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SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Skowhegan, Maine

Lecture by CHITRA GANESH
June 24, 2019

Transcriber: Jess Pinkham

Welcoming remarks by Elle Pérez: Welcome to the 2019 Barbara Lee lecture series at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. So, before we get started with tonight's lecture, there are a couple things I'd like to remind you, so, first, please silence your cell phone. Second, if you need to leave the lecture at any time, please exit through the back door. If you're looking for the restrooms, they are at the library, which is just down the road. There will also be time for Q&A after the lecture; at which point our barn monitors are gonna come around with microphones, so please, wait until you receive a microphone to start your question, so that we can record it. So, tonight, our speaker is going to be our resident faculty member Chitra Ganesh. {applause, cheering} And he will be introduced by Lan Tuazon. {applause, cheering}

Introductory remarks by Lan Tuazon: I'm gonna try my best here, I'm almost out of voice, cheering you guys on at the drag party, so {laughs} so good evening, everyone, I'm happy to introduce artist, feminist and scholar Chitra Ganesh. A person who, after twenty years of art making, has shown evidence of the literal translation of her name. Chitra Ganesh, art wisdom. I remember as a child, my mother would send me to a distant corner store, so that I could rent twenty comic books for her. Melodramas, romance, and thrillers. I would sneak reads of these comics, and they were my first contact to adult content. I only mention this because it's important to consider the mode and medium by which we receive and hand down stories and

histories. Chitra's work is also influenced by an immensely, immensely popular 1960's Indian comic book series called *Amar Chitra Katha*. Which I think translates to 'immortal picture stories.' That sought to teach children Indian epics, myths, folklore, and history. Now, early budgetary versions of this comic was printed in yellow, blues, and greens, thirty pages. But in the 1980's, it became quite popular, and that format grew much bigger, to something like a three-volume set of thirteen hundred pages. The publication became also a repository, and the reproduction of dominant beliefs and cultural codes of gender, power, caste – women in this comics were passive containers of male projections. Now, enter the next generation of picture story tellers, with someone like Chitra Ganesh. Chitra, both the subject and the reader of the story, she now tells her own story. Now, Žižek wrote about the sequel in his criticism of Batman: The Dark knight. And in it, he makes a point to say that for a narrative to appear and re-appear as the sequel, it means that we have to do the work of analyzing the difference in the sequel, that the sequel presents. This difference provides the key in understanding our collective consciousness, and the differences reveal to us the character of our historical present. I will look forward to the decisions Chitra has made in her version of power, in the Indian myths she works with, and in how women and femininity re-appears in her work. With Chitra's presentation coming right after my lecture, the point of which was that identity is in the expanded field, and how one might define the personal as we enter the social, I have to tell you the truth: I met Chitra at age eighteen, and then we never saw each other again until we were here. But from the distance that we both continued on as artists, I always thought, 'oh, geez, she really figured it out.' {laughter} That even with the position that I hold, Chitra's work and answer to the challenge was entirely radical. Radical in that Chitra brought her cultural perspective with her. She did not leave herself behind. (00:04:57) The subject of her work was not at all a marginalization of her cultural perspective, but rather taking that cultural perspective as the center. Let me explain a little bit: in the writing, in the text, the book, *Art Power*, Boris Groys wrote the essay "Europe and Its others." There he analyzed the Western art tradition as something entirely anti-tradition. Modernity was marked precisely by what was outside of Western cultural tradition, so women's work, craft, decoration, was traditional and therefore not accepted within the Western art tradition. Rather, what was accepted was everything that was outside of tradition. Right? So we can think about something like Modernist painters and their appropriation of African art, we can think about the fascination of non-traditional subjects, the

child, the madman, the liberated sex worker, or the gender-bending and surrealist art. You can come up with many examples. And it all sounds great, right? To, for the Western art tradition to always sort of lasso in precisely what lies outside of tradition sounds really good. {laughter}

