. With works installed on dark-purple walls in a dimly lit space, the exhibition evoked, with a contemplative mood, the liminal state between sleep and waking life, a limbo that seems an apt metaphor for the atemporal stupor of the past two years.

Despite their quietude, these images retained the irreverent material experimentation that has defined Ganesh's practice across media. Evoking the nocturnal reveries of the show's title, many of these pieces were made on black grounds, while others recycled the surplus of paper bags and cardboard boxes generated by our dependence on home delivery during pandemic sequestration. Rejecting the whiteness of the proverbial blank canvas, Ganesh probes the conceptual, visual, narrative, and material possibilities offered by a shift into darkness. To build her images, she incorporates unconventional but everyday materials, such as dried flowers for their delicate

textures; sequins and mica flakes to add a bit of twinkle; jewelry and embroidered fabric for a personal if exotic touch; and cleverly repurposed castoffs, including bits of insulation that get transformed into clouds and shards of mirror that coalesce into a glittering moon, sourced during neighborhood walks.

These works are populated with fantastical hybrid beings that gleefully transgress conventional boundaries and categories. Ganesh privileges wisdoms that lie beyond reason and sight, forgoing heads altogether or substituting other objects for them. In *Vitruvian Flight* (all works 2021), the artist queers Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, ca. 1490, replacing that male icon of Western rational order with a tiger-headed androgyne who possesses a third breast but lacks visible genitalia. Like da Vinci's figure, this character is circumscribed by primary shapes, but here the square is embroidered in electric-blue thread and the circle is composed of dried rose petals that uncannily resemble textured brushstrokes, their undeniable craftiness further deflating the original's art-historical authority.

Ganesh's bodies are less in or of the world than they are entire worlds unto themselves, unfixed sites of transformation that can be simultaneously human, animal, vegetal, architectural, and alien. In *Guardian*, bits of brightly colored knotted cord and a chintzy metallic rainbow rope tipped with a black pom-pom form the fur and tail of a monkey-like body. A hand making the scorpion gesture, with index finger and pinky extended while holding a *vajra*—a somewhat sinisterly alien-looking ritual scepter—appears in place of the head. Such hand signs, called mudras, and all-seeing eyes unattached to bodies reappear, emphasizing more corporeal and performative forms of knowledge, communicated through sundry physical and facial expressions, as in classical Indian dance. Based on an archival photograph of a performer dressed as one of the Citipati—a pair of skeletal deities from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition who guard the threshold between life and death—*Death Dancer* responds to the recent recirculation of canonical images of mortality, such as the beak-masked bubonic plague doctor and the danse macabre. Ganesh's non-Western tableaux expand the visual archive of pageantry around death, underlining the reasons communal rituals of mourning, something many of us were unable to do during the current crisis, are crucial in processing loss.

The artist's semiotic play is also linguistic, frequently featuring self-authored stream-of-consciousness text fragments. In *Ammammammamma*, candy-colored porcelain letters resembling a child's first alphabet repeatedly spell out the Tamil word for mother, which float above an image of the artist at rest as she grieves the premature loss of her own. Embroidered around the floating lantern-headed apparition in *we are the dust* is the protest slogan THEY TRIED TO BURY US LITTLE DID THEY KNOW WE WERE SEEDS: a call for resistance to oppression that gains strength from the certainty of rebirth and a phrase that beautifully encapsulates the regenerative optimism of this show.

— Murtaza Vali