



**BR**

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# CHITRA GANESH

## with Megan N. Liberty

Brooklyn-based artist Chitra Ganesh works across media, including drawing, collage, comics and printmaking, animations, videos, and immersive installations. Her figurative work is both formally and conceptually rigorous, drawing on Indian myths and legends, 1960s and 1970s comics, science fiction, pulp movie posters, modernist literature, and subway graffiti. On the occasion of Ganesh's upcoming site-specific installation, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art's QUEERPOWER commission, which will cover the street facing windows of the museum, we talked about this moment of rethinking public space and public monuments, the way comics are uniquely equipped to represent this time of rupture and isolation, modernist narrative strategies, and reimagining archives.

**MEGAN N. LIBERTY (RAIL):** You work with a wide range of media—video and animation, different kinds of printmaking including linocuts and screenprints, thread, weaving, and even sometimes glitter. Could you talk about your approach to materials?

**CHITRA GANESH:** It began with more traditional forms of collage, partly generated by collecting materials that weren't easily found in the US, and that had a different kind of visual language. When I was younger I loved fantasy book covers, psychedelic posters, and album covers and sleeves. On trips to India over the summers, I encountered miniature paintings and statues that were thousands of years old alongside advertisements for everyday products, political graffiti, painted and silkscreened movie posters, magazines, and comic books. I would bring those things home and start to think with them through the process of collage. It was that impulse to assemble in a way that allowed the incorporation of everyday materials and print culture into my work more easily—it took longer for me to integrate the collage aesthetic with painting. There's an immediacy that connects the process of drawing and collage. Both an object's irreducible material qualities and a mark made of ink on a piece of paper cannot be erased—they have a similar sort of synergy. This method was also influenced by teaching children and witnessing the elasticity of how they orient themselves to and approach objects with a very thin line between the everyday and the fantasy. Suddenly, a cotton

ball can become a cloud—and it really can hold the presence of a cloud.

**RAIL:** Almost like an unlearning of how we're trained to approach materials in a way.

**GANESH:** Noticing flexibility in thinking—of how disparate objects can be juxtaposed and go together—works against the idea that we shouldn't be using, for example, coffee grounds with Elmer's or macaroni or glitter. There was also a distinct sensibility between the objects I saw in the world and the objects I saw in my house, many of which were decades old, brought along in the process of immigration, and accrued meaning.

**RAIL:** Artists who work in collage and with bookmaking and publishing are usually tapping into very rich material histories of objects that are both popular culture objects, but as you've noted, domestic, household objects, which have a shared cultural history as well as a personal, more intimate one.

**GANESH:** Yes, I agree. My work became about incorporating personal objects, like my parents' drawer full of old keys to try and get at an integrated experience—of affective response and reflection or remembering that can be triggered by engaging with certain artworks and materials. For example books I read when I was younger stay in my mind as much for their smell and feel of the pages, and dusty shelves, as for their content.

**RAIL:** Are there ways in which, when you're appropriating these objects or bringing them into your

artwork that you try to translate these histories and associations into the work? For example, with your prints you're translating the comic book which has a specific feel and texture and cheapness to it into a screenprint. How do you capture these qualities?

**GANESH:** In some of my wall installations I use everyday materials, such as shower curtains, decorative objects from the 99 cent store, second hand embroidered fabrics, and synthetic and human hair. Something I used from early on were paperweights with flowers embedded in them. These were always a point of fascination for me; almost an unconscious object of meditation. But in the work, there's something about their weight that gets conveyed and their angle that's different. In my comics, in both silkscreens and digital prints, some of this is embedded in printing textures and colors. Sometimes there is a purposeful, slight misregistration to convey the urgency of this kind of print culture and print material, with a looseness of what stays in the line and what leaks. I'll create patterns and palette swatches comprised of various print textures. I build whole palettes where each singular color is composed of multiple colored fragments, as you see in reprographic techniques such as half tone and older versions of four-color printing. Some of my plain colors also have that kind of texture or a tooth. There's something about what that information communicates in terms of time, process, era, and so forth that even if the eye or the mind isn't consciously engaging it, which is nonetheless really important to making meaning.

**RAIL:** You use these backgrounds in *Architects of the Future* (2014), your suite of screenprints with woodblock printing?

