

Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski and Chitra Ganesh in conversation

Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski and Chitra Ganesh sat down to have this conversation together via Zoom on November 8th, 2020. This exchange, originally planned for March, had been postponed along with the exhibition due to COVID-19 shutdowns across the United States. They recorded this conversation in the midst of the US election week, and held space for the following curiosities.

Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski: I want to frame this conversation first by saying that I am really excited to be speaking with you, as you know.

Chitra Ganesh: As I am with you!

ADM: Your work has been a big influence for me as an artist and maker. I listened to a recent interview of yours and appreciated your naming of the multiple pandemics we are experiencing: COVID-19, racial violence, and one of authoritarianism and censorship. I would add the ongoing climate crisis as well. This week, we are also dealing with an intense presidential election. This exhibition is looking at future narratives and both of us as artists turn toward futurity as well. What does it mean to you, to deal with the future in this moment when our present is so urgently calling for our attention? Is this feeling familiar to you? Have you been here before?

CG: The value of thinking towards the future even as the present urgently calls for our attention is that all of these temporalities are deeply layered and intertwined. Even the political conflagration and urgency that surrounds the multiple pandemics we are living through is a direct result of a refusal to acknowledge the multiple axes of violence that underpin American history and settler colonialism. So moving toward the future is just as much about looking at the past with our eyes open and being able to put it in its proper place. And as we proceed and evolve in this moment, the legacies and lineages of what is making our future possible also stand out in greater relief to me. An anchor to this process is considering multiple temporalities in the same frame, showing us where history repeats itself, is written towards power, and becomes entangled with misinformation, xenophobia, or colonialism.

ADM: Yes, exactly. I love how you talk about a 360-degree relationship to time: understanding time as a spiral, a mass, or existing simultaneously. It comes out in your work, too. For me, that is a really important part of being able to generate future mythologies in this present moment by the fact that the future exists in us presently. And it's something too about just queerness and queer folks, living in the conditions of constantly needing to imagine what doesn't yet exist for us. It becomes a practice of being alive in multiple realities. Projecting fantasy and the experience of other possibilities in the moments of living in a really, really intense or severe reality. There's a lot of value in that.

CG: It makes me think about how queer youth survive adolescence by accessing pop music as an escape hatch, sometimes inhabiting super conventional narratives about love and longing to an end of fantasy and liberation, queering the bodies and desires that song lyrics might evoke along the way. As processes and as tools, fantasy and play can help us to better articulate ourselves in relation to the world, and that is a vital process of understanding queerness from early on. There is also the fact of the dystopian

edge of today—of the daily realities of living during a pandemic and in capitalism which gives the sensation that the future is right here and now. Look at today: it is almost November and it's 70 degrees Fahrenheit outside. I was just telling my partner earlier today how it blew my mind that the Greenland I learned about as a child was an Arctic place, named that because eons ago it was once temperate—it was completely unimaginable to me as a child! I thought, wow, eons ago the terrain was actually green, just like the Sahara was also green and a jungle. Now, within decades, human climate destruction has brought us to a precipice that compresses millenia of erosion as ice melts today at a rate no one could have imagined. The importance of how the past bears upon the present is also reflected in authoritarian governments' compulsion to rewrite history textbooks, to remove and exclude from history all alternate modes of governance, sexuality, religion, and class. Instead, they seek to imprint the past in the mode of present hierarchies and power structures.

ADM: Hmm. Yeah. And that all of it was also imprinting into this present, which was a future at one time.

CG: Yes, absolutely. What you say makes me think of how one never knows when things will activate. In both art and education, it often feels like the work may be acknowledged in a time far away from the present, with ideas igniting like a sleeper cell. Or sometimes the activation is late, but it was ahead of its time, and then there are multiple sparks over the course of time.

ADM: Yeah, that brings me to my next question about your work and reflecting on the urgencies of the past. I'm wondering about what maybe felt activated for you at one point that no longer feels alive. As I've said, your work has been an important influence in my own practice and life. For one, it was the first work I saw that centralized queerness and femmeness as brown protagonists who are both autonomous and complicated, here and future, historical and mythological. (Also just to add: every time I say femme, I also mean queer. Femme is and always will be queer to me.) What are the stakes of figuration for you? Has that changed? What have you kept and what have you let go of?

CG: For the longest time, there was such a limited scope of representation where my own subjectivity was part of the narrative. A true understanding of how this happened emerged from learning about the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917, which expanded the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to prohibit immigration from any country that was on, or adjacent to, Asia, and was "not owned by the United States." That means from 1917 to 1965 people of Asian descent were barred from immigrating to the U.S. with rare exceptions, primarily for elite and highly educated people. I finally connected how xenophobia woven into history and law underpinned my own sense of subjectivity. I grew up on the one hand in a tight knit and relatively homogenous new immigrant community, alongside an enormous absence of representation in the U.S., which felt like a contradiction in terms. Putting the past in proper perspective deepened my understanding of how these erasures came into play and continued to accumulate for decades on end. That reminds me of one of my number one childhood fantasies which involved finding out that the only way I could be truly American is if I became the adopted or secretly revealed child of Pam Grier and Eric Estrada.

