

Art Essay

Knowing “The Unknowns”: The Artwork of Chitra Ganesh

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To the extent that [Walter] Benjamin is right, that “there is a history of perception that is ultimately the history of myth,” it would not be inappropriate to regard these philosophical studies as critical illuminations of that mythology—an ideological formation. . . . What the light of history shows, we have learned, it shows only with adumbrations. There is no light without shadows, without darkness and concealment. And in this acknowledgment, there is perhaps a lesson for history already inscribed in the field of our vision.

—David Levin,

Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy

Chitra Ganesh was born in Brooklyn, New York, where she currently lives and works. Her work has been exhibited internationally and has attracted a following in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Over the past decade, she has become recognized as an artist whose work contributes much to the thinking on “feminist,” “queer,” and “South Asian” contemporary art. At the same time, Ganesh’s work has also been recognized for elucidating the productive complexities of having an aesthetic, style, and subject matter that elude the national and conceptual boundaries that currently constitute the ways in which the art world frames and promotes the work of emerging artists. In so doing, Ganesh’s work troubles the art historical orthodoxies that demand categorizing contemporary art

Feminist Studies 37, no. 1 (Spring 2011). © 2011 by Feminist Studies, Inc.

through easily bounded notions of “East” or “West,” “feminist,” “figurative,” “political,” or “conceptual.” In addition to all of these, Ganesh’s work has also been described as mythic, postcolonial, and rebellious, as it brings together a diverse array of images and referents from Indian mythic poetry; the Progressive Artists’ Group (one of the most influential groups of modern artists in India, formed in 1947 and active until 1956); comics and graphic novels from the United States, India, and Japan; Mexican muralism from the early-twentieth century; contemporary street art and graffiti; as well as phantasmagorical motifs from Egon Schiele, Hieronymus Bosch, and Albrecht Dürer and autobiographical meditations in the vein of Bhupen Khakar, Frieda Kahlo, and Ana Mendieta.

Like many artists who have made work that sits outside of the mainstream, Ganesh has also been described as “oppositional”—to colonialism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy, for example. Her work has, at times, seemed to serve as an example of art that attempts to rewrite marginalized subjects into the art historical canon or as an example of “substitution theory” in action, in which normatively raced and sexed characters are replaced by nonnormative ones.

In this essay, I do not aim to dismiss an oppositional reading of Ganesh’s work outright, as if oppositionality is somehow only reactionary or shortsighted. To be sure, the need to resist normative, hierarchical modes of aestheticism and representation (e.g., the pursuit of “pure” beauty and/or conceptual rigor through the removal of the figure, or relegating certain tones and materials to the realm of the “decorative” and therefore “primitive”)¹ demands artwork that legibly opposes these hierarchies. Feminists, in particular, have demonstrated time and again that women require being written into the canons of art history and visual theory, even at the expense of reifying the structure that produces an invisible or diminished Other in the first place. Using the rubric of oppositionality for exploring Ganesh’s work does recognize the gaps and absences in the canons of contemporary art with respect to both form and subjects. In Kobena Mercer’s famous formulation of this dynamic with respect to Robert Mapplethorpe’s nude photographs of black men in the 1970s and 1980s,





Previous page, Figure 1

Untitled

40 x 80 inches, 2009, mixed media on canvas, including acrylic, glitter, paint, and tinsel and clay. Private collection.

