

CHITRA GANESH

A Universe of One's Own

BY MIMI WONG



Portrait of CHITRA GANESH with a work-in-progress in her studio. Unless otherwise stated, all photos by Mimi Wong for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



A flyer from Ganesh's solo exhibition "The Scorpion Gesture/Face of the Future" (2018) and photo of the late artist Zarina hang alongside other memorabilia on the cork wall above the desk.

Sitting atop a mattress on the floor of her studio apartment in New York City's Ditmas Park district, Chitra Ganesh lamented being unable to properly host guests. "It's so weird," she said, her voice slightly muffled through her face mask. "I keep wanting to offer a cup of tea to people who come over." Some six feet away, I perched on a blanket-draped futon, my own face partially hidden behind a mask. Although I had previously covered Ganesh's 2018 dual exhibition "The Scorpion Gesture/Face of the Future" at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York, this was my first meeting with the visual artist, known for her futurist twist on feminist and queer mythologies.

Normally, between January and March, Ganesh would be working in India, preparing for art fairs across Asia. But like everyone adjusting to pandemic life, she found herself unexpectedly homebound. "I grew up in New York, so this is not the first time I've seen the city suffer," she said. She recalled the blackout of 1977 and the 1980 transit strike before adding, "Both of my parents have been mugged at gunpoint multiple times when I was growing up." As an adult, she lived through September 11 and the 2008 recession. Still, she acknowledges, "Nothing has ever been like this."

As Covid-19 deaths skyrocket in the United States, it is crucial that Ganesh, who is immunocompromised, avoids commutes. Thus, she and her partner turned the one-room apartment adjacent to where they reside into a shared workspace with two

large desks. They put up shelving to store her paints, brushes, and colored pencils. The cork walls make it easy to tack up her colorful sketches and prints, personal photos, and other sources of inspiration. At the time of my visit, two unfinished works-on-paper were also pinned up. The lack of 14-foot ceilings poses a challenge in terms of being able to bring in largescale works, but, otherwise, Ganesh views the current arrangement as a viable one for the foreseeable future. She's content to paint kneeling on the hardwood floor or standing at a rolling metal tool cabinet. "We're living in a moment where everything is constantly changing, and it's all about being adaptable and flexible," she reflected.

She pointed to the Amazon wrapping paper, brown paper bags, and cardboard boxes lying around her studio, some even stuffed behind the futon. For her, the excessive packaging that she has started to collect serves as "a sign of what's happening and a drastic change because people can't go anywhere [so they're] ordering in." With her recycled canvases, she invokes the DIY approach and "spirit of urgency" during the early days of the pandemic, when people had to make their own masks, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, when people took to the streets "with cardboard signs made with a marker."

Found materials appeal to Ganesh, not only aesthetically, but also because "it's a way to incorporate other kinds of meaning, labor, histories, stories into the work," she explained. For example, glass beads and automotive glass add a three-dimensional aspect

to the acrylic-and-ink painting *Path of Escape* (2019), exhibited as part of the 2020–21 group show “UnRealism” at Los Angeles’ Shoshana Wayne Gallery. In the center of the dreamy landscape floats the artist’s rendering of Tipu Sultan’s 20-sided gold “magic box,” a Mughal-era artifact stolen by the British. The looted treasure made headlines when it was auctioned by Christie’s in 2019. Additionally, the canvas features a blue, seated monkey—a reference to a glazed statue claimed by Egypt that is currently in the Brooklyn Museum’s collection. These imageries gesture to the growing conversation around the provenance of museum objects, and decolonizing institutions.

The use of symbolism recurs throughout Ganesh’s work. “Archetypal symbols become very important when people are feeling precarious,” she said, referring to how familiar figures can help us to process difficult realities. In Ganesh’s work, these characters often take on feminine and fantastical forms. Showing me one of the in-progress brown-paper works pinned to a narrow wall next to the galley kitchen, she drew attention to a three-headed figure emerging from a tower (“or a city that’s burning”), extinct animals indigenous to New York, and mythical creatures such as the Sphinx. The scene conveys the sense of anxiety and urgency of a city in turmoil, raising questions about what has been lost and what can be recovered.