ADM: Yaaaaaasssssss!!

CG: Initially, a lot of my work attempted to capture images I wished I could see in the world: stories and their actors that are very much in the air, but curiously absent from contemporary art or mass media representation. I was motivated by the idea of putting my finger on the pulse or pulses of a shadow narrative. One of the most transformative experiences I've had seeing art was visiting a Robert Colescott exhibition at the Queens Museum in 1992. I was completely mesmerized by the works, which imprinted my sensibility for years to come. I didn't know what exactly gave me so much joy; I certainly didn't have any language for it. But looking back on it, it was the combination of a few things: of brown and Black bodies with dynamism and energy, and with a sharp eye to social justice and power. The color, the complexity of interlocking forms, the joy, and the humor were also part of that defiance. Now there is so much more room for what Colescott, Faith Ringgold, Wilfredo Lam, Martin Wong, and so many others were doing. Recently, I have also been moved by forms in architecture and nature that reflect the layered complexity and radical potential of feminist or queer utopian spaces.

ADM: Mm-hmm. I'm curious whether being where we are now has changed your devotion to figuration or your process? Or has that complicated it?

CG: I still find the body as a vital way to think, and the kinds of subjectivities that we both explore in our work are quite capacious and continue to feel expansive. Figuration is a rich space to explore collectively held subjectivities and vision, and for being in balance with environment/ground, and new approaches—material or conceptual. Through this year, I've been thinking also about architecture, sustainable plant life, urban biodiversity, queer narratives of protest and dissent, and these have also come into the work. Recent works I made for the Public Art Fund and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art feature the envisioning body, biodiversity, and urban environments emerging together, drawing upon iconic visual tropes in South Asia, such as the tiger and the tree of life. There's more topographical space and architecture in my work now which is a recognition of how once significant architectural forms can allow us to access a different narrative of civilization. Or evoke one, as the African Burial Ground National Memorial does in New York City, and historic engravings of Lenape agriculture and settlements do to reframe and offer up a story of American history and New York City that I never learned in school. This, alongside world-building and queer utopias, is what keeps me thinking as much about the body as the space that surrounds it.

ADM: Is this the project where you are drawing figures not only of folks who are alive, but of people, specifically trans people, who have been murdered this year?

CG: Yes, my project for the Leslie-Lohman Museum's QUEERPOWER Facade commission, *A city will share her secrets if you know how to ask*, weaves together queer and trans activist icons like Miss Major, Pauline Park, local elders who died of COVID-19 such as Lorena Borjas and Mona Foot, and historic community figures such as Ernestine Eckstein, June Chan, and Stormé DeLarverie, alongside images of the 36 trans and non-binary folks who were murdered between January 1 and October 1, 2020. Seeing this shadow narrative of 2020 emerge, one in which trans lives exist under threat of erasure, and how Black trans women are disproportionately the targets of multiple forms of violence, all of this felt very much in line with a long-held

commitment of mine to explore and articulate iterations of femmeness, and narratives of disappearance, that are curiously absent from the mainstream political and electoral discourse. Attention to this particular shadow narrative very much shaped the sensibility of the QUEERPOWER Facade commission which envisions a utopia where spaces of dissent are welcome, and which is anchored in recognizing the labor and sacrifices of those who came before and those around us who remain invisible, illegible, or unacknowledged.

ADM: This is so important. Thank you for sharing that with me. I'm really moved by how you are creating space for the multiplicities of past, present, and future, and also spaces of death and remembrance that are in service of the living and resist erasure. This makes me think about something I've heard you say in relationship to answering a question about femme representations in your work and how femme embodiments work in the world, too. And you are describing femme as a refraction, a multiplicity. Why is femme necessary?

CG: I loved how you clarified earlier that "by the way, I'm talking about queer femme and yeah, femme is always queer for me." Yes, yes, and yes!! This asterisk is so important, as we see femme and other categories of identification expand to include bodies that are not necessarily queer-identified, or BIPOC, and also used as new marketing categories. My affinity with femme is definitely generational: butch/femme was the first time language offered me a framework for, and reflected formations of, desire and ways of moving in the world that I had a lot of affinity with, but had no words or mirror for. When I came out in high school, around 1990-91, the only queer communities whose cultural production was being given visibility felt very, very white. And certainly not reflective of the constant presence of butches and femmes around the city that I would clock in the Puerto Rican communities that came out for Pride, folks I saw on the subway, in the Meatpacking district, and in the clubs. As a gender-conforming brown person, I very much felt like an interloper to the kinds of white queerness being given visibility. Femme on the other hand, in the context that I was introduced to it, was extremely political. The femmes I met were critical of the culture wars and anti-pornography feminists, radical in their vision of how women engage with sexual economies as active agents, and invested in making a space for sexual pleasure that moved beyond subject/object binaries. Femme was quite capacious, almost a little bit of a flashlight for me to learn about ways of being outside of second-wave and mainstream feminisms. To your initial point I would also add this distinction: that femme and feminine are often conflated...