Above, Figure 2

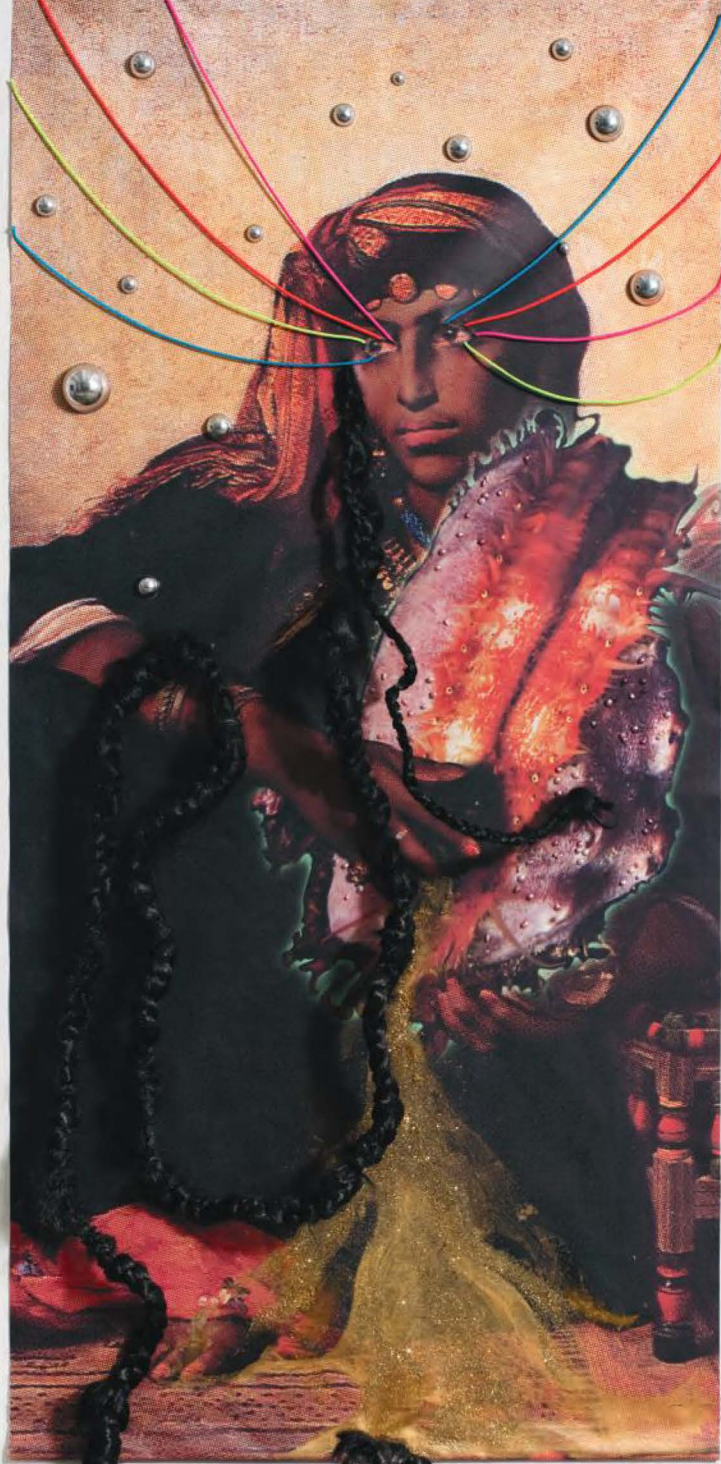
Untitled

40 x 80 inches, 2009, mixed media on canvas, including charcoal, styrofoam, and sand. Private Collection.

