In order to have a really robust, regenerative, and replenishing futurism, you have to reorient yourself to the past as well. To have a more just possibility of our future, we have to keep looking back into the past differently, in a way that upends our ideas of teleology and progress.

—Chitra Ganesh

Chitra Ganesh: Dreaming in Multiverse

With an interest in visual narratives and their possibilities, Chitra Ganesh draws on Buddhist and Hindu iconography, science fiction, Surrealism, queer theory, comics, Bollywood posters, and video games, combining them with her own imagery and drawings to present speculative visions of society in the past, present, and future.

The exhibition brings together a suite of recent prints, Multiverse Dreaming, and five video animations that exemplify the artist’s experimental storytelling. The multiverse evoked in the title—a hypothetical group of alternate universes that comprise everything that exists—underscores Ganesh’s creation of poetic and lucid worlds that recognize histories and futures as abundant and temporally layered.

Multiverse Dreaming (2020–21)

This suite of thirteen prints is inspired by Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Picture Stories), a popular comic book series originating in the 1960s in India that includes tales of epic myth, folklore, and history of the South Asian subcontinent. Largely completed during COVID-19 lockdowns, Ganesh repurposes the comic form to present nonlinear narratives that focus on reflection, regeneration, and desire in times of uncertainty.

In Urgency, a large-scale print that opens the series, the central figure resembles the goddess Kali, an icon of women’s empowerment associated with themes central to Ganesh’s practice, including cycles of birth and death, injustice, the circularity of time, and the end of the world. The tattooed, three-breasted, three-headed figure towers over an urban landscape set aflame. While one head speaks with a megaphone, another is replaced with a lamp radiating light, and the third is covered with a surgical mask, their eyes appearing as portals to another dimension.

Across all thirteen prints, Ganesh features an interweaving of disparate visual idioms, shape-shifting bodies, and poetic texts that often convey moments of interior thought or ideas about dreaming. They invite viewers to consider utopian possibilities while also tapping into the collective memory of audiences in India and its diaspora who have grown up reading these comics. By centering women, femme bodies, and queer relationships, the project reorients traditional narratives around experiences and communities that have been marginalized historically as well as in the contemporary world.

Notes

1 Chitra Ganesh, in “Chitra Ganesh with Megan N. Liberty,” Brooklyn Rail (July/August 2020): 32.

Animations (2010–22)

Ganesh extends her two-dimensional experimentation with visual narratives through the use of movement and sound in her time-based animations, instilling a dynamic sense of dimensionality and depth into the graphic worlds she creates. Like her prints, these works challenge conventions of gender, sexuality, and power by focusing complex narratives—often of mythological or epic proportions—around iconic women protagonists and visual forms.

*Rabbit Hole* (2010) is one of Ganesh’s earliest animations. The video was inspired by a variety of creation myths where bodies are torn apart, as well as the intertwining of conception and destruction in mythological tales more broadly. The video opens with the fragmented body of a femme-presenting figure asleep by a river. They are awakened by a winged hookah and travel to an underground realm where they consume lotus flowers—symbols of enlightenment and rebirth—before returning to the surface where they have an erotic encounter and then resume their slumber. The soundtrack is derived from the music of Karsh Kale, an Indian-American musician known for his electronic tabla playing, remixed by DJ Rekha, a pioneer of bhangra, a form of Punjabi club music. This evocative aspect deepens the otherworldly character and eroticism of the video. For Ganesh, eroticism, or more specifically “erotic intelligence,” exists as a force of agency and transgression, a site of possibility and imagination for story arcs and tales yet untold.

Three of the animations are from a series commissioned in 2018 by the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, in which Ganesh responded to the museum’s collection of Tibetan art.

The title of the first video, *Rainbow Body*, refers to an elevated state of, or metaphor for, the transformation of consciousness known as a rainbow body. The Buddhist master Padmasambhava and Mandarava, a female spirit (dakini) and princess in Tantric Buddhism, are said to have entered into a sexual union that led to mutual enlightenment. The animation opens with Mandarava waking up from a dream in her bedroom and follows her journey through the bardo, a Tibetan term for a liminal space between death and rebirth. The bardo is reimagined by Ganesh as a cave littered with wrathful deities that take monstrous forms with a psychosexual charge.