ADM: Exactly. Thank you. And they are not the same!

CG: Now femme is a richer multiverse than it was twenty five years ago. It opened up a counterpoint to challenge prevalent representations of brown feminine bodies as objects of rescue, curiosity, or pity. Femme made a space to move beyond replacing a corrective or "positive" image to counter a "negative" one.

ADM: Yeah, that's really important to me as well. I really appreciate the way that you've been able to talk about your work because you are holding space for femme being complicated and for being messy. And with that, rejecting the need for it to be limited along that polarity of "good" and "bad." And that's what femme does. It exists in rebellion to constriction, it expands beyond femininity and beyond gender.



Chitra Ganesh

Totem, 2018
Aqua resin, foam, plaster, fiberglass, steel, and cement
86 x 33 inches
Installation view of *Her garden, a mirror* at The Kitchen, NYC, 2018
Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle, courtesy of The Kitchen

CG: Much like queerness, it's a capacious category with the elasticity and room to hold multiple iterations. Can you tell me a little bit about what femme means for you and how it comes into your work?

ADM: Yeah! Femme is really important to me actually. In terms of the queer generation that I grew up in, I also inherited the butch/femme or femme/stud terminology. And those terms felt like home for a time. But when I started focusing on that in my work, and in figuration, I wanted to understand if it was possible to name femme or to anchor femme in some way that wasn't dependent on butch, that wasn't defined solely through the signifiers and experiences of other people. Something autonomous and of its own damn self. I wanted to understand if it was possible to use the graphic language of symbols and mythology to name femme without trying to fix it into one thing.

CG: Yes! I love this about your work.

ADM: In a lot of my work I'm nerding out on all the weird-ass ways we name a spiritual experience and how we are visually describing the conditions and trauma of being alive. All of the surreal-ass work that comes out of trying to understand what we can't know and those questions of where do we come from? Why are we here? What is beyond? And then, how do those origin stories impact our lives and our livelihoods, and impact our abilities to relate to ourselves and each other in the world? And what would our lives and our livelihoods be like if we had inherited a different genesis, a femme genesis of humanity? And how would we fuck and fight and find our sense of belonging to ourselves and each other? How would we build architecture? How would we build cities and places and community if we were working with a different point of origin?

CG: Absolutely to all of those questions! So, I'm excited to talk rainbows with you...

ADM: Let's talk about it.

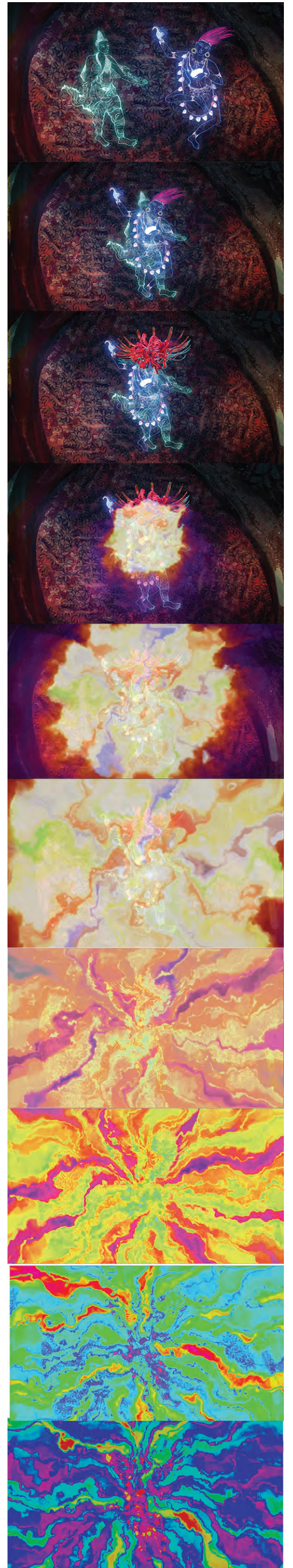
CG: Did you ever see the animation I made, *Rainbow Body* (2018)?

ADM: Hell yeah. I went to the Rubin Museum show. I loved it!

