



A Prophetic Vision that Dares to Imagine Otherwise

Chitra Ganesh's new digital animations at the Rubin Museum of Art, NY provide dream-like visions that dare to imagine otherwise. A review by Natasha Bissonauth.

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Silhouette in the Graveyard (2018), one of Chitra Ganesh's new digital animations in her show, *The Scorpion Gesture* (February 23, 2018 to January 9, 2019), opens theatrically with a set of dancing curtains made of skeleton bones that quickly lift to reveal the underlying drama. As the moving image progresses, more skeletons fall, this time towards a hellish scene where waves, red like blood sway, carrying ghoulish monsters, scavenging beasts, and tortured bodies to places unknown. But out in the sparkling galactic skies a triple-breasted pink silhouette emerges from the darkness; she first appears crossed-legged with her faceless head in flames and as she slowly stands, the camera zooms into her torso, which projects scenes from our apocalyptic present. Scenes such as crowds protesting against the occupation of Palestine and other western-led wars and conflicts in the Middle East flash before our eyes. We also see images of the Women's March, of migrants jumping ship, Rohingya women and children fleeing Buddhist supremacy, and posters that read Black Lives Matter and I Can't Breathe - all superimposed over background images of climate disasters such as forest fires, volcanic ash, melting icebergs, and torrential rain. In the end, the skeletons have the last dance as a grim line-up of skulls whirls in lyrical form, in a creepy and cryptic race to the bottom.

Adding to the experience of this poignant visual message, Ganesh's visitors bear witness to an encounter that transforms the conventions of museal display. The operative word here is 'encounter' since Ganesh's animations are not displayed separately in a dedicated gallery but are seen among the permanent collection, which is mostly comprised of manuscripts, paintings, sculptures, and other objects depicting Hindu and Buddhist mythology dating back 1,500 years. However, Ganesh's aesthetic, which is more speculative in tone, does not simply exist alongside the Rubin's mythological representations but encounters them, engendering dialogue across temporalities and fantastical forms. *Silhouette in the Graveyard* is particularly unique in its display; projected directly behind a late 18th to early 19th century Mongolian sculpture (gilt copper alloy with pigment) of the bodhisattva Maitreya, this animation directly interfaces with the permanent collection by appearing as its looming shadow. In Ganesh's words:

"Maitreya is the Future Buddha, whose prophetic arrival is said to usher in a new age at a time when the terrestrial world has lost its way. The endless stream of images of political, social, and ecological upheaval that we are bombarded with daily seemed in uncanny alignment with the apocalyptic moment associated with Maitreya."

And so, in addition to animating a confluence of fantastical traditions, Ganesh's installation in concert with the permanent collection demonstrates how aesthetic objects across time can cast new meaning onto one another. More precisely, given the



Chitra Ganesh.
The Messenger,
2018, digital
animation
(courtesy of the
artist)

(Images/Notice
Board/Essay/B
ig/Concept 1
still

2_135707428
2_397.jpg)



Chitra Ganesh.
Metropolis,
2018; digital
animation
(courtesy of the
artist)

(Images/Notice
Board/Essay/B
ig/Concept 5
still

1_716506543
_398.jpg)



Chitra Ganesh.
Rainbow Body,
2018, digital
animation
(courtesy of the
artist)

(Images/Notice
Board/Essay/B
ig/Production
still from Chitra
Ganesh, "The
Rainbow
Body," 2018,

contemporary era of precarity in which we find ourselves, Ganesh pulls at the past in a search for future-oriented models.

The Scorpion Gesture transforms the permanent collection's conventional reception by interrupting narrative logics that have long plagued the histories of art display. Today, the colonial legacy of museums collecting non-western art is well documented. This hegemony adheres to a Hegelian notion of time that translates the spatial distribution of continents (Asia, Africa, America, and Europe) into chronological order - where the western imaginary represents itself as the innovative and enlightened present while conveniently relegating the 'East' and 'Global South' to the traditional and barbaric past. Given these colonial understandings of time and human progress, the opportunity to draw connections across cultural and temporal schemas poses a challenge within permanent collections, one that is rarely met. Contemporary legends like Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, as well as James Luna, and Fred Wilson have created art that delivers a scathing critique of such discursive limitations. In some instances, they have activated their own performative bodies to shed light on how museums objectify and fossilize black and brown bodies for white cultural consumption. And while the Rubin opts out of the encyclopedic and anthropological tendency to display art objects as artifacts, its aestheticizing eye is not without orientalizing residues. Interestingly though, *The Scorpion Gesture* does not only counter this legacy by calling out archival discrepancies or mischaracterizations but transcends the colonial confines of the museum by offering an alternative relationship to display; Ganesh's works call for co-presence. She engages with what remains, and in re-imagining possibility with that which remains, she dares to imagine otherwise. Using the language of the late great queer of colour theorist, José Muñoz, there is a 'being-with-ness' to her interventions that ultimately disidentifies with the museum's hegemonic narratives, paradoxically, by inviting viewers to engage with the collection.