Opposite page, Figure 3

Untitled

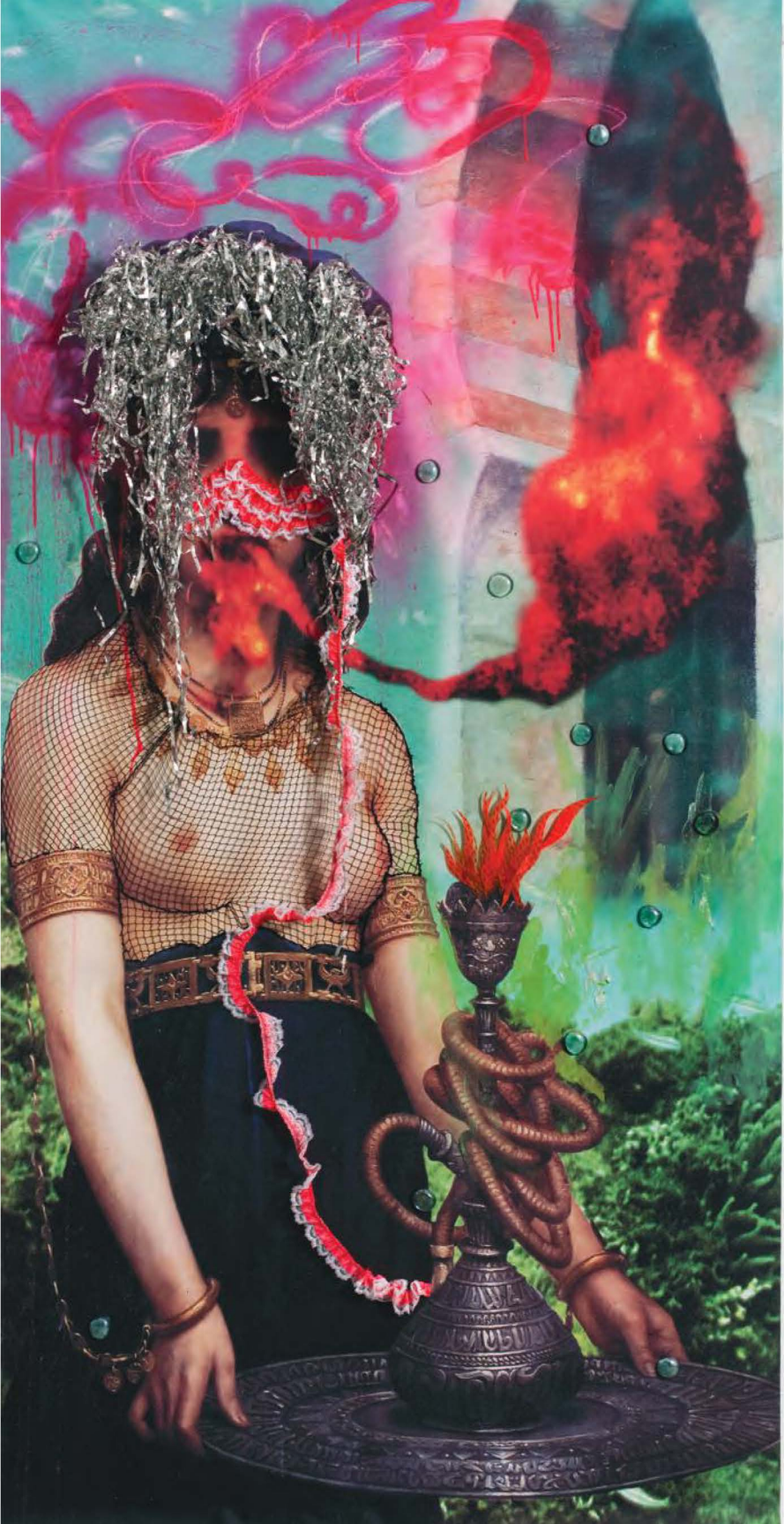
40 x 80 inches, 2009, mixed media on canvas, including glitter, glass, and elastic chord. Private Collection.





Above
Werewolf
40 x 80 inches, 2009,
mixed media on canvas, including
feathers, and holi powder.
Private collection.

Opposite page
Harem
40 x 80 inches, 2009, mixed media
on canvas, including lace,
spray paint, tinsel, and chalk.
Private Collection.







Opposite page

Under the Cape

40 x 80 inches, 2009,
mixed media on canvas,
including acrylic, holi powder, satin
chord, glitter, and clay.
Private collection.

Above

**Skype Dream
in RealTime**

40 x 80 inches, 2009, mixed media
on canvas, including satiny chord,
rubber, and broken glass.
Private Collection.

Following page

Mermaid

40 x 80 inches, 2009,
mixed media on canvas,
including acrylic, mirrors, artificial
flowers, hair, and silk.
Private collection.



The subaltern black social subject, who was historically excluded from dominant regimes of representation—"invisible men" in Ralph Ellison's phrase—is made visible within the codes and conventions of the dominant culture whose ethnocentrism is thereby exposed as a result. The mythological figure of "The Negro," who was always excluded from the good, the true and the beautiful in Western aesthetics on account of his otherness, comes to embody the image of physical perfection and aesthetic idealization in which, in the canonical figure of the nude, Western culture constructed its own self-image.²

Some twenty-five years on, the problem in a solely oppositional reading of art that aims to push the boundaries of the canon is that it centers "the center" as the subject and reduces the frames, critiques, and contexts for the work in question to a conversation with dominant modes of power and to a project of recuperating marginal subjects. This reading necessarily privileges a normative Occidental viewer as much as it reifies the normative paradigm in question, while also reifying the idea that participant knowledge is required to read work outside of the mainstream. In this instance, a primary reliance on this kind of reading removes the possibility of seeing Ganesh's work in relation to the wide array of influences and art historical contexts that inform it, including popular culture and visual languages outside of high art, in addition to the influences and contexts that have already been mentioned here. Reading Ganesh's work, or that of South Asian and/or feminist artists more generally, as oppositional to the mainstream canon ultimately holds this work outside of the canon in perpetuity, always "other," and re-instantiates the idea that the work is ultimately impossible to enter, with an assumption in place that all the references are cultural/autobiographical and identity driven, rather than formal or art historical as well. I suggest that, although Ganesh's work does produce some of the bodies missing from the contemporary art historical record, this reading is, at best, partial.

