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How We Get the Job Done: Chitra Ganesh

Kiran Bath 5/2/19 <https://www.thejuggernaut.com/article?id=5ue8rPxlb7oeEIH4LGPkz8>

Chitra Ganesh's work traverses worlds and realities, exploring history's feminist and queer stories and imagining the future. Through her long and successful creative journey, Chitra has asserted the critical agendas and visual stories of



brown artists, keeping alive a needed momentum. Her list of inspirations is vast, from Smita Patil, whom she celebrates for her dark-skinned beauty and commitment to [parallel cinema](#), to Keith Haring for [ripping through subway tunnels](#) and advertising space with his drawings, to Phoolan Devi for [taking](#)

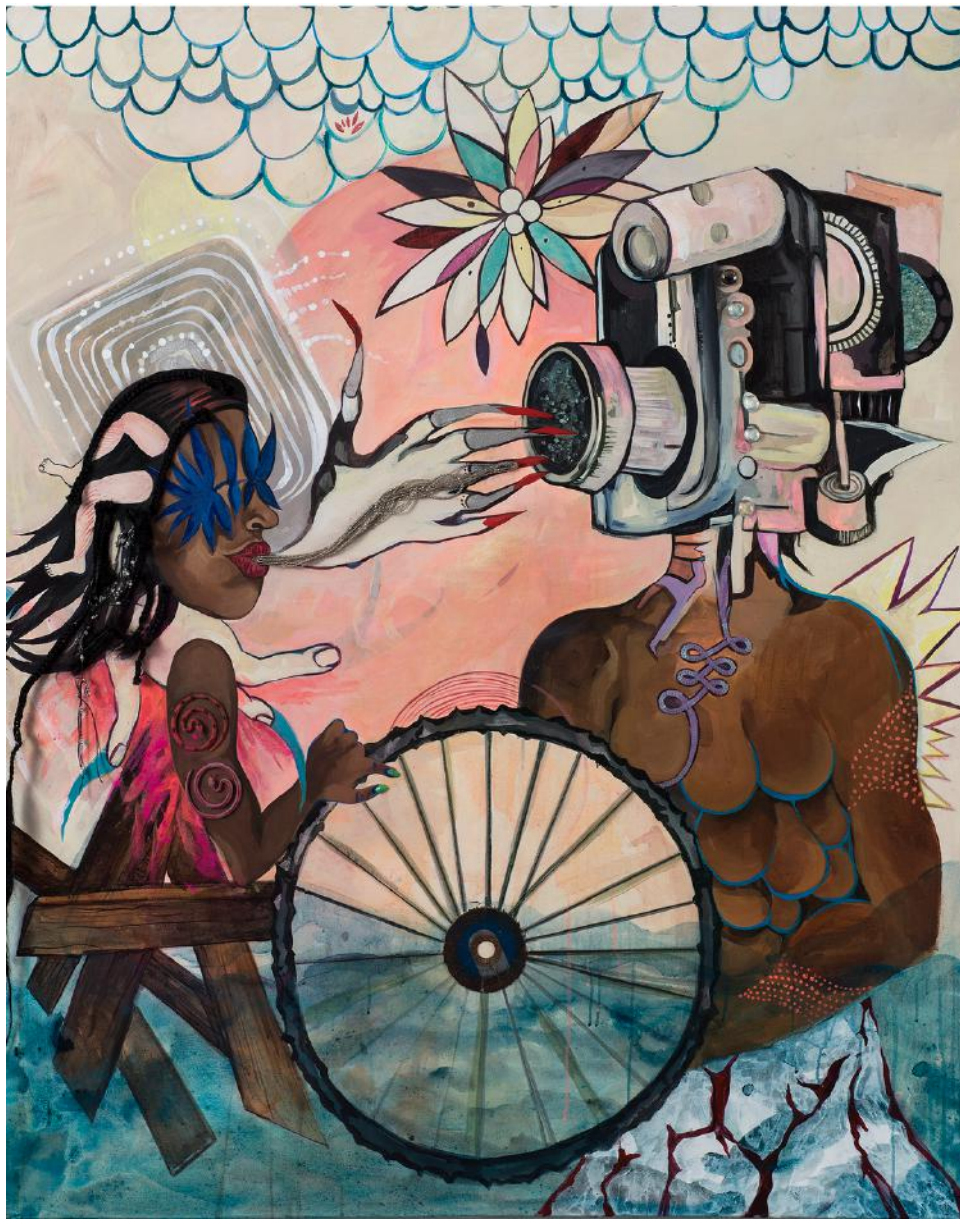
[revenge on her attackers](#) and occupying space The visual artist, who is based in Brooklyn, always has several things in process at once.