**GANESH:** Yes, there's actually two or three layers of printing in *Architects of the Future*—the texture, the color, some with glitter texture, some darker. The holes that you see are made out of little dots from a wood dowel. They have another kind of materiality. All of those choices and color sensibilities are very important, as are some of the changes and interventions I make. The original comics I reference, including from the Amar Chitra Katha, an Indian comics series, are from the early '60s and '70s—from when there were only like three colors of foundation, and extremely limited variations of skin tone. There were also those same markers that we still see now—beards, dark, thick hair, darkened skin, olive skin, black skin—being used to signify evil or danger. I want to create a completely new sort of language around how the colors operate, while still pointing to these original frames of reference.

**RAIL:** In some of your previous interviews you talk about “the gutter” in comics. It raised a lot of questions for me about audience, viewership, and authorship, especially because the hand is often writing or doing some activity in the image that gives the characters agency.

**GANESH:** I love that question—I don't think anyone's ever asked me that before, and I'm not quite sure I've ever put it that way. But yes! In *Anima Mundi* (2020), the most recent comic I made for Creative Time, the hand also makes an appearance there—in this case with its finger on the vagus nerve. The hand for me recalls how the author's

Portrait of Chitra Ganesh, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



Chitra Ganesh, *The Fortuneteller*, 2014. Screenprint, woodblock, and gold leaf. 25 3/4 × 22 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Durham Press.

name and unique identity is often interlaced within older modes of oration like poetry and songs. You can hear it in Carnatic (South Indian Classical) Sufi music, and see it in Latin lyric poetry. Because of the way myth is structured, looping around back and forth across time, often smaller stories are nested in the larger narrative. The hands function like chapter or section breaks in myth—as a reminder that we’re actually *in* a story, something that small ruptures help us remember. It’s not a continuous world built that is supposed to encase you the way a novel is.

**RAIL:** You do that formally with the way you structure your comic narratives, you remind us of the frame with the gutter, things reach into the gutter, or move across it—or don’t—to suggest that there’s something outside of these borders.

**GANESH:** Yes, that there’s something outside of these borders and that this is a structure that can also grant “permission” for the image to exceed the frame. You see this in newer comics too, like the comic series *Monstress* or in classics like Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*, where there’s more and more stuff leaking out of the frame and an expansion and contraction of the gutter. Sometimes full-page spreads are used to create a kind of second parallel narrative or historical narrative or something like

that. In *Monstress*, the full-page spreads show a cat who is a professor of history giving us background and larger context for the current story. Similarly, with the information that traverses one frame to the next in my works, I aim to convey a larger sense of texture that animates the drawn world.

**RAIL:** Your comics are usually displayed framed on walls, could you talk about the installation of the pages in the gallery space? You end up with multiple gutters, because you have your page with gutters between frames, but then each page is individually framed in a way in which the viewer can consume all the images at once with gaps on the wall between them.

**GANESH:** Something I really appreciate about the comic form is its flexibility—when I would read them, literally the pages come off and fly around. It’s also a different sense of space. The comic is spatialized in relation to intimacy and can be read on the go. It’s something that people can read on the subway, on the toilet, in their bedroom. They work both similarly and very differently in spaces that are public. The space surrounding the work is also part of the artwork in, for example, a gallery or museum space. There’s another layer of spatialization that comes from a public interaction rather than a private interaction. And then having them

on the wall also allows me to play with some of my own interests in scale.

**RAIL:** Showing the hand also plays with scale. Even in a gallery space, it reminds you to embody the reader and the narrator, even when you’re not able to have the book in your lap. The bodies that you represent, they move physically—floating in space, traveling different landscapes, encountering different beings—but it feels like most of the narrative is focused on the interiority of the characters, primarily women, and you’re giving space for this kind of interior dialogue.

**GANESH:** There’s also a way in which for me the structure of comics is perfectly suited to convey both the immediacy and process of interiority unfolding, like an unfurling of thought in real time that the hand is actually, in drawing, directly connected to. Those interests, such as providing a narrative space for interiority, or reflections on the passage of time, are very much rooted in literary forms. I think a lot about Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, for example.

**RAIL:** I would never have thought of that, but of course, that moment in *Mrs Dalloway* where we watch things pass by from these different characters’ vantage points is similar to how we experience time in your narratives. Time is very much a character in your work.

