



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Chitra Ganesh,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Chitra Ganesh on August 31, 2020. The interview took place at Ganesh's home in Brooklyn, New York, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Chitra Ganesh at her home in Brooklyn on August 31st, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Chitra, could you tell me about your life and work and how they've changed since March of this year?

CHITRA GANESH: Uh, yeah. So I think that, um, among the—among the main changes for me and my life and my work is the fact that I have been now in New York State since—is that distracting? [Car engine noises in the background.]

BEN GILLESPIE: No, it's okay.

CHITRA GANESH: Can you hear it? Um, I've been—I haven't left New York State since the end of February, which is extremely unusual for me, Um, I travel a lot for my work but I also spend a significant amount of time in South Asia. I was very—feeling very lucky and fortunate to have had the opportunity to do that right before the quarantine started. So I was actually out of the country in India and Bangladesh from December 26th to February 18th. Um, and then—so I think in terms of traveling, in terms of the kind of contact that I have with students and other colleagues, um, things have also really changed and I think in other ways it's been beneficial for my participation in certain things because I have also some autoimmune health issues that make it easier to participate and um, continue certain things on Zoom then I would have if things hadn't moved to this more remote kind of platform.

BEN GILLESPIE: So could you tell me a little bit about the—the projects that you've been working on then at home?

CHITRA GANESH: Yeah so, I have actually been—it's been quite busy during the pandemic. Um, I did—I worked on a couple of print projects. One with Creative Time and one with The Kitchen which were sort of initial artist response projects. The one that I made a comic that was co-commissioned by The Kitchen and *Flash Art*, so it appeared in the print issue, but it also appeared online. And working in that form, in a graphic or comic form is um, it's like—was extremely appropriate and engaging for the moment because it's something—the form itself it's—it's like origin in some ways is digital, or it's kind of natural habitat at this point is digital, so that helps the circulation of that kind of work in a way that would be different from my paintings or drawings.

And then, um, in addition to that, the comic form itself is something that's been, um, interesting and, um, I guess, provocative and soothing for me to use as an artist right now because in the form itself it's about how different parts are fragmented, but also remain connected together as a whole, which is very much something that's been in the air and on my mind during this pandemic. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah, but I mean the comic seems really powerful right now through the use of the frame—

CHITRA GANESH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BEN GILLESPIE: Because you have a sense of, like, continuity or movement between the different frames, um, and—

CHITRA GANESH: And also a gutter where things get broken up and all of what—all of what lies between what can be actually said or what it feels like it's valuable to say, there's a symbolic

space for that too so, yeah. Um, so I've been working on those. I've been working on a collaboration with Saul Williams who is an artist and a spoken word poet where, like, he just—he released an album last year and I'm making an animation for one of the songs or with one of the songs.

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So I'm doing that and then I'm—my own commission, solo exhibition at the Leslie-Lohman Museum was postponed through—so that is set to open now in about a month and a half. And that, um, that was postponed by, like, several months and it was unclear when it was going to open but I feel very lucky with that project because it's actually—it's a series of installations so it's almost like a mural that wraps around 10 windows of the museum. So at this moment particularly, it's meaningful because it's something that can be accessed from outside and doesn't require entry into an enclosed space and can be seen by a much broader audience of people. I mean anyway museums have more of a specific audience than the street does, but I think at this time that has shrunk even more because of these institutions being closed and just very slowly starting to reopen now.

BEN GILLESPIE: And has the delay made you think any differently about that project? I mean it sounds like the form is really ideally suited for people in the city right now but what about the work itself and thinking about queer representation and feminine representation in 2020?

CHITRA GANESH: Yeah it really made me—well so the project was about—was obviously going to be exploring those issues of queer and, um, representation of queerness and femmeness, and femininity, but it was also going to draw on different kinds of utopias and thinking about the idea of queer utopia and thinking about this city in particular and, um, gentrification, and, like, a number of other issues where how the architecture and sex and sexuality can be expressions of power and resistance. So I think that, um, yeah, the pandemic, kind of, stopped me in my tracks because a lot of what I understand to be like queer life, queer joy, queer activism is about bodies coming together in public space, like, or private space but in privatized public spaces like clubs and other kinds of bars or institutions but also on the street, also in public sex, I mean, so there's like a lot of different ways in which obviously the pandemic would—and the social distancing and the radical rearrangement of intimacy and space would affect the work.