Except there was one problem: the roles and positions were there for Western artists alone. If the non-Western were to present their own culture, it would have been seen as traditional, or regional. And thus not accepted by an anti-traditionalist position of the Western art model. So, Boris Groys ends his essay, as he usually does, with some sort of affirmation of aesthetic power, with a kind of flourish of hope and belief that essentially writes the future of art and art making as defining what it means to be human, that becoming human itself as a battle of civil rights, as the truly, truly anti-traditionalist position. But even with that kind of ending, the problem will still exist, that this will still make space only for a Western author and artist. What I love about Chitra's work is that she herself is taking an anti-traditionalist position as she re-writes Indian cultural myths and history. The fact that all happens within Western art is truly the radical aspect of the work. I'm gonna read a little bit, because I think it's important to recognize how the woman that stands before you has arrived here. So, Chitra received her BA, magna cum laude, with high praises from Brown University, in comparative literature and semiotics as a BA, and then received her MFA at Columbia University. She's shown nationally and internationally, including the Queens Museum, Asia Society, Berkeley Museum, many, many more, and examples of international exhibitions would include Goteborgs Kontshalle, with solo presentations at MOMA PS1. I got a long list here, but I'm gonna skip ahead, but I did mention she is a scholar. Her writings that she contributed to *Juicy Mother* was the finalist for the Lambda Literary Awards. There is a great deal more I can say about our artist presenter tonight, I could have delved into things like myth, history and representation, but I leave that to the artist herself; she's the pro. So, rather, what I want to leave you with is a quote from anthropologist Michael Taussig, as he analyzes aspects of the visual world. And it says, '...the eyeful - the eye, opened up, by the revelations of the optical unconscious, is also a hallucinatory eye. A rollercoastering of the senses, dissolving science and art into a new mode of truth seeking, and reality-testing. As when Benjamin, in noting the achievement of film to extend our scientific comprehension of reality, also notes in the same breath, that film bursts our prison world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. And it is here, in this transgressed yet strangely calm new space of

debris, that a new violence of perception is born, of mimetic capacious machinery.’ Let’s put our hands together for art wisdom, but we call her Chitra Ganesh. {applause, cheering} (00:10:01)

Chitra Ganesh: Thank you! Bam! Thank you, Lan! Thank you, everybody. I really want to thank you for the experience of being back here so far. I, this light is in my eyes, so I can’t see you, but imagine that I’m making eye contact with you. {laughter} So, my heart is already bursting with the synergy and warmth I feel around us in this place. And I can’t wait to see what the next seven weeks hold for all of our experiences here, and what we take beyond. So, because this is such a special place, I’m gonna include a bit more about how my time here has shaped my trajectory, and a bit more personal information, than I would in another lecture. So I wanted to start with some images and experiences that informed my thinking more broadly, before I talk about my work. I was born in Brooklyn, and I grew up in New York City, between Brooklyn and Queens. Minus the year that I lived in India, and my summers there. My parents immigrated to New York a couple of years before I was born. There was no art, and there were no artists in my family, so my first experiences of art were ones like these, coming from the fact that I spent as much time as I could outside the house, and started to ride the subway by myself when I was nine. The first visual encounters I remember having were interventions like these, and graffiti. Interventions in public space, ephemeral works that occupied space and that disrupted my way of seeing, mainly in this, in this kind of instance, the hand-drawn inscribed on top of advertisements and machines. Then there was an entirely other constellation, constellations of imagery at home, that exerted equal influence on my ways of seeing. Including something like this whole lexicons of icons and objects put together. This is a prayer altar that many people would have at home, we had it in our, on our kitchen counter. Largely drawn from Hindu Buddhist iconography and Bollywood movies. The hecticness of these movies, of their plots, of the melodrama, of the collaged posters, with a multiplicity that was inherent to how I understood figuration, which I now see is related to the way in which categories such as individual and society are configured radically differently in Asia and more generally so outside of the US. All of these things were actually things that I experienced in person, so there was a continuity between these visual experiences, on the streets of New York, rooted in visual excess, everyday installation maneuvers, like painting a train car, or gathering objects for an altar, and also watching films in public space in, this is pre-VCR, so in movie theaters like this that only played Bollywood films. So in relationship to these images, the received iconographies that circulated from systems above, via institutions such as museums,

