

GALLERY **WENDI
NORRIS**

FLICKERING MYTHS
Chitra Ganesh
November 1 – December 22, 2012



She the Question, Head on fire (detail)
archival lightjet print, 70 x 50 in. (178 x 127 cm), 2012
Cover Image

Pop Apocalypse

by Anuradha Vikram

Monsters of the psyche are at play in Chitra Ganesh's work. Incorporating mixed media and digital collage, her drawings are unpredictable, and sometimes vicious. Ganesh's women have powers that rival even the cosmic forces that seem to continually tear apart their bodies. On the page, the ad hoc materiality of the street enters the privileged realm of drawing, with plastic gemstones, poster art, and other detritus, both humorous and aspirational, peppering the surface.

These women are both the agents and the victims of violence. Their bodies are unstable, splitting into parts endlessly. Mouths, eyes, and hands all have special significance for Ganesh. The mouth is a portal from which emit powerful forces are born. The tongue that protrudes feeds the feral appetites of a Goddess. The eye is blind, turned inward. The hands, through which artistic images are rendered, multiply in cosmic rapture. While multiple limbs and third eyes are common features of the popular images of Hindu goddesses that Ganesh appropriates, they also function here in a Cubist sense, to convey simultaneity, movement, psychology, and phenomenology. This is indicative of her approach to symbolism, which she culls from any number of ancient and contemporary mythologies. While certain forms may resonate with specific traditions, the social critiques embedded within Ganesh's work are directed at power dynamics that are not restricted to any nationality or culture.

Though *She The Question* borrows elements from religious *Amar Chitra Katha* comics that will be familiar to South Asians, the work is inspired by the work of Roy Lichtenstein, Martha Rosler, and Hannah Höch, who used images from popular media to comment on archetypes of gender and aggression in the 20th century. Ganesh synthesizes disparate styles of drawing and painting with digital photomontage in these works. The Indian comics relay myths of mortals cast as pawns in divine schemes, in which women are paradoxically rewarded and punished for the passivity they are expected to embody. The Goddess, however, can be fearsome and aggressive, but also benevolent, embodying War and Death, but also Wealth, Knowledge, and Fertility. Ganesh's surrealistic tableaux explore myriad aspects of these contrasts.

She The Question is set in lush landscapes, which give way to interstellar vistas. In the symbolic language of Western art, the natural world has appeared interchangeably with the female body as a vision of beauty that incites possessiveness. Ganesh frees both Woman and the Earth from this cycle of consumption, which has fueled centuries of conquest. She transports her characters to a celestial realm referencing the ancient Hindu cosmology. Another set of goddesses has been added to India's mythological canon with the advent of Bollywood, and they join the cast of characters. Technologies of vision and of transportation, which have come to define modern India just as they have in the West, take on metaphysical power.

Poetry is another important factor in the work. Ganesh's heroines are often trapped, "like Amnesia's golden fish hook lodged in my lungs," physically and metaphorically, reflecting their abject status as women and colonized subjects. Yet their words are transcendental, invoking apocalypse, "all this while the sky burnt to a crisp." Ganesh's evocative phrases subvert the traditional uses of text in the comic form, conflating scene with dialogue, and eliminating narrative. "Just wait," the Goddess says as her body shape-shifts into a spaceship, "a word will blow through the weeds, showing us where to roam next, and which grassy knolls, what constellations will hug those skeletal remains." Language, for Ganesh, functions as a non-linear trajectory.

In the presence of such violence, oppression and death, it is essential to acknowledge that Ganesh's work ultimately strikes a hopeful note. Though fragmented, split open, penetrated, and violated, the titular She is shown finally as a warrior princess. After centuries of ordeal, the final frame shows our heroine rendered complete and iconic. The snow that falls obliterates tragedy and loss, leaving only the hazy blindness of inner vision. The eye and the hand work in concert. The gaze of the warrior turns upward and inward, towards Truth.

Chitra Ganesh makes art about expansive concepts of space and time, which is still very much of our present time and of the hybrid space of a globalized world. Her women are specifically chosen to represent the artist's own experience, but their struggles and their raptures resonate broadly. These shapeshifters are ancient but also contemporary, magical but also ordinary. They are all of us who fight to escape our conditioning and embrace our innate power.

Anuradha Vikram is Curator of the Worth Ryder Art Gallery and Coordinator of the Visiting Artist Lecture Series in the Department of Art Practice at the University of California, Berkeley. Additionally, she is an independent critic and curator whose exhibition Social Fabric will open at LA's Craft and Folk Art Museum in January 2013.



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She the Question and Transmission (Installation view)
Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco, 2012