On the wall perpendicular to the pinned piece, hanging above Ganesh’s desk, is a photo of her close friend and mentor, the late Indian American artist Zarina, who passed away in April 2020. “Zarina is always with me,” she murmured. The daughter of Indian immigrants, Ganesh recalled that she didn’t know any artists growing up. “We were all expected to just get full-time jobs,” she said of her parents and the people she knew from her community. “I really didn’t know or think that I could be an artist.” Ganesh initially studied comparative literature and art semiotics as an undergraduate student at Brown University. It was only after her mother died in 1998 that she decided to seriously pursue art, applying to graduate school at Columbia University. She recounted, “I just felt like life is short.”

When I asked what sparked her interest in visual art, Ganesh retrieved from a bookshelf an Indian comic book that a former girlfriend used to send her. “It brought me back to reading them when I was kid, and just thinking about how the women were represented, including that they’re [depicted as] White,” she said excitedly. Ganesh pairs that graphic sensibility with a playful



Path of Escape, 2019, acrylic, ink, Kodak repositionable fabric paper, automotive glass, glass beads on paper; mounted on paper on linen, 144.8 × 121.9 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco.



A built-in bookshelf used by Ganesh who is an avid reader.

exploration of different visual modes, from comics to painting, sculpture, and video. As an artist who dabbles in different media, she seems conscious that her work may appear scattered to audiences. Alluding to her academic studies, she referred to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" (1921), in which he likens the effort to gluing back together the fragments of a vessel. For Ganesh, consistency lies in the structures of narratives and myths: "I like that feeling you have when you read a really amazing novel. It can just be the world."

Books fill the sun-drenched apartment. A stack sits next to the bed. Ganesh reads as many as four or five at a time depending on her mood and what preoccupies her mind. She told me she had just finished Zarina's memoir *Directions to My House* (2018), written with curator Sarah Burney, and was in the process of finishing researcher Jean Pfaelzer's *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (2007) and journalist Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams* (1966), which documents how people dreamed under authoritarianism. The two of us also shared our mutual adoration for the essay collections *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018) and *Minor Feelings* (2020) by Alexander Chee and Cathy Park Hong, respectively. Much of what Ganesh reads serves as research for her artistic projects. Her exploration of Asian diasporic identity past, present, and future remains consistent, while, lately, she has renewed her interest in the visual language of protests.

History, resistance, and fantastical stories coalesce in *A city will share her secrets if you know how to ask* (2020), a site-specific installation that occupies the facade of the Leslie-Lohman Museum

of Art in Soho. Illustrations of long-haired femme and nonbinary individuals, who gaze back at passersby, commemorate trans and gender-nonconforming people who were murdered in 2020, iconic LGBTQ activists, and victims of Covid-19. In one of the center panels, a person looks through a pair of goggles toward a seated Buddha with a tree for a head. The tableau mirrors scenes depicted in the digital animations and paper collages of "The Scorpion Gesture/Face of the Future" that include observers wearing 3D glasses viewing Buddhist tales, suggestive of Ganesh's desire to reframe them as mythic narratives for our time. In this way, she continually builds upon existing stories that have been told and retold.

Accustomed to solitude, Ganesh managed to produce work steadily throughout 2020. While the theme of isolation permeates her current series, slated to be exhibited later in 2021 at a solo show presented by New York's Hales Gallery, she hopes that by the time the exhibition opens, people will be able to attend in person. Another brown-paper work-in-progress reveals a lone, seated figure; a drawing of a shadowy staircase covers the abdomen of her naked body. Above the faint outline where the head should be, paper cutouts of cherry blossom branches droop. The partially completed piece possesses a meditative yet slightly melancholic quality. Despite the large size of the artwork, which nearly fills an entire wall from floor to ceiling in the living room area, Ganesh believes that no online image will do justice to the materials: "Especially on this paper, it's very delicate." I nearly missed the trail of dried rose petals, from flowers given to the artist, along the bottom. Such details can only be appreciated up close.



Installation view of *A city will share her secrets if you know how to ask*, 2020, laminated vinyl, 2.4×20.6 m, at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York, 2020. Photo by Kristine Eudey. Courtesy Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art.