**GANESH:** Yes—time is a character, absolutely. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* was another influence for me in that way, as were the writings of Clarice Lispector.

**RAIL:** Your work is so rich in a literary capacity as well, which I wasn’t necessarily thinking about before, but its connections to modernist literature like Virginia Woolf, as well as magical realism. Visually, you’re drawing on surrealism, your films and animations bring to mind Leonor Fini, the Argentinian surrealist artist, and Frida Kahlo.

**GANESH:** There’s definitely really a connection between the language of surrealism and of magical realism for me.

**RAIL:** How much are you engaged with the legacy of Western female comics? Particularly those who forefront women’s sexuality, such as Julie Doucet, Gabrielle Bell, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner?

**GANESH:** Julie Doucet’s *Dirty Plotte* was hugely important to me. Also, there was another one called *Wimmin’s Comix* which I got my hands on later. I would say my interest in comics and my interest in writing and alternative culture is a lot reflected in something like this series of illustrated interviews *Angry Women* [published by RE/Search Publications in 1999], which was really big when I was growing up in the ’90s, and it included Kathy Acker, bell hooks, Annie Sprinkle, Sapphire, Carolee Schneemann, Lydia Lunch, VALIE EXPORT. I also read Diane DiMassa’s *Hothead Paisan*, Alison Bechdel’s comics, Anaïs Nin’s *Delta of Venus*, and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*.

**RAIL:** I love hearing about these spheres of influence. It was so pioneering to express female sexuality and interiority as two sides of the same coin. Whereas before, sexuality was so much about a woman’s body as an object versus something that a woman could express *herself*—and all the bodily

concerns that go along with it. What you were just mentioning, women go to the bathroom and they menstruate—

GANESH: They have nipples!

RAIL: Yeah! [Laughter] Your work feels like it's drawing on this legacy to show women having—and all of your characters—full lives. Especially with your use of the gutter, these gaps that we're not able to see between the moments, between different prints, we don't know if it's one continuous thought; we don't know what's been interrupted; this idea that a full life is going on beyond that that we can't necessarily see.

GANESH: With the gutter, in *Anima Mundi* for Creative Time, for example, there's a way in which the sudden ruptures in everyday patterns of life, and the trauma of this moment would just instantiate this sense of fragmentation. We're stuck in our neighborhoods and we don't quite know what's going on over there, or even next door. There's all these different layers of fragmentation; you can't think; you can't concentrate, so you're fragmented. But there's also a way in which the form can coherently address that.

RAIL: You're using this grid of three by three and so it puts everybody in their own little moment. But then you have a few things that stretch across the grids and across the gutter, and whenever I see structures with this kind of formal use of space on the page, I think of the really dense panels of Chris Ware and others who are using the grid so purposefully to overwhelm us with that density that we experience even when we're alone in our homes in isolation.

GANESH: Just even this idea of now—do we care or not care that our neighbors can see us in our underwear and naked? Do we even have time to care about that? There's a lot of intimacies that are sort of leaking out as well. Normally the only people who we have that kind of access to, are people who are exhibiting it to us, like in a reality show, or people who are homeless and effectively denied access to privacy and their lives are thus more visible on the streets.

RAIL: Again it comes back to life in objects and material possessions and collecting.

GANESH: In this case, that postcard in the fourth frame of *Anima Mundi* is actually something that we have lying around our house. It's from Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*, and it says "EARTH PIECE/ Listen to the sound of the earth turning./1963 spring." It was something I was thinking about in relation to what we can and can't hear. And what scientists hear, the seismic movement of the earth. And what birds can themselves hear. So initially they got louder and then they kind of tuned themselves down to be the right volume that was better calibrated to the absence of human noise.

Another book that had a profound impact on me—this is more in the relationship of science fiction past and future—was Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. The development of my own work was not about consciously or strategically deciding. "I want to represent brown characters." Rather, building upon my own early visual and interpersonal experiences, which centered immigrant and



Chitra Ganesh, *Anima Mundi*, 2020, commissioned for Creative Time. Courtesy the artist, Gallery Wendi Norris, and Hales Gallery.

non-American communities, subjectivity always assumed these forms, and was never rooted in or in opposition to whiteness. I learned from my early work that bodies that are racially marked are first and foremost seen primarily in that way. That marking can't be unseen before any reception of the work. In my earlier work, that marking came along with an earlier set of paternalistic, neo-imperial readings that I didn't quite know how to understand.