Currently on her plate are two large scale installations that explore queerness politically and conceptually, at the [Contemporary Arts Museum](#) in Houston and the [Hayward Gallery](#) in Southbank, London. She is working with poet and musician Saul Williams to create an animation for his June-release album, and on an iteration of Her garden, a mirror, a feminist utopia project which premiered at [The Kitchen](#) last fall, that will be shown alongside new sculptural and video material at the [Dhaka Art Summit](#) in Bangladesh next February.



Who introduced you to art? Who encouraged you?

One of the first people who introduced me to art was an uncle who lived in a neighboring apartment complex in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. He had lots of art books, and when I was fairly young he took me to art openings in the city. My parents also had a great love for arthouse cinema and one of my fondest childhood memories was attending a film festival in 1980 for classic Hindi cinema with them. My first love and home is in drawing. My grandmother taught me how to draw [kolam](#) and I also took drawing classes at the back of a real estate office in Queens when my family lived in Hollis, New York. I also remember being really affected by the various sculptures at a Hindu temple in Flushing, Queens, where I took dance classes.



Art teachers have also been a huge source of support — the seriousness with which they taught and gave criticism was integral to feeling a sense of support and interest for my artistic inclinations.

What drives you to keep creating?

I've had a multitude of artistic motivations and desires over the past 20 years of my career. One of the common denominators has been encountering my own feelings of fear or discomfort when I notice how certain stories remain untold or suppressed, deemed irrelevant or too 'special-interest,' precisely because their existence would so profoundly trouble the waters of key social structures, such as family, nation, etc. This shock of seeing certain structural inequalities persist, of noticing how stories are continually erased and sublimated, has been at the heart of many of my projects. As I spend more time in this profession, I'm realizing how many unsustainable models there are out there for young artists to follow. This is truer than ever today with the basic costs of housing and living that are impossible to meet, coupled with more emphasis on youth, fame, money, and social media influence that I ever thought possible. So I am trying to think, with other like-minded colleagues and friends, about how to create more sustainable modes of production. For me, this looks like working within my means and moving toward ways of creating that include as much pleasure as possible, as well as acting in ways that are generous to my body and the development of my ideas — and to rush less.

Who were your major inspirations growing up?

My inspirations are many, many, many! And I am so thankful for it. From diverse origins and backgrounds — I pulled role models from wherever I could grab them. In no particular order, my major influencers are: Smita Patil for her dark-skinned beauty and her commitment to [parallel cinema](#), including her superb roles in masterpieces like [Mandi](#), [Pam Grier](#) for her fierceness and embodiment of sexuality as power, Keith Haring for [ripping through subway tunnels](#) and advertising space with his drawings, Frida Kahlo for [surviving her bus accident](#) and her ability to articulate the

connections between pain and regeneration, Kalpana Chawla for being the first desi woman to [explore outer space](#), Phoolan Devi for [avenging her attackers](#) and occupying space and power, James Baldwin for [expressing the desire and sorrow](#) interlaced in learning to love queerly for the first time, my second grade teacher who was Sioux, who never inched away from talking about the pain and violence of being Native American — long before there was even language for settler colonialism or genocide, my grandmother for everything she survived, and so many others.

How did you make room for yourself in this industry? What were the biggest challenges? Do you still have any?

I am here because countless others, known and unknown, have made room for me, and taken the risks they took before I even got here. Making room was and will always continue to be a collective effort, rooted in networks of sociality, love, and reciprocity that can exist above and beyond career-focused strategic allegiances. So when I first entered art, it was really through an interest in making the kind of work that I wanted to see out in the world — my friends and lovers were my primary audience — and in thinking with my friends who were also young burgeoning artists, about the kind of work that we wanted to make, and making the work we wanted to see.

This included friends from college, and also folks that I met in New York City in the late 90s, which, at that time, had a beautiful, burgeoning, progressive South Asian community. At that time I moved in spaces like [SAWCC](#) (founded by Jaishri Abichandani), DJ Rekha's [Basement Bhangra and Mutiny](#) (a Drum and Bass party, which DJ Rekha had thrown with Vivek Bald), and progressive activist South Asian political networks that manifested in gathering such as [Youth Solidarity Summer](#), [SALGA](#), and [SAAA](#). Taken together, the spaces provided a wonderful context to think about creating work as well as the work of creating space, something which is undervalued as part of the structural interventions made by those who founded these spaces. At that time, there were very few South Asian artists whose work one could encounter in the context of a broader public or institutions. These artists included [Rina Banerjee](#), [Shahzia Sikander](#), [Bari Kumar](#), [Zarina](#), and a few others.