the sports industry, or journalism, communicated violent misrecognition, reductive stereotypes, and, when I looked at them, I felt them consistently denying a sense of subjecthood. There was no sense of south Asia, a region of the world that has one point eight billion people, the most densely populated place in the world, and now a, currently, a quarter of the globe's population. In art, it was rare to see anything of my subjectivity mirrored in these kinds of visual representations. For example, all arts from South Asia would appear as artifacts, coded and arranged anthropologically, always from over a thousand years ago. So there was this huge gap between the contemporary cultural material I consumed, and the way in which art represented non-Western subjectivities. While I love this photo, and I deeply respect the work of Pablo Bartholomew, the photographer who took it, seeing images like this in the US in 1984, outside of context, and a pre-cursor to the disaster porn we endure today, felt like a very violent and unsettling experience. (00:14:55) Of, the first one of seeing an Indian girl who would have been my age for the first time on the cover of an American magazine. So, something that was – I loved what you said about that it wasn't about speaking from the margins, and how that happened. And so, part of that, what accentuated that kind of disjuncture between these kinds of images, that I had at home, and what I saw outside in institutional settings, is something that I only realized, like, I would say, in the past several years, which was the disconnect between my own subject position as a minority citizen in the US< and my parents' understanding of themselves as the norm, as upper caste Hindus, the face of hegemonic subjecthood in India, one that wields great power and enacts more brutality than ever in the current Indian government. Especially emboldened after the elections. So, the, there was like a lack of understanding within that space of my community for any experience of being othered. Coupled with my own lack of historical knowledge, and experience of racism. So, this is a map that I only discovered in 2017. This is one of the reasons that there was such a silence and an absence, is because there was an ongoing ban on immigration from Asia that was brought into its height in 1917, and started to come, started to be reduced incrementally in 1952. But, until 1990, immigrants who were classified as homosexual were still banned from this country. Something to think about. So, a lot of my own work and iconography has to do with navigating these different regimes of visibility and visibility. So, like, one of the things we've been talking about here, which has been great, is about hypervisibility, and invisibility, and how both means are often deployed to the same ends, to police and manage which bodies matter most, and which ones we can forgo. So, my first

paintings were made in my house, on bed sheets. They were an attempt to process these kinds of gaps and fissures, in my own visual experience. And to dissect and re-assemble these disparate images that were haunting me, and to push that kind of a friction to the foreground. So, these were, it's like seven by eight feet, probably the largest size stretcher and bedsheet I could get into my house. So, this is, this is the work that I was doing when I came to Skowhegan. And this, some of this is actually the work that I did before and in my first year of grad school. So, then I arrived here. And as many of you are experiencing the truly special place, and one of the things that makes it so special is that many of us seem to come here during some kind of a crossroads in our life. So, I was also like this. Looking back on it, my experience of Skowhegan was all the more a magical respite from my life, which was situated at the point between two extreme events that altered its course. So, one made me be an artist, and the other made me think about what kind of work I was gonna make. So, the one was the sudden death of my mother from unknown health-related causes, that was before, and the second one was September 11th, which happened right after. So, there we are. {laughter, cheering, applause} And so, there we are, me and my buddies, in 2001. So, this was the magical moment, so the images I'm about to show you are the before and after, they are recreations, and appropriated images, so, the before, of how I found my mother, and the after, of September 11th. This image in particular reminded me of seeing my best friend's brother running on the TV. So, so what did I do here besides hang out with my magical buddies? So, I arrived after my first year of grad school, which I hated. I was feeling really stuck in painting, which I realized, for me now, was more like a gateway drug into art. (00:19:59) It was what I was able to learn, and that I was trained in, but I wanted more skills and ways of creating, and of altering stories. So, what all did I do here? So, I learned to sew. I made this for the costume ball. {laughter} I learned to sew from scratch, I learned to sew a corset from scratch. I forgot that I first wore it here until Sung reminded me. Because much of the material that I came up with here only became cooked and integrated into my work a couple of years later. So, this dress was one of those. I also started to play with computers, didn't own a computer until 2004. But I taught myself Photoshop here, and I, from one of the prehistoric computers that was in the media lab, and I used my newfound skills to remix my childhood material. And this one is like a photo where I re-imagined me and my girlfriend at the time through our kindergarten class portraits. {laughter} And our very consistent gender expressions. {laughter} And I also started to play with comics, which Lan mentioned. So, which I re-visited for the first time as an adult from