I think definitely I wanted to, um, pause before I continued working on the piece. I took a little bit of a break because I felt like it was important to figure out how to, um, I mean as it is in general in life but also with this pandemic, to respond rather than react. And to, kind of, figure out what that response would be, um, in a more thought-out way. And a lot of my own experiences of approaching this time both as an artist and as a human have to do with being born and raised in New York and having lived here for much of my life and also having experienced September 11th here in New York. So that was the last time I kind of—I mean the financial crash and there were other things in between, but in terms of something where the city stopped in a way that I had never seen in my life, the last time that happened was around September 11th. And I know then, as now, that there were a lot of different kinds of modes of expression that were very necessary but that were, like, the kind of the very first layer of reaction to what was going on and also the question of how do you—how do you, like, talk about or create, um, in relation to a traumatic event when that event is still undergoing? Like, ongoing underway.

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So those are some of the things that, um, I was thinking about. I was also I mean another I guess so that was one aspect and thinking about how much of that I wanted to gesture towards in the work and how much of that I wanted to leave out. And so it feels like things are a little bit more steady and stable now in terms of understanding we're going to be here for maybe, like, two weeks at least which is more than you could say from before but. And then I think that the protests and the acknowledgement of a racial pandemic and the introduction of the words systemic racism into white culture and media and politics has also been something that's been on my mind that I'm thinking about.

So, like, one of the things that I ended up doing for this project—a lot of times I collect many of the pieces before I make the work, especially if the work is much broader and more detailed in scope. But one of the things that I ended up thinking about was, like, specific people who you might call queer elders or people who have been around in the community forever and ever in New York City who died from COVID. So like Mona Foot and Lorena Borjas who—Mona is a—was a drag queen and hostess in the club scene for a long time and she hosted something called

Star Search. And then Lorena Borjas was an activist in Queens and often helped undocumented and otherwise precarious queer and Latinx folks.

So, like, thinking about them but also I ended up doing drawings of every—like, there is one panel in the mural or the installation which is going to be like a large group scene that winds its way between protest and celebration. So it's going to start as a, sort of, a protest and then become more like a party or a sex party on the other end, but the—among the figures that are populating that part of that passage of the work are going to be, um, all the trans and gender-nonconforming people that were murdered this year. So that, um, that was some a way in which I think the pandemic actually shaped, um, the work in a way that I wouldn't have expected. In part because, um, I was thinking a lot about—like, I went to—there was a trans rights march by the Brooklyn Museum which I attended and I was so amazed to see 15,000 people there because I had also been at the very first trans rights march in 2005 which was amazing, but it was just, like, a very, very different energy and just to see how things have, like grown and shifted and see how important these parts of the movement are for, um, both giving us, like, a larger social and economic analysis of what's happening, and also the sheer horror of the amount of brutality.

Um, and I think that, um, that aspect of project is very much related to these larger, more abiding, ongoing questions in my practice of trying to understand how to shed light on certain narratives that are ongoing, um, and certain disappearances of bodies from the system, from legibility, from access to survival.

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And so again it was making me think about the time around September 11th and the years that came after because during that time, I started working on a project called *Index of the Disappeared* with artist and filmmaker Mariam Ghani, um, in which we created an archive of disappearance, um, which included, um, which began around detention, deportation, and other forms of disappearance of mostly Muslim and South Asian men who were being profiled in the post 9/11 era. But that a similar kind of logic of wanting to have some kind of an archival approach but with some—with warm, like, something that we call warm data, collecting warm data, or having a way in which there was a different sense of humanity or engagement or touch with the subjects. So that was a lot of what motivated and sort of guided my process of collecting that information. Um, yeah, and it's been, like, it's—I think it's now 30—28 or 30 people. Um, it's really intense.

BEN GILLESPIE: That is an amazing project and it's amazing to hear how many—how many good things are happening, um, with your practice even while sifting through incredibly, like, powerful and devastating, um, threads out of history that continued to emerge and. So I'm going to ask a, sort of, complex question because you hit on everything I wanted to ask about and so it's making me think about things a little differently. Um, and so the question I was going to ask that I'll then frame is, um, how do we how—do we helpfully navigate the sense of incredible urgency that we have in moments of intense affective saturation? So, like, how do we keep going? How do you keep creating when it seems like everything is falling apart? And what you were just speaking about and thinking about your work and, like, the *Unearthly Delights* series and, um, you just have this amazing attention to the coexistence of creation and destruction. Um, and so these moments of devastation can also be really powerfully productive. Um, and so I guess I was going to ask you about how the generative friction of creation and destruction helps you to stay focused?