The occasion to transform a permanent collection through trans-historical co-presence is not new to Ganesh. In *Eyes of Time* (2014-15) at the Brooklyn Museum of Art she made a site-specific mural inspired by the goddess, Kali. Ganesh's depiction sidelined cultural and religious formations to visually interpret philosophical ideas of Kali as cyclic time. In cyborgian form, she created a futurist vision for the goddess that encountered a vitrine of artworks from the museum's permanent collection. Curated by Ganesh, the vitrine included selections that highlighted multiple moments of feminine power in the archive (from sculptures of the ancient Egyptian goddess, Sekhmet, to Louise Bourgeois' iconic 'Eye' drawings). The takeaway: re-imagining the museum will require speculative visions and Ganesh's cybergoddess signals the future-leaning disruption of art historical display and narrative.

Although *Eyes of Time* is a clear precedent, Ganesh has investigated the confluence of myth and science fiction throughout her career. At an artist residency in Skowhegan, Maine (after completing a B.A. in Art Semiotics at Brown University and her MFA from Columbia University), she made a zine in the form of an artwork that established her commitment to storytelling in what is now recognized as her characteristic graphic drawing style. *Tales of Amnesia* (2002) is a queer feminist deconstruction of stories from the classic children's comic book series, *Amar Chitra Katha*. Through intertextual play and dissonant juxtapositions of image and text, the zine parodies goddess iconography in myth to boldly caricature Hindu fundamentalist depictions of femininity and sexuality on the one hand, while inciting other kinds of storytelling on the other. And while it might be easy to pigeonhole this diasporic artist for the way she mines her own cultural heritage, her investment in the *form* that mythic/speculative storytelling assumes repeatedly comes to the fore - with *The Scorpion Gesture* as her latest exercise.

Formally, Ganesh's experimentations with animation are indeed quite rich. For example, *The Messenger* reveals her formal processes whereas the other digital animations such as *Rainbow Body*, *Adventures of the White Beryl*, and *Metropolis* are inspired by intertextual dialogue with nearby objects in the permanent collection. The opening

mandala in *The Messenger* functions as a point of entry for the show. Many objects in the collection tell complex stories containing multiple layers of imagery, however they only exist on a single pictorial plane. Through animation technology, Ganesh translates the visual depth and dimensionality inherent to these stories, allowing the viewer to enter the image time-space in more visceral ways, as though moving through a wormhole. Working with an animation studio, she enhanced her drawing process using multiple camera angles, zooms, and other technical manipulations. [1] Overarching preoccupations in *The Messenger* such as its cyclic narrative structure and bodily transformations recur throughout the animation series. As Ganesh notes:

“Rainbow Body takes inspiration from the cave on the right in the painting of the bodhisattva Maitreya, located adjacent to the animation. The cave structure is elaborated upon and extensively built out, introducing an interior depth where the ultimate transformation happens.”

Likewise, *Adventures of the White Beryl* features a shape-shifting protagonist as a way to speak to the multiple stages of life described in a multi-leaf manuscript of a neighboring gallery room. This animation also indexes different media forms, including early stop-motion animation, vintage comics, and early video game aesthetics. Finally, *Metropolis* is likely Ganesh’s most ambitious production in the series, referencing, not only the nearby painting *Life Scenes of Master Shantarakshita* and other bronze sculptures of Maitreya, but also the Soviet silent film, *Aelita, Queen of Mars* (1924), and Fritz Lang’s 1927 science fiction film of the same title. Throughout *Metropolis*, scenes of interlocking environments and urbanscapes recall the dystopic worlds of Octavia Butler and Manjula Padmanabhan’s writings, characterized by major class divide, imperial ambitions, and inequitable access to resources.

Connecting back to *Silhouette in the Graveyard*, *Rainbow Body* and *Metropolis* are also prophetic in scope. In *Rainbow Body*, viewers are transported through a dream-like journey to witness the tantric and transcendent union of Padmasambhava (the Second Buddha) with Mandarava, a female *dakini*. Whereas *Metropolis* culminates with the dramatic resurrection of a cyborgian version of Maitreya. Why does Ganesh exhume these particular narratives and re-imagine them through a speculative aesthetic? The kinds of questions myth has posed for a long time gets picked up by science fiction in a way that rubs against the teleology of history - questions like, what are the boundaries around the human? Where are we going? What is the arc of justice? What constitutes alterity? As a fantastical device, science fiction exposes ‘real-world’ sociopolitical desires and fears that have instigated the invention of such alternate worlds in the first place. When disarmed of its imperialist aspirations [2], science fiction has the capacity to re-generate itself, mobilizing its uniquely fabulatory heuristic to imagine otherwise, making re-imagining a matter of social critique and critical realism. Centering her cybergoddess-supersheroes, Ganesh’s mythographies enter into the stakes of urgency and survival - stakes in much sharper focus now, given the global rise of Fascism, right-wing populism, and religious fundamentalism.

Notes:

[1] For an earlier example of Ganesh using the moving image, see Rabbithole, 2010.

[2] As John Rieder notes in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), the colonial gaze frames science fiction; the period witnessing the most fervid European imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century coincides exactly with the rise of the genre. Since the early pulp days of the genre, science fiction has romanticized and demonized the imaginary Orient, rather than take the opportunity to dissect how its narratives of otherness, otherworldliness, and alienation might reflect systemic social realities tied to the histories of empire.