CHITRA GANESH

Vandana Kalra, *'The idea of the diaspora itself has changed': Chitra Ganesh, artist,* The Indian Express, 24 March 2023

Video still of Chitra Ganesh, *Before the War*, 2022 Digital animation, 3:56 min

New York-based Chitra Ganesh's solo '*Orchid Meditations*' at New Delhi's Gallery Espace draws on some of her familiar themes, including Buddhist and Hindu iconography, myth and science fiction, comics and surrealism. In this interview, Ganesh, 48, talks about her influences, being part of the diaspora and why the written word is crucial to her art. Edited excerpts:

Does the title of the show, *Orchid Meditations*, also reflect on the pandemic, when several of these works were made?

The title of the exhibition is based on a painting of the same name. It shows a tree-headed figure in a meditative state, surrounded by forest and enclosed in a glowing sphere, holding a pair of orchids. In 2021, when both my partner and I lost our fathers, someone gave us an orchid. I noticed then that I love how orchids are inclined to bloom only when they want and thrive in the shadows. They are both delicate and firmly rooted and associated with sensuality. This exhibition mixes personal and art historical imagery to explore the way politics, loss, and fantasy come together in daily life.

Influences of Amar Chitra Katha have been a constant in your work since the early 2000s. Did you grow up reading these? What else do you read?

I was an avid Amar Chitra Katha reader as a child, both in New York City where I grew up, and during regular visits to India. Returning to these stories as an adult, I saw how the comics

reproduced certain patterns of representation: heroes and heroines were always light-skinned, while the rakshasa figures were very dark; other evil characters were often bearded, either a conscious or unintentional reflection of religious and caste-based bias. I'm interested in the mythological form and how it helps us ask questions that seek to find out who we are, where humanity is headed, what constitutes a human, and what justice looks like. I also read poetry, novels, and contemporary social theory as well.

How important is the written word in your work?

Storytelling and word building are very important in my work. I often integrate image and text, allowing parallel visual and written narratives to occupy a singular frame. I hope these multi-layered images provide an opening of sorts for the audience to enter the work — a third story or position which the viewer may inhabit, stepping into a shared dreamscape. It is a way to connect to what is around me, and what liberatory possibilities might be hovering at the edges of our perceived reality.

What prompted you to interpret Rokeya Sakhhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream (1905) in 2018? When did you first read it?

I first read Sultana's Dream about 20 years ago. Hossian was one of the few elite Bengali women of her generation writing in English, thanks to the support of her husband who encouraged her to read and write. It was first published in the Ladies' Journal, a women's literary magazine based in Madras, appearing some 10 years before Charlotte Perkins Gilman's iconic feminist utopic novel Herland.

While making the work, I dug much deeper into the story, and its place within a larger body of literature, specifically Bengali and feminist science fiction. During that period, I was also reading Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia E. Butler, and Manjula Padmanabhan, alongside feminist and science fiction texts by writers such as Ismat Chughtai and Jagdish Chandra Bose, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), reflecting on the connections between fantasy and speculation rooted in non-Western and non-white contexts. The series of prints drew on Hossain's vibrant imagery, translating a story written in verse into a visual grammar that connects with problems that shape 21st century life, like apocalyptic environmental disaster, gender-based and economic inequalities, and the ongoing geopolitical conflicts.

You were born and brought up in the US. What was your initial exposure to Indian art?

We travelled to India all the time, and my parents took me to all the historical sites, the Taj Mahal, Konark, Khajuraho, Ajanta and Ellora, and so on. It was their Bengali friends in Brooklyn who introduced me to the work of Jamini Roy. My father would also buy me those small spiral-bound books that the Lalit Kala Akademi used to print, which were quite inexpensive at the time.

Early on, I really connected with the work of Bikash Bhattacharya, Ganesh Pyne, and Amrita Sher-Gil. Later, in New York, as a teenager and young adult, I saw works of artists such Nalini Malani, Sunil Gupta, Anita Dube, and Nilima Sheikh. Rummana Husain and Zarina Hashmi, that were powerful encounters for me. Zarina became a wonderful mentor figure and was very supportive of my work.

As part of the diasporic artistic community in the US, were you expected to produce a certain kind of work?

Being a racially marked subject making art in an American context was very different when I started out than it is today. In the late '90s when I started making work, people would often say they couldn't relate to the subject matter;

back in India, I was questioned about making ‘negative’ images that could give the country a bad name. Luckily, these conversations have evolved significantly over the past 25 years. The idea of the diaspora itself has changed. Today, we witness a constant flow of visual and popular culture between the subcontinent and the US, enabled by technology and ongoing efforts to broaden our definitions of what contemporary art is and create more inclusive art worlds. Showing my work in Asia, I see how audiences have greater experience with, and a keen awareness of, the visual languages I reference, including art history, comics, mythology, and popular culture of these regions.