CHITRA GANESH: Yeah. I know. I mean I was going to add, you know that there—there has been also a lot of, um, like, discovery and joy in this period of time. One thing that we longtime residents of New York have been talking about was this incredible gift of having the time to watch the spring unfold because you had to walk, because you were around the same place all the time you might actually notice that something started flowering when it wasn't flowering yesterday, and like that—I mean it's—you know, it sounds a little—it could sound a little overly optimistic or could seem a little bit, like, cheesy but I do really think that the connection with nature, with plants, with the outdoors, and seeing the resilience has been, like, extremely generative. So I would say that spending time in Prospect Park or Greenwood Cemetery with the people that I love the most, um, taking long walks at night, um, being able actually in a—in a way that's, like, um, experiential to be able to reflect on my childhood because the city has become again a lot more quiet, um, and not on this incredibly steep commercial incline of becoming even more of a mall than it was yesterday, you know?

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So those—those things have all been, um, wonderful but I think that—I think that cutting out a lot of the busyness has been really great to, kind of, see what resources we all have and how we move forward with what we have. Also staying in touch with friends from—I mean, I spend a lot of—I've been regularly in touch more this year than ever before with friends from Berlin, from India, from Bangladesh, from the U.K. Just like Milan—comparing notes in the beginning, but then just also, you know, this is one of the first times where—that I can remember where everybody in the world had the same problem at the same time.

And it's the first time in my life that New York City ever had a curfew. And so history has also been really important to me because I was like, I can't even remember not even during the subway strike, not even during the Summer of Sam which I remember where there was a blackout, not during the 2005 blackout, not during 9/11, never was there a curfew. Like, what is this? And the last time there was a curfew in New York it was also in relation to a Black soldier, I believe, being killed. Um, so, like, it's interesting just to see how this didn't actually radically change everything, it just brought into relief a lot of the patterns and the constraints that so many people had been living with.

BEN GILLESPIE: So that also anticipated the final question I wanted to ask which is we've been talking about utopias and your new project, it's about a utopia and not only envisioning the future, but recuperating the past differently to help us see a better path through the present into the future. And I guess along those lines, what are the lessons from this moment that you think you will carry with you into the future?

CHITRA GANESH: I think for myself personally, definitely a kind of a reorientation towards time, um, that I would like to keep with me. I mean you would hope that this extraordinary period would catalyze change for different individuals, but also institutions, sectors of society, um, approaches to history, but I don't necessarily know how quickly that's going to happen because for example in art, the people who control it and the people who control the money have not changed. So that's something that we need to, um, keep at the front and center of our mind. Is that there are, of course, going to be some changes on very, like, practical, everyday levels, but in terms of the way institutions could open up to embrace a more nuanced and or any kind of understanding of the moment depending on what the institution is, is a big project moving forward.

And I think that another way that I'll keep this moment with me as I think that I'm feeling like education is really, really important in terms of how I personally might be able to contribute or how many people contribute to rebuilding, um, New York, but also rebuilding some of the belief systems and requirements that, you know, ruled the pre-pandemic world. Like, for example, no one would have ever said to me prior to the pandemic, you know, don't come for two days to Denver, Colorado. That's going to be really bad for the environment and really hard on your body. Why don't you just give a lecture this way or why don't we think of something else to do? So I think things like that are really good, you know? The amount of travel and the amount of engagement that was happening was, I think, overwhelming for a lot of people and especially for people who have any kind of a public-facing aspect or performative aspect of their job.

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I mean nothing in comparison to what, you know, essential workers and public school teachers who are my friends that I know are dealing with, but nonetheless I think that there's—there's a—there is a kind of an urgency which I actually also, um, which I actually also thought about in my work. I did—I didn't mention this earlier but I also did a project with the Public Art Fund that's up right now and it's 50 artists were asked to create some work in response to the last several months, um, and so I—I'll send you an image of this, but I created a work that's called *Urgency* so. And that's based on this idea of like mythic archetypes and also on tarot and other kinds of, um, collective knowledge that people seem to rely on more when things feel precarious. So I was thinking about what would urgency look like if she was—if she was with us.

BEN GILLESPIE: That is an amazing note to end on. Really looking forward to that and the Leslie-Lohman installation. And thank you very much for speaking with me today.

CHITRA GANESH: Yeah, thank you so much. I'm looking forward to hearing these—hearing what everyone has to say. This is the wonderful project. Thank you.

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