When I began making work, there wasn't space to discuss this kind of subjectivity in terms of what I grew up with. There was Nyota Uhura on *Star Trek*, or the news anchors Sue Simmons and Connie Chung, but there wasn't the environment that there is now and the culture that there is now around brown femme bodies. Having these concurrently represented, a complex interiority that sometimes doesn't care about how opaque it is or not to you, and these bodies that can't really escape their racial marking, is a way to kind of resist the idea that you are only seeing this body from the outside. I'm seeing from the inside.

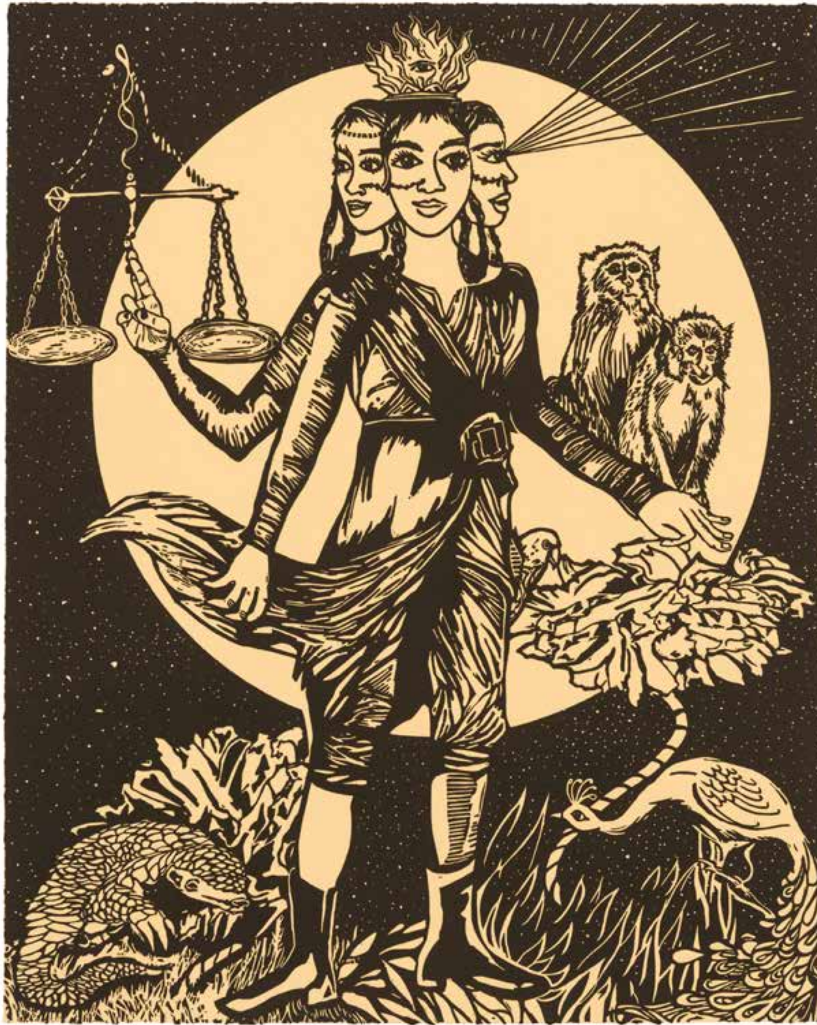
RAIL: This is also a natural segue into your upcoming commission, the QUEERPOWER façade installation at the Leslie-Lohman Museum. Did you want to talk a little bit about that?

GANESH: I grew up as a queer young person in New York City, and that was still before the gentrification of SoHo, so that area, all of that area, was an important part of my upbringing and life. Since the commission is for the windows, it's a museum installation but it's also public-facing, so

it's actually a work of public art. Now that's additionally important, not only because it might be some of the only part of the museum that people might be able to access at times, but also, we are in the process of radically renegotiating our understanding of public space—or not. In addition to things like protests, if people are actually going to be able to eat, they're going to have to close off more streets; more tables are going to have to be open; fewer cars on the streets. I am thinking about how shifting uses of space, interlaced with my own decades of experiencing NYC, can be embedded in this form.

RAIL: Because of the façade of the building, the columns of the Leslie-Lohman Museum create these 12 specific windows, almost like different panels in a comic.

