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## The moving imagery of Chitra Ganesh

'Orchid Meditations', the Brooklyn-based artist's solo in Delhi, offers a glimpse of her new experimental language



Chitra Ganesh at the opening of her show at Gallery Espace. (Courtesy of the artist/Gallery Espace)

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As soon as you enter Gallery Espace in Delhi, you feel you have stepped into a colourful bubble, complete with large-scale comic prints and Indian iconography. You leave behind the chaos and humdrum of the city to enter the immersive world of Chitra Ganesh. Her work has always combined South Asian iconography, science fiction and queer theory with pop culture influences such as film posters and Amar Chitra Katha comics. But her ongoing solo, *Orchid Meditations*, offers a glimpse of Ganesh's new experimental language. Besides the comic prints, the exhibition features unique animation, *Before The War*, created with the support of Ford Foundation Just Films and Studio NYC. Threads from this animation can be seen in Ganesh's new works on paper as well.

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In her essay on the show, Beth Citron, New York-based art historian, critic and curator, writes: “With ‘Orchid Meditations’, Brooklyn-based artist Chitra Ganesh returns to Gallery Espace and New Delhi after a decade (her work has been shown in India in the interim at the 4th Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2018), bridging a long-standing engagement with experimental and non-linear narrative modes, long temporal arcs, and the language of comics with newer mediums and approaches, including animation.”

One has seen many shades of Ganesh through her two-decade-long practice. From drawing and painting, the artist’s visual vocabulary has grown to span mediums such as collage, wall drawings, computer-generated imagery, video, sculpture, and now animation. “Ganesh subverts traditional storytelling to create women and queer-centric narratives of the future. She draws out alternative depictions of sexuality and power from popular stories and histories, highlighting the accounts of female protagonists, which have often been subsumed or marginalised by plot lines that reproduce the contours of majoritarian power,” states the curatorial note.

This preoccupation can be seen right from her earliest work, *Tales Of Amnesia* (2002)—a comic book and installation—to her latest, *Orchid Meditations*. According to Renu Modi, founder-director, Gallery Espace, Ganesh’s imagery has only become bolder and more allusive with time, while continuing to focus on gender, race, politics and social change.

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*Before The War* is such a layered work that each time you revisit the piece, a new element vies for your attention. Universal in its appeal, the animation juxtaposes personal narratives of memory and loss with wider sociopolitical shifts and instances of polarisation. “There is a continuation of my visual language, wherein you will see some of my recognisable imagery, such as the sari-clad figures in gas masks. But I have also inhabited this new medium through fresh elements—take, for instance, the inclusion of hand-drawn vignettes in the animation,” says Ganesh.



Change is in the Air, Mixed media on paper, 41.5 x 29.5 inches, 2023. (Courtesy of the artist/Gallery Espace)

The digital space allows for this interweaving of diverse visual imagery, including moving images. True to her non-linear narrative style, the 47-year-old artist has remixed and resampled images from across time periods. She alludes to the recent removal of the statues which had once memorialised members of the Confederacy in the US in a quirky visual—it shows the sculptures floating downstream, with New York’s skyline as the backdrop. This is quickly succeeded by imagery of the iconic Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro and sites of old human burials, showing us the world wasn’t always the way we perceive it now.



Ganesh’s love for cinema can be seen in visuals drawn from silent films. A floating bubble shows a young woman from one film quickly transform into an old woman and back. “The animation allows temporal art to be richer,” explains Ganesh.

Interestingly, *Before The War* features music by American artist-musician-poet Saul Williams. For Ganesh, working with music and sound offered a new means of creating harmony, dissonance and meaning. For each frame, she embarked on in-depth research—for instance, how should the Confederate statues be positioned, what should the movement of the water be like? Sound, movement, films and footage come together to comment on inequality, climate change and other pressing issues. “The footage of a tunnel, which says ‘exit’, was taken from the video of a flash flood which rampaged through a New York City subway station. There are visuals of forest fires, of space, which are layered with 4K imagery from (US space agency) Nasa’s telescope,” she says.

There is a dream-like quality to all the works in the show, a feeling that you have stepped into fantastical landscapes featuring giant blooms and butterflies. The presence of female protagonists, however, remains a constant through these richly layered worlds. In *Tree Page*, an orb can be seen floating through the jungle. Within it stands a girl, whose head has been supplanted by a bird resting on a cloud. In *Pink Forest Tiger Girl*, Ganesh draws on elements from Rajput painting traditions by creating a lush forested landscape. Only, it is inhabited by a girl with a tree for a head, sitting atop a tiger. The idea is to allow female protagonists to take centre stage in mythical and historical plot lines that might have relegated them to the margins earlier. “Here (*Pink Forest Tiger Girl*), the protagonist lands up in a jungle, with elements behind her taken from the poetic Baramasa paintings. In her animation, these are integrated with imagery from Henri Rousseau’s works, a post-impressionist artist who painted a lot of imagined jungles,” adds the artist.



Still from *Before the War*, 2021. (Courtesy of the artist/Gallery Espace)

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Cues for the research and creation of works in *Orchid Meditations* lie in events across the globe over the last 10 years. Ganesh noticed a slow movement towards concentration of power and money in several countries from 2016-17. “The political climate, the tendency towards authoritarianism, and all that has been happening with the climate crisis, informed my work. I was talking to a dear friend, who said that this is the longest that New York has been without snow since 1973,” says Ganesh.

All these challenging political and ecological disruptions, compounded by fissures in governance during the pandemic, affected her. No one, across strata, seemed to be immune to loss. “I lost my father, as did my partner. Everyone I know lost someone. My work has always been interested in stories of love and loss, new ways to hope for more justice and compassionate governance. All this feels all the more urgent now,” she adds.

For Ganesh, fantasy and imaginative narratives have the potential to counter misinformed perceptions. “People have visual evidence and facts but for some reason are stuck in certain belief systems, amplified by misinformation and the legitimisation of terms such as ‘alternative facts’. Finding a ground between the symbolic and imaginary could be a good way to counter this,” she says.

As we wind up our conversation, I ask her about the choice of title for the show. Ganesh harks back to the time when her father died and she was sent an orchid by a well-wisher. “But this orchid never bloomed! I love the fact that it is refusing to perform on schedule,” she says. Ganesh is also fascinated by the fact that orchids grow in the shadows. “These ideas can function as really valuable metaphors for people who want to cultivate their ideas in the shadows. And they can choose to reveal them to the world when it is time,” she says. “This show is a bit like that too.”