I trace my own reading of Ganesh's work through feminist art criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, which had much to say about oppositionality, while offering the beginnings of a new analysis of Ganesh's work through her series entitled *The Unknowns*. This reading both assimilates an opposi-

tional paradigm for Ganesh's work and reaches toward a critique that troubles the categories that drive contemporary art. I draw critical paradigms from the canons of both feminist and postcolonial art historical critique, particularly drawing from work that critiques "universalism" as an organizing framework for notions of "beauty" and "form." We may recall Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff's foundational argument in this vein that, historically, the term "decorative" had not only a pejorative connotation in contemporary art but also that whatever was considered decorative was devalued in the process of producing modernist work and was itself associated with "primitivism."³ This attitude, they and others argued, accompanied the demise of the figure in Western art, in the service of pure beauty and essential, universal form. Following the critique of *The Unknowns*, I elaborate below the connections between these kinds of feminist interventions in the art practice of the 1970s and 1980s and the context of a currently "globalizing" art world.

THE UNKNOWNNS

Chitra Ganesh's series *The Unknowns* consists of seven female figures drawn from the margins of a mythic history. The title of the series is itself a provocation—what does it mean to call these figures "The Unknowns," with their hooded, sometimes absent eyes, but never absent their gaze, seeking their audience and interlocutors in an unambiguous stare, not necessarily seeking a mirror, knowing, perhaps, that what this gaze sees, it is rarely seen by? The interrogation of the gaze in *The Unknowns* calls to mind the scandals surrounding Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R.)* (1907), both of which shocked and scandalized audiences of the time. Both Manet and, later, Picasso depicted the nude courtesan in these works as self-possessed and at ease, signified by the unambiguous stare the subjects of these pieces aimed at the viewer. Although both pieces importantly broke key conventions of contemporary art practice of the time, for example, by using a flat perspective that signaled the beginnings of impressionism, they also broke with representational conventions of socially marginalized subjects, by depicting a self-assured sex worker who looks out, rather than signifying prostitution through the normative trope of shame. The gaze of the figures in

Ganesh's *The Unknowns*, like that of Manet's and Picasso's figures, looks *out* and looks *at*, calling into question the politics of representing an Other, challenging this dynamic by offering a figure that is commonly known as "other" and yet unknown as a subject.

The image in figure 1, with its blue door and prisonlike bars askew, a blue sari on the female figure, with flowers for eyes, is a startling meditation on this gaze. Understood here as an act of categorizing, defining, shaping, and producing the discourse in which it is itself produced, we may wonder how this gaze "sees," looking through blood-red flower-eyes embedded in a sea of blue. The image of the woman in a blue sari sitting inside a blue door is itself drawn from Mary Ellen Mark's controversial *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay*,⁴ a book of images from 1989 and 1990, taken in Mumbai's much-discussed red light area of the same name. The figure of an Indian sex worker, then, is reworked by the artist, through an array of processes that have added an additional hand, a head on the lap of the central figure, "decorative" splashes of paint, beads, gold and red streams of color, with plastic flowers literally pierced through the eyes in the vinyl print of the photographically manipulated image. What does it mean for the politically and socially overdetermined form of a nonwhite, non-Western sex worker, this form that is discursively attached to the notion of sexual excess, to see with eyes that have been gouged out and replaced with red carnations that leap forward into their own gaze of the viewer?

Ganesh's interrogation of the gaze throughout the series is also exemplified in figure 2. Although like figure 1, the image also begins life as a photograph, the photograph in figure 2 initially serves as a model for the artist's rendering in charcoal, rather than, as in figure 1, being assembled from the beginning as a photographically scanned image. The charcoal rendering is photographed and, like the rest of the series, is subsequently assembled with other scanned elements, ultimately manipulated through both computer-based and postprinting collage. Here, the right eye is obscured by red and silver whorls, rendering the figure herself as possessing the all-seeing eye of a Cyclops, the eye adorned with an exaggerated eyelash that calls to mind the deranged character Alex DeLarge in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. The originary photograph that forms the basis for figure 2 was taken in Ahmedabad, India, in 1951 and is of a four-year-

old girl whose gaze is accompanied by a pronounced pout of exaggerated dissatisfaction that provokes the viewer, while being partially obscured by the whorls that surround her face in this image. The initial photograph survived in a personal archive only as a one-by-two-inch image on a contact print. It was rephotographed in large format film and reprinted some fifty years later and then drawn and rendered as this Cyclops about fifteen years on. The history contained in this piece may be seen as refracted in the image over and over, such that the gaze is honed through the remaining seeing eye, which both pierces and is obscured by the frame.