*Adventures of the White Beryl* follows the encounters of a shape-shifting protagonist who appears as woman, a shadow, the universe, an animal, and a machine at different points in the story. The title refers to an eighteenth-century manuscript known as the White Beryl astrological treatise, which illustrates the Tibetan practice of elemental divination. Ganesh’s video takes the form of a nonlinear, cyclical narrative that draws on the endless permutations of conflict, rebirth, and change described in the manuscript. It reveals the artist’s interest in early stop-motion animation, such as the work of Harry Smith and Pramod Patil, vintage comics, and early video games, the aesthetics of which are employed here to create a dynamic visual framework for navigating life’s dangers and contingencies.

In *Silhouette in the Graveyard* the artist gestures again toward the transitional space between life and death. The video begins with dancing skeletons and a river of blood, out of which emerges the silhouette of a three-breasted figure with flames instead of a head. The figure quickly morphs into the outline of the bodhisattva Maitreya, the Future Buddha whose prophetic arrival is said to usher in a new age at a time when the terrestrial world has lost its way. A stream of images of contemporary political, social, and ecological upheaval rapidly flows across the silhouette, creating a prescient juxtaposition of our current reality and the apocalyptic moment associated with Maitreya.

The final video, *Before the War* (2022), is Ganesh’s newest animation. It is, as the artist describes it, “an open-ended narrative of memory, love, and loss” informed by sociopolitical shifts relating to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the political polarization characterizing these times. The visual imagery, combined with music and lyrics by the singer and songwriter Saul Williams, probes how personal and political conflicts are often interlaced and can be bearers of profound transformation.
Chitra Ganesh: Dreaming in Multiverse

Checklist

PRINTS
1. Urgency, 2020
Archival digital print, 3/3, 66⅛ × 45½"
2. Even in Winter, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 21 × 30¼"*
3. Multiverse Dreaming, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 21⅝ × 27¼"*
4. Battle with Myself, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 15 × 25¼"*
5. Sparkles, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 21 × 42"*
6. The Ecstasy of Others, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 27¼ × 22¼"*
7. When a Girl is Terrified She Might Run for Her Life, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 18¼ × 23¾"*
8. Cat Meditation and Mirrored Fields, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 21 × 31"*
9. Double Pool Dream, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 30¼ × 23¼"*
10. Combing Hair on Balcony, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 18⅝ × 27¼"*
11. Black Rose, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 14 × 16½"*
12. Yellow Cloud Dreaming, 2021
Archival digital print, 3/3, 17¼ × 25"*
13. Eclipse, 2020
Archival digital print, 1/3, 59 × 42"*

ANIMATIONS
Rabbit Hole, 2010
Digital animation with sound, 2:54 min.
Rainbow Body, 2018
Digital animation with sound, 2:02 min.
Adventures of the White Beryl, 2019
Digital animation with sound, 2:10 min.
Silhouette in the Graveyard, 2018
Digital animation with sound, 1:22 min.
Before the War, 2022
Digital animation with sound, 3:56 min.

All artworks are courtesy of the artist;
Hales, London and New York; and
Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco.
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Artist Biography

Chitra Ganesh (b. 1975 Brooklyn, New York) earned a BA in art
semiotics and comparative literature from Brown University
in 1996. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and
Sculpture in 2001 and earned her MFA in visual arts from
Columbia University in 2002. Her work has been widely exhibited
both nationally and internationally, including solo presentations
at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York; The Kitchen,
New York; Rubin Museum of Art, New York; MoMA PS 1, New York;
Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Elizabeth A. Sackler Center
for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum; and Gothenburg
Konsthall, Sweden. Her work is widely recognized in South Asia
and has been shown in New Delhi at the Indira Gandhi National
Centre for Arts, Devi Art Foundation, and Travancore Palace;
in Mumbai at the Prince of Wales Museum; and in Bangladesh
at the Dhaka Art Summit at Shilpakala Academy. She is Associate
Professor of Studio Art at Hunter College, New York. She lives
and works in Brooklyn.

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supported by the Siteman Family Charitable Fund.
It is organized by Meredith Malone, curator at the
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

Special Event
Artist Talk: Chitra Ganesh
Monday, March 7 6 pm

To request a tour of the exhibition for your class or group,
please email kempereducation@wustl.edu.