CG: When you asked me the other day about rainbows, the rainbow body phenomenon was the first thing that came to mind. Across many different mythologies, the rainbow visualizes a bridge between our reality and another. There are deities that guard bridges, and there are several deities who *are* the bridge. The rainbow body is an elevated state, where the body, upon attaining enlightenment, turns into a swirling rainbow of light.

ADM: I would love to see it. It also reminds me of a Taíno myth of the creation of the rainbow, in which a god was beheaded and the head was just existing and bouncing around the universe. So everyone was like, yo, you got to become something else besides a floating head. And so, the god was like, let me become something that doesn't exist yet. And then he became a rainbow and the creation of the rainbow triggered the creation of death.

CG: That intertwining of creation and destruction is stunning! There is so much I love about the rainbow body: its idea of shapeshifting through color, the prismatic aspect of transformation, and its relationship to the moment between life and death, often arriving just as the spirit de-



Chitra Ganesh
Animation stills from
Rainbow Body, 2018
2 minutes 10 seconds

parts. And I love that it's been around as early as the 9th century—over a thousand years at least.

ADM: The rainbow body is sooooo amazing!!! I love it. I love how ancient it is, and how psychedelic it is.

CG: I've also been thinking with this image of Isaac Newton holding a prism which refracts as a rainbow, and about femme as prismatic—it feels like there's a connection.

ADM: There absolutely is a connection. Can I show you a video that I made of Wilfred Benítez boxing a rainbow (and getting brutally defeated), and read something that I wrote about it and rainbows?

CG: Yeah, please!



Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski
Stills from *Heavyweight*, 2019
Infinite video loop
Dimensions variable

ADM: I'm 1,000% about everything we are talking about with rainbows. And there's another part of the rainbow that I'm thinking through, too: the racialized mythology of the rainbow as racial mixing, as an utopian ideal, and what a lie that is. And I'm thinking a lot about that as a way to talk about a body that exists in an in-between space but is also haunted in some way by those mythologies.

CG: Yes, of course, totally. I mean, it's also like the relationship here that I love is also between like, the rainbow and the shadow. And another thing that I was going to talk about that I appreciate about the shadow is what happens in the shadows, and shadow narratives, which comes up again and again in relation to the current pandemic(s).

ADM: Yep, exactly. This video is made to be played on an infinite loop. Ever feel like you just got your ass whooped in the name of diversity? I think a lot about Puerto Rico as a psychic state of battling and becoming the rainbow. We are called the "Rainbow Island" or the "Rainbow People." Mostly it feels like a way to erase or bury the legacy of slavery, colonialism, genocide, forced miscegenation, colorism, and economies of sexual violence that we carry in our DNA. Hurricane Maria mapped the island as a rainbow. The rainbow is also a symbol of pride, and we are asked to perform that a lot, even when our mouths are full of blood. I work a lot with the rainbow. Most of the time it's taken at face value as happy and utopic, and sometimes I wonder if that's because I insist on a femme aesthetic, and we are programmed to read anything femme as surface and vain, unintelligent and dismissable. And actually I'm cool with that, because that's part of it too. But the rainbow, like all spectral apparitions, is way weirder and more complicated than that. I'm working a lot around ghosts and phantoms, that unshakeable sense of living in a haunted body/place/planet, always coming back to the rainbow as home, as that giant in-between, that fat ghost, that spectrum, that bridge, that no-place. Even the concept of utopia as the original definition beyond and before dystopia: No Place. Utopia simply means that it doesn't exist yet.

CG: Amazing.

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Chitra Ganesh is a visual artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. Ganesh's drawing-based practice brings to light narrative representations of femininity, sexuality, and power typically absent from canons of literature and art. Her wall installations, comics, animation, and mixed media works on paper often take historical and mythic texts as inspiration and points of departure to complicate received ideas of iconic female forms. Her work has been widely exhibited in the United States, Europe, and South Asia. Her installation, *A city will share her secrets if you know how to ask*, is currently on view at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art through October 2021.

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Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reimagines femmes of color as protagonists of historical, spiritual, and religious narratives that make up the foundation of today's societal beliefs and culture. Whether through drawing, video, performance, or installation, DeJesus Moleski experiments with how to name the conflation of celebration and mourning when being racialized, liminal, and alive. DeJesus Moleski grew up moving from city to country to city in the American East Coast, South, and Midwest. Spending her most formative years in a constantly shifting landscape has tethered her work to interests in multiplicity, belief systems, and bewilderment. She has an ongoing practice of tending to the in-between, and those that know the trouble and pleasure there. Employing flamboyance as an exercise in utopic fantasies for the future, her work is a dream sequence triggered by our current time. She graduated with an MFA from the Yale School of Art and has exhibited with the Brooklyn Museum and with MoCADA. Her work has been featured in *Teen Vogue*, *New American Paintings*, *Art of Choice*, *Hyperallergic*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Momma Tried Magazine*.