It was within these spaces that I realized there were other artists and activists born from the desi immigrant communities we grew up in, alongside great diversity within individual communities, and there was much joy in finding one another and becoming together.

Your work, such as [Index of the Disappeared](#) and [Her garden, a mirror](#), is provocative and politically critical. Do you view yourself as a political artist?

I have a raised eyebrow about the terms “political artist” and “identity-based art” because they serve to reinscribe a lot of problematic ways in which artists hailing from so-called minoritized groups, and/or outside the west, are categorized. Additionally, it places a significant amount of the burden on artists who are not afforded a universal, or formal interpretive lens, to speak about certain issues over others. This is something I found very interesting and moving in a [recent article](#) I read in the Times about older black abstractionists in America finally getting their due. While the majority of folks were participating and invested in the civil rights movement of the time, artists who chose different modes of investigation

in their art making were sidelined and viewed with suspicion, because their work was perceived as not political enough or inauthentic.

White artists make art that reflects their identity and their cultural context all the time – [Alex Katz](#) or [Grant Wood](#) are two such artists who come to mind. However, because whiteness remains unmarked and the universal category against which all other special interest categories are defined, the political/cultural/identitarian aspects of such artists' works are not singled out. So, political art as a term operates similarly for me – I think all art and actions reflect a certain politics, and either disrupt or cohere existing relations of power, and this includes silence – something like the [Silence=Death](#) campaign in 1987, which was born from the [ACTUP](#), AIDS activism, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

That said, I am clear that my work makes certain political interventions in broader discourses in relation to gender formation, sexual expression, and art history. These interventions are an outcome and consequence of following a desire to make images that I wish to see out in the world – and my own visual experience is as much shaped by what I saw as it is by all the glaring absences of representation.

Tell me about your recent trip to India and the interactions of diasporic art and the art scene in the motherland.

So much has changed over the past 20 years that terms like diaspora and motherland don't retain the same relevance and importance they once did to describe the relationships between South Asians living within and outside the subcontinent. People travel much more back and forth now than they ever have, and patterns of South Asian immigration are radically different now than they were.

I am ever grateful and fortunate for having space, legibility, and support of my work in South Asia, as well as other parts of Asia including Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, and to artists and curators who make the choice to work in the global south and outside the center to support local and emerging artists. My relationship with the Indian contemporary art began over 20 years ago. It included attending openings as a young unknown artist at galleries such as Bose Pacia Modern and Gallery 678, spaces that were in Soho, New York in the mid to late 1990s

that were showing contemporary artists of South Asian origin such as [Sunil Gupta](#), [Jitish Kallat](#), [Nalini Malani](#). At these shows, I was able to meet and speak with both younger and more established artists – something that was especially important as I had not known a single artist from the immigrant desi spaces in which I grew up. The first presentation of my work in India included an artists' talk I did along with [Jaishri Abichandani](#) and [Prema Murthy](#) at the National Center for Performing Arts in Mumbai in 2000. It was challenging and informative to encounter the questions, perspectives, and skepticism of audiences encountering my work and my Americanness for the first time. The context gives my work necessary breathing space from interpretive frames in the US, where an identitarian narrative dominates the readings of the work. Working more throughout South Asia is integral to my art practice and something I hope to continue for the rest of my life.

Much of your art explores imagined futuristic themes. What do you hope the future looks like in 50 years?

I hesitate to imagine too hard. We are definitely at the cusp of something – poised for some major tectonic shifts in the architectures of power, allocation of resources, and impending environmental collapse. I am not sure where it will go, but one thing I have been thinking a lot about is the resilience of life in the absence and limitation of human intervention. I am thinking specifically of the animals of [Chernobyl](#), and how much they have [flourished](#) in the three decades since humans abandoned the environment.

If you could time travel, where, when, and why?

There are so many places I would love to travel back to, it's hard to say. But one I do think about all the time is wishing I could travel back in time to hear Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan live in concert, for example during his 1993 tour at Birmingham Town Hall. There's one song in particular I would have loved to have heard in person: "[Mein Jana Jogi De Naal](#)." How I would have loved to be in the front rows of the audience during this spectacular performance.

Kiran Bath is a poet and essayist from Brooklyn by way of Sydney. She is a 2019 Poets House Fellow and has received fellowships and support from Brooklyn Poets, Winter Tangerine and Kundiman. Her work has been nominated for the Best of The Net and her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Wildness, The Lunch Ticket, The Adroit Journal and elsewhere. Kiran spends her spare time perfecting her mother's recipes and herbal-reverse-engineering her favorite perfumes.