GANESH: I am thinking about them as different comic panels or frames, about using segmented windows to express these kinds of moments of interior thought, or ideas about dreaming. Some of my research was already going to include histories of gentrification in the area, often with queer youth at the forefront. They're at the frontline of what gets affected with these histories. My research is also going to expand to look at, obviously if I'm looking at the history of New York, the history of other pandemics, and the history of queer culture here. And architectural and utopic visions of New York and other cities, in part in relation to this reorganization of our relationship to public space. One of the things I have been interested in in my own specific kinds of utopic and dystopic narratives



Chitra Ganesh, *Sultana's Dream: Justice is Virtue*. Linocut, 20 ¼ × 16 ½ inches each. Courtesy the artist and Durham Press.

is the ability of that form—the utopia—to focus on structures, rather than individuals. I mean, there is of course science fiction that prioritizes an individual character that sort of transcends consciousness, maybe more of like a white male liberal humanist sort of ideal, but I do think that like for example in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and many other utopias, they talk about structures like governance, food distribution, traffic flow.

**RAIL:** Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* comes to mind as well.

**GANESH:** Absolutely. Of course Octavia Butler and Hossain talk about radical farming, collective knowledge sharing, water storage, electricity harnessing, using mirrors as weapons to harness the sun and blow things up. It's all very structural and I think that's a very important way to think right now. I feel like we vacillate between two poles where it's either, "Okay we're moving in a positive direction because we have more minority representation," and, "Actually we're not because Black people are still getting murdered by the state every day and we're forced to watch it." And that

evidence is being denied. And COVID-19 is laying bare how structures—or lack thereof—are preconditions of trauma and suffering that compound the psychic disorganization. It's not in the illness itself, but in the way that the illness is dealt with—this is why Black communities are hit so much harder by COVID—it is economic, environmental, housing, medical, and legal oppression, centuries of injustice actually, that are at the root of this. As with trauma, it's not the trauma itself, but the conditions that allowed the trauma to unfold, and how trauma is processed and validated. It was important for me to think about those questions, especially because I'm interested in this Leslie-Lohman installation, in being critically minded with spaces like The Shed, that seek to capitalize on NYC redevelopment and redirect funds to themselves that were actually intended for community growth. Such capitalist oriented models of public space unfold alongside the gesture of putting a Shirley Chisholm or a Marsha P. Johnson statue up somewhere instead of actually getting homeless youth mental health care. In order to have a really robust, regenerative, and replenishing futurism, you have to reorient yourself to the past as well

because initial ideas of futurism have been built on a forward moving teleological arrow—away from the "primitive Other." To have a more just possibility of our future, we have to keep looking back into the past *differently*, in a way that upends our ideas of teleology and progress.

**RAIL:** This relationship between futurisms and our understanding of the past also brings up issues of the archive and monuments, how we archive histories and whether or not they are archived by the institutions or if there is a way to have more of an embodied archive.

**GANESH:** I also just want to add that I feel like we're seeing this around the world, certainly in India, but we have to keep remembering the relationship between monuments and fascism—it can't get lost in the shuffle. Individual histories and the iconicity of them are super important—like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson. We see that in the sea change that is governing the discourse and actions surrounding the preservation of confederate monuments and histories in the US. So this is exceptionally important, but cannot be a substitution for material care and sustenance. First of all, I feel like they would be throwing up in their mouth if they knew a statue was being built rather than children being taken care of and not neglected to death. It's really about the sense of a collective history, collective purpose, and individuals in relation to their environment. I think that's been at the heart of formations of queer culture—of how much intimacy bodies can have in different kinds of space. Whether that's the space of the street or the nightclub, of the shelter or the bed, the alleyway or a public park. That was also very important for me and my print project *Sultana's Dream* (2018), which is why relief printing is so great, because it demands and invites and seduces you to think about the balance between the figure and ground. Lately I've been reading about the idea of the collective unconscious and archetypes; the idea of individuation isn't necessarily about you as an individual, but it's actually about how the individual develops relationally or dialectically to other individuals and to the society. So the individuation is actually about thinking about the whole. That idea of an individual being the paradigmatic unit is superseded by all kinds of other measures and groupings humanity: relationships of care and reciprocity, community, electorate, cadre, chosen family, and many more. These are ideas that I felt that a public commission would give me a new way to think about and expand. I'm immuno-compromised so I actually can't really go outside. Just thinking about contributing and making your voice heard and deepening the story and fleshing it out without being in the streets with your own body; the idea of trying to respond versus reacting. How do I respond and incorporate, but not necessarily just react?