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Chitra Ganesh's earlier work was based in painting and drawing, while her more recent work builds upon these media and techniques, with increasing attention to drawing that is also modified through computer-based techniques, including photographic scans, commercial printing processes, and photography and filmmaking. In addition to nuanced readings of marginality and subjectivity in Ganesh's work, her use of photographic tools, both in rendering and assembling the images that appear throughout her work, also bears mentioning here. With respect to *The Unknowns*, Ganesh's use of photographic techniques calls to mind the critique that the photograph offers anything but an "indexical" relation to reality, a "transparent" view of an image and a moment that is somehow directly imparted to the image by the photographer and camera. Rather, "the camera isolated momentary appearances and in so doing destroyed the idea that images were timeless."⁵ Ganesh's use of these techniques is itself an act of remembering, and perhaps remembrance, while referencing the ways in which the visual grammar of the world around us is utterly dynamic. In assembling both her images and the techniques used to produce them, Ganesh invokes assembled techniques used in the production of mass-mediated images, as in, for example, printed advertisements that deploy these same processes in order to both evoke and move beyond the hand-painted signs they replace.

Both of the pieces from *The Unknowns* that I have discussed thus far began life as archival photographs and images that were then manipulated by digital and photo-based processes integrated with painterly techniques

that ultimately result in “un-real,” un-photographic imagery. *The Unknowns* accomplishes this flip of un-reality in part through an interrogation of the frame itself, in Barthes’s sense of the frame as everything around the image, as excluding that which is not represented in order to make extant what it shows.⁶ Unlike the photograph contained within the boundaries of its own frame, many of the elements of the figures and images in *The Unknowns* emerge from the frame itself, at times spilling out on to the floor in front of it, materials fraying until they practically disintegrate under the viewer’s feet. Figure 3 includes the now-familiar braids that often populate Ganesh’s work as “hair poems” and as key components of the visual vocabulary in her drawing, as fabricated hairpieces spring from this two-dimensional image, extending from the braids that frame the figure’s face and bleed onto the floor below.

DECOYS AND *THE UNKNOWN*S

I have often, in my work, invoked the image of the decoy, a lure that attracts attention by posing something immediately—reassuringly, attractively—known. The disclosure of the decoy’s otherness unsettles certainty and disrupts expectations. I retain the hope that in some small measure my work can help us “see through” the commonsensical notion regarding things as they are: that this is how they must be. This is the first step toward change of any magnitude.

—Martha Rosler

In framing this essay by Walter Benjamin’s perspective on the history of perception as that of “the history of myth” and ending with Martha Rosler’s⁷ evocation of the decoy, I aim to evoke a reading of Chitra Ganesh’s work that both encompasses and moves beyond oppositionality while suggesting that Ganesh’s work may serve as a lens through which to question the organizing rubrics that frame contemporary art and the art historical canon. Rosler’s use of the decoy as a theoretical rubric for understanding the common sense of “things as they are” is instrumental in thinking through the politics and effects of work such as Chitra Ganesh’s, art that attempts to move beyond the generally accepted frames of universal categories (such as conceptual art) and particular ones (such as queer and Indian art). The decoy, in this case, is the illusion of an objectively

knowable, specified other, which requires the constitutive illusion of a universalized self. Whereas feminists began pushing these boundaries in the Western art world of the 1970s and 1980s, the art world has assimilated these interventions within a framework that requires aesthetic, political, and national boundaries in order to reproduce itself. Ganesh's work provokes these categories by exceeding them, urging the viewer to consider the histories of myth within the figures that populate her images, as well as the history of mythmaking that structures the narrative of the canon itself. If the story of the art historical record is that of categorizing the canon into the knowable forms and places of the "universal" Western canon, under which emergent categories such as feminist, queer, or Asian art are produced and assimilated, then Chitra Ganesh's work abstracts this narrative, pulls it apart, and looks intently for what remains.

NOTES

The opening epigraph to this article is drawn from David Levin, ed., *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 18.

1. Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture (1977-1978)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Howard Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 154-67.
2. Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choice Collective (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 188.
3. Jaudon and Kozloff.
4. Mary Ellen Mark, *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang/Noonday Press, 1981); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1981), 18.
6. A salient example of this kind of reading in action may be found in Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
7. Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), ix.