

# Astral Bodies and Dancing Trees

Chitra Ganesh's drawings and murals reimagine femininity, sexuality and power



Noor Anand Chawla | 03 Feb, 2023



Chitra Ganesh at Gallery Espace, Delhi (Photo: Raul Irani)

**S**TANDING ATOP A ladder placed on a staircase landing, Chitra Ganesh cuts an artistic figure as she fine-tunes a large mural with exacting brush strokes. This is where I first see her, three days before the opening of her solo show, *Orchid Meditations* at Delhi's Gallery Espace. Her decisive flow and the detailed image of a three-headed woman embracing herself, belie the fact that she only began painting this work a few hours before. She is immersed in the act of creation, even as the artwork coming to life through her dexterous fingers, bears the imprint of her personality, linking her inextricably with the image.

*Orchid Meditations* marks the second solo show for this Brooklyn-based artist, after a gap of ten years. During this time, she has participated in large-scale events in India and around the world, including the India Art Fair and the Kochi Biennale. This exhibition collates her diverse practice by showcasing an animated film, drawings, paintings, murals and collages made using mixed media.

Minutes after descending from her artistic seat, she says, “Orchids are interesting flowers. They never bloom when you want them to, and they live in the shade, displaying a finicky nature. Yet they are symbols of sexuality and sensuality. In 2021, both my partner and I lost our fathers, and it marked a big moment of change and loss. Someone gave us an orchid, and that’s when we learnt about its reticence. We water it every day, it is fully alive and has grown roots everywhere, but it doesn’t bloom. It has its own moods.”

The orchid has inspired both the title of the show and its titular painting, where a tree-headed figure reposes in a meditative state within a protective bubble amidst lush, forested surroundings. The scene could as easily be one of hope as of despair. This duality of interpretation characterises much of Ganesh’s oeuvre, which is largely inspired by imagery associated with art history, mythology, comics and other mediums of pop culture.

“For this show, I took inspiration from the Barahmasa paintings, both for their syncretic style as well as the change of seasons they depict, which are often associated with loss or expectation. But I was also thinking about the fact that we barely have seasons like we once did, due to climate change. The hope and expectation for a better future are also grounded in this idea,” adds the artist. The central figure’s stance points towards the ritual of performing *tapasya* (penance), even while being firmly connected to the real world. There is colour, drama, vibrancy, playful patterns and plenty of emotion, along with recognisable elements extrapolated from other pop culture mediums.

BORN AND RAISED in Brooklyn, New York, 48-year-old Ganesh studied at a progressive school, double majored in Art-Semiotics and Comparative Literature from Brown University and pursued an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University. She stayed connected to her Indian roots through the long and languorous summer vacations of her childhood. These were spent travelling around the country with her parents, as they visited relatives. While her family members were occupied with their lives, she entertained herself by devouring comics, vivid movie posters, over-the-top videos, catchy songs and other Indian visual imagery. Hence, the iconography of both cultures seamlessly shines through her work.

Though initially drawn to creating murals on walls as they made for expansive canvasses, circumstances led to a change in her practice. When the subway system was shut down for the better part of a year following September 11, Ganesh found it cumbersome to travel to her university in New York city. This prompted her to make smaller works on her kitchen table, leading to the imagery and aesthetics of her work changing to its current form.

Her mother's staunch Indianness (she wore sarees and her *mangalsutra* every day and refused to give up her Indian citizenship in all the years she lived in America), also played a defining role in the formation of Ganesh's visual narrative. So, her mother enters her work frequently, both physically and metaphorically. In *Amma's Story*, the bespectacled mother figure's thought bubble rains wisdom on to the hopeful daughter figure. A mother figure also makes an abstract appearance in *Ancestral Visit (Star Gazer)* where she seems to rise from the lap of a flowing river to guide her daughter stuck in a violent space war.



(L-R): *Amma's Story*; *Change Is in the Air*; and *Orchid Meditation* by Chitra Ganesh

Courtesy Gallery Espace and the artist

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One sees this camaraderie of spirit in her work, *Change Is in the Air*, where a female astronaut envisions a rich natureescape from her mind's eye. An elephant and peacocks are believable additions, while a brightly painted red and white dog seated on a hilltop adds an unexpected element. The idea for this piece came from Ganesh's interaction with her friend's daughter who was questioning the science behind one's vision, and if it really "comes out of an eye".

When asked if the pandemic affected these works, the artist denies a direct correlation. She does, however, credit the pandemic with being responsible for the process of thought that culminated in the final result. "During that time, I became much more attuned to the seasons, because we couldn't go anywhere. All that time was spent looking at trees or window-watching these panoramas move throughout the day. In that more oblique way, the events of the last three years played out in my work, while also drawing from what I've generated previously," says Ganesh.

Other prominent themes that have defined her work over a two-decade practice, include the focus on queer narratives and anthropomorphism. The former plays out in the *Ocean Dream with Peacock*, where a beautifully decorated mermaid-esque creature, reclines in a posture harking back to the black-and-white photos of Indian courtesans taken at the turn of the last century. She seems to be communicating her utopian dream to a peacock seated nearby listening in rapt attention. One also observes it in *Seated Figure with Tree Shirt* where a confident young woman sits half-naked in a garden, her hair adorned with rich brocade fabrics and peacock feathers, as the leaves of trees form striking patterns on her vest. Red flowers, cut from the fabric of an abandoned umbrella, add a decorative element.

Ganesh's anthropomorphic figures appear often as well. One sees them in works like the title piece and *Pink Hills* where a tree-headed girl atop a tiger looks on to a lush green area, and *Tree Dance*, which portrays a woman whose head consists of a bird flying in front of a colourful cloud. Ganesh describes the Indian visual sources she had exposure to as a child as a portal from which she draws inspiration. She is especially attracted to the concept of shapeshifting, which allows the subject to go wherever it chooses or be whomever it desires.

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NOW A NAME TO reckon with in the industry, Ganesh’s professional trajectory has not been without hurdles. She explains, “A challenge being based in the west has been the implications of using a broad range of references that do not necessarily centre a western context or perspective. This made my work illegible for years in the United States in many ways. I was often told by white critics and professors that my work failed because they couldn’t locate themselves, or find an opening that ‘allowed them to enter the work’. Most artists I know who have roots anywhere geographically from Lebanon to Vietnam, including places like Palestine, Korea, Hong Kong, and Afghanistan to name a few, have a significant portion of their audience, career, and legibility outside of the US.” This is also why Ganesh has found popularity and success in India.

She adds that though the South Asian subcontinent constitutes one-fourth of humanity, South Asian artists in the US continue to lack visibility. “Thankfully this is changing,” she says, “including shifts actualised by some wonderful young artists in North America. I think teaching and mentoring is a crucial aspect of shifting the discourse, politics, and opening up the space for a greater diversity of media and narratives to flourish.”

Another challenge faced by an artist with such a diverse repertoire, is the multiplicity of mediums. Ganesh chooses her mediums based on the project, though the art of drawing is the focal point of all her work. While admitting that it’s hard to keep learning new things, she mentions the value of diversification in the same breath, to keep pace with a changing environment.

This belief rings true in her animated film, *Before the War*, which we watch together. By combining evocative imagery with provocative thought bubbles, peppy sound with meaningful lyrics, Ganesh attempts to share a number of messages through this work. She reflects on the ecological imbalance severely affecting our world, expresses her personal grief, shares a glimpse of her resilience, and raises numerous poignant questions, which she lists out as, “Where are we going? What is the future? What is the past? What is human? What is superhuman? What is subhuman? What other possibilities are there for society to exist?” This exhibition invites you to seek the answers for yourself.