**RAIL:** The urgency of needing to create but also wanting to take that time to create something thoughtful really resonates with this moment in publishing and all the various forms that it takes, whether that be this kind of public window installation, protest signs, or some other form of embodiment.

**GANESH:** Or zines! I've made a few and they were a very important part of my own politicization. It wasn't necessarily a part of my art practice but it was just something that I did for fun and did on my own. I also taught a zine-making class for high school students of color in 2009. We made a zine together called *Drawn in Color*. I think that within literature there's always this idea of major and minor literature and like a lot more forward-thinking movement can happen in minor literatures, such as the space science fiction once occupied that is currently occupied by young adult novels now. But I wonder about that in terms of archiving; I wonder if there's major and minor ways of archiving.

**RAIL:** Archiving connects to what you were saying about architecture and structures and the utopias—how we can think about these structures in relation to personal archives and public archives and how they reinforce—or don't—these systems. In your recent *BOMB* cover, I was really moved by the actual face of the timepiece that she was speaking to, to which she says: "She gave me her roadmap of tragedy, dirtied at the creases, and in all those thousands of lines, I found no place to hide..." Can you talk about the text you write into these pieces?

**GANESH:** There's some relationship or sensibility that I'm going after that is both iconic but also kind of anonymous and particular. The disembodiment of time is something that I've worked with in a few different instances. In part because of my interest in time and time as a character in science fiction. In Hindu and Buddhist mythology, there's these large, epochal periodizations, on the scale of the neolithic and pleistocene. But in all of that mythology, the present era or epoch, the one we're in, is called the "kalyug" or "Kali Yuga." The "Kali" means strife or contention and is related to the demon Kali—important to note that this is not the goddess Kālī! When I was younger I always thought this was really weird, we've always only ever been in this time, since this book was authored, but we're still in this time, and how do we get out of this time? There's this idea that we're already at the end of days, that relationship between, I don't want to say disaster, but maybe something apocalyptic, or churning. Now at this moment you see that interconnectedness more than ever, with the world. The clock—the kind of clock itself—was about that sort of passage of time, and in other aspects of my work the clock is about thinking about certain ideas that those works have in terms of being in the city. Like in one I used the clock at Grand Central. So thinking about an iconic timepiece.

**RAIL:** I feel like for so many people, today especially, when they think about visualizing time, it's a phone screen.

**GANESH:** I know! I think it's going to have to change. The screens will be in there, in my installation too, I'm sure. But I am trying to reflect on it more deeply than taking an ancient image and slapping on a modern signifier, but rather to harness these signifiers to open up new pathways for understanding or to reconsider the complexities of our present moment.

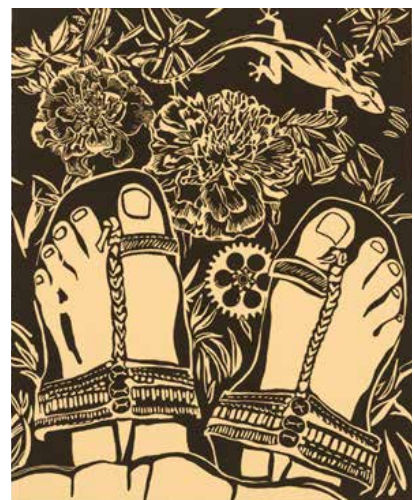
**MEGAN N. LIBERTY** is the Art Books Editor at the Brooklyn Rail. Her interests include text and image, artists' books and ephemera, and archive curatorial practices.



Chitra Ganesh, *Sultana's Dream: City in Broad Daylight*. Linocut, 20 1/4 × 16 1/4 inches each. Courtesy the artist and Durham Press.



Chitra Ganesh, *Sultana's Dream: Water Storage*. Linocut, 20 1/4 × 16 1/4 inches each. Courtesy the artist and Durham Press.



Chitra Ganesh, *Sultana's Dream: Chappals in the Grass*. Linocut, 20 1/4 × 16 1/4 inches each. Courtesy the artist and Durham Press.