



Tradition
Trauma
Transformation

Chitra Ganesh

A generation younger than Sheikh and Malani, Chitra Ganesh received her BA in comparative literature and semiotics from Brown University and her MFA from Columbia University. She has spent many years navigating the cultural terrain of living within the Indian diaspora in Brooklyn, where she was born in 1975 to Indian immigrant parents. Ganesh draws freely from both the East and the West, in both media and content. Her works impressively engage with and embrace challenges of the diaspora. Her works, though nourished by two cultures, do not involve dichotomies such as past versus present, or India versus North America, but rather exist in a space somewhere between where memory, melancholia, dreams, and fantasy bleed and blend together. Filtered through her personal sensibility, works emerge featuring female figures that portray time, distance, loss, violence, and sexuality, often humorously.

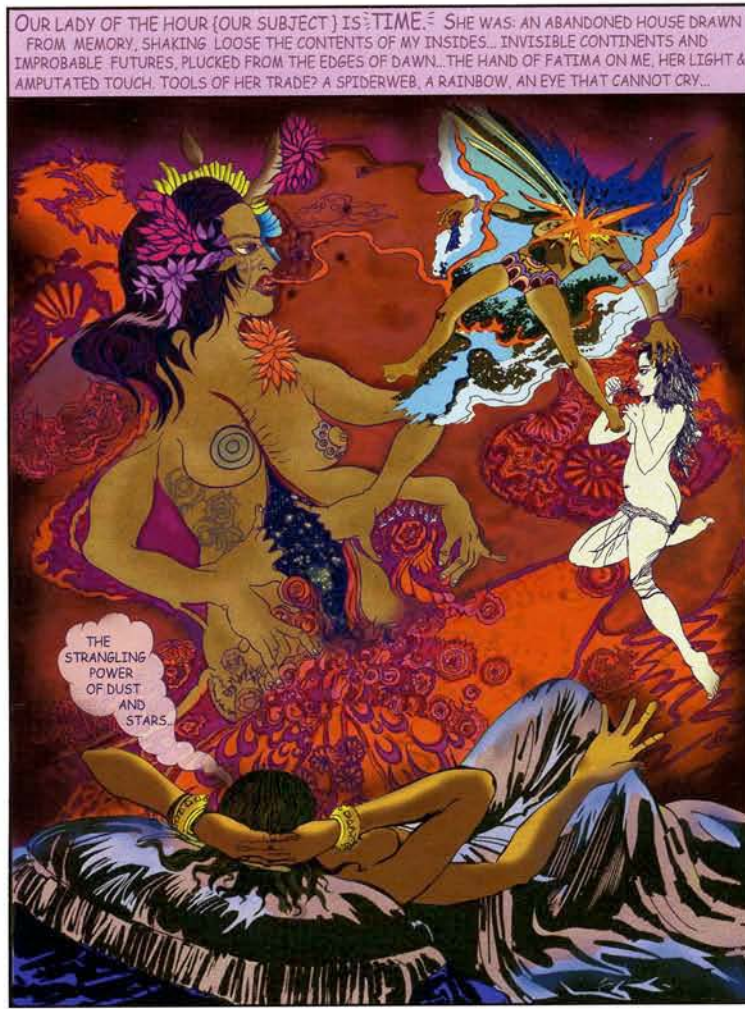
Ganesh has had an ongoing love-hate relationship with *Amar Chitra Katha*, a popular Indian comic series that focuses on religious and mythological narratives. For generations, children in India and the diaspora have been raised with these comics, which are intended to culturally educate the South Asian population. The characters in these comics provide accepted models of nationalism, private and public behavior, good versus evil, male versus female, and sexuality. In her digital collages, Ganesh combines female characters from the series with her own drawings and texts, offering alternate expressions to the prescribed models of the comic series. Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* is clearly one of her many direct references. Close examinations of the space within the frames of her works reveal a dreamscape of earthly, heavenly, and demonic bodies.

In her recent works, such as *How we do at the end of the world* (left), the comics intersect with her interest in science fiction. The images compel the audience to engage with Ganesh's visuals, which then allows access

to intimate private moments and connections with otherness. There is something ephemeral about experiencing these works that engage with memory and melancholia on a completely different plain than our reality. Her works are simultaneously easy and difficult to look at. Drawn in by their psychedelic colors and pop aesthetic, viewers soon realize that all is not goodness and light. A feeling of discomfort sets in as one feels compelled to look at every multiple-armed female nude, dismembered body part, bleeding torso, and mutilated figure, as well as depictions of feminine power expressed through self-pleasuring.

By exposing her women, Ganesh also exposes the underlying objectifying narrative of this "exotic other." The viewer is forced to face the sexualized nature of Western perception of the Asian woman. Simultaneously, the viewer is also led into questioning the time and events portrayed, and the role played by the figures in the circumstances that surround them. Ganesh's women do not assume the subservient roles reserved for them in the *Amar Chitra Katha*, but rather act as independent powerful heroines. These women may be demonic or at the same time, Devi, the great goddess, wielding her many weapons in her multiple arms. Reclaiming sexuality, Ganesh's female characters do not represent the ideal sexual fantasy of a patriarchal society. In *Melancholia: The Thick of Time* (2010) a woman with a vulva-shaped rupture in her stomach reveals the universe within. In *Sorrow's Refrain*, Ganesh reworks Albrecht Durer's famous etching *Melencolia I*, incorporating and transforming numerous elements from the original—including the figure, scale, hourglass, rainbow, ladder, dog, and keys. The seated figure is now nude and many-armed; keys that hung from the figure's belt now hang from a piercing at her hip; the globe on the floor has become a fiery-tailed planet, birthed from a disembodied pair of legs; the star is a spiderweb, and "Durer's solid" (a polyhedron, seemingly of stone) is, in Ganesh's





version, a crystal. To this the artist adds a needle with intravenous line in one of the figure's right arms; an infinity sign drawn on her inner thigh; and a multi-breasted/eyed torso with blood dripping from its blade-like arms. In these works one finds the banal, the sublime, and the transcendent all working and existing together. Life, death, and birth are here synchronous with women and their sexuality.

The concept of time in Ganesh's work is similar to the time construct of the ancient world. The inner world of fantasy and mythology is meshed with reality, everyday ideas, blurring all boundaries, and moving between the constructs of time and space. Like parts of her figures, time is dismembered from the single structure and then arranged into pieces, wandering in space as the past, present and future all overlap. Ganesh

conceives her own unique world that conflicts with the real world, resulting in strange and even absurd figures and gestures. Using comic book images works well within this alternate world. Depending on how we may interpret or deconstruct Ganesh's reality or fantasy, her works certainly resonate with many viewers. The works provide a whirlpool of cosmic energy that pulls many of us into periodically intriguing vortexes. Ganesh inhabits a space that meanders through perceptual systems and narrative conventions, leaving a charged footprint in art informed by feminism. Her expansive interrogation of the other includes questions of post-colonialism, migration, citizenship, and sexuality. The content of her works is prescient in the way it opens a wider frame of political reference and incites the urgency of critical recall.