the care packages that she sent me. So, these are comics that, I don't know if you can see here, but *Amar Chitra Katha* is a series of comic books, it was started in 1969 as part of the post-independence national project, and it included history and myth and folktales, all mixed together, and, because it's polymorphous polytheism there were also stories about Christ, and there was also, like, a Santa Claus, and there was also a Buddha, and there was everything. It was written in Hindi and English. I read them in English, but they were circulated actually all over the diaspora, as well as in India. So looking at these images again, I noticed that there were many creepy disjunctures between the images, which I hadn't noticed since. The obviously strange sexualizing of women in awkward moments, the, the skin color, which I noticed, and then also re-noticed, that was a way of racializing good and evil. But with a totally different framework from that of American race, so that made me think about the other variety of hierarchies like here, religion and class, that contribute to certain kinds of imaging violences. And while I played with comics, I also was part of a writing group. So, I was there with Sung, and Beverly Semmes, and Kara Walker, and Monica de la Torre, who was the, who is the partner of Bruce Pearson, who is one of our resident faculty. And I began writing again, as a practice separate from but related to my work which then later became integrated into my work. So, all of these lines here, 'When everyone has gone down the hill, I wonder if you are wandering in your neck of the woods,' all of this stuff was stuff that I wrote here. And then brought into my work later on. So, at the same time, I was using my rudimentary Photoshop skills to alter the original received comic modes, and integrate my own drawings into them, and I had no idea where any of this activity was going. So, I just was doing this. So, I left with some costumes, and like seven comic images, and all my bad, unfinished paintings that I never started or finished, that I brought here, and then, and I was very lucky, actually, to work with Kara Walker, when she was here, and then she also ended up being at Columbia afterwards, so that was a nice bridge of my experience. And she actually really encouraged me to make a book. And make this a book, and make my thesis a comic book. So I looked at a lot of other different types of artists' books, about the role that illustrations and mass-produced images and surreal, surreal storytelling had played in art. This is a book by Max Ernst that greatly influenced the process of making this book. And then, I made a book. (00:24:56) And it was called *Tales of Amnesia*, and the title reflects this kind of ongoing interest I have in bringing submerged stories to the forefront. But, another really, really fun aspect of working with comics was just learning more about comics, comic culture, graphic print

culture, mass-produced images, and children's stories and illustrations. I realized the power of a shared visual lexicon, that's burned into your brain from childhood that can actually define a whole generation, or a series of generations. I know that imagery is different of different people here. But, one of the things I was thinking about, in thinking, remembering my own experience of reading other things from childhood, is how often children's stories, much like myth, often serve as cautionary tales of the consequences of girls being careless, not obeying rules, and getting in trouble. So, Red Riding Hood, as some of you may or may not know, is like a rape careful story. So you see this kind of relationship between transformation and transgression in so many of these stories. And, to produce an idea of what a female-bodied person could, should, or shouldn't be. It was also amazing to remember all of the, my own life-long love for comics, and this other rich visual repository that I could draw from, and bring into my work, which, I actually spent like hundreds of hours doing in high school, and had sort of blocked out. So I began researching, and re-looking at this graphic imagery, that, the intersection between comic art and illustration, and this kind of graphic language that accompanied minor literatures and the subject positions that interested me. So, kind of how, how often comics and more largely print culture were primary means of circulating a subculture, or spaces where subjects and ideas that were not going to make it into portraiture or the nightly news could comfortably dwell. So, I read a lot of *Love and Rockets*. And, this included, this included a lot of psychedelic imagery as well, and in all of these images there was this thread going through them, something that I appreciated, a world where violence and eroticism could co-exist without being used as a tool to police or secure existing power hierarchies. While also working within them. So this is Akira Uno [?], who's a Japanese artist. This print from 1814 blows my mind. So, the kinds of disreputable places and situations that this kind of graphic language described, really struck me, and how it, it actually meets at the intersection of a lot of things that I'm interested in. This one is for you guys. {laughter} So, so basically, spaces, spaces of ill repute and female-bodied transgressions, it's hilarious that the art colony is one of them, but also thinking about the ways in which print culture allowed for more circulation and access to these alternate positions, to a lot more people, even while thinking about them through the mainstream lens. So, this is more like a Boschian image of showing you, showing you something in order to explain that it shouldn't be shown. So, this is one of those images. So, these, so, I continued to work in this vein. I continued to write, and create images. Some of them are singular, and some of them are multiple. Some of

them are in serial form. And at some point, I also realized that there was a kind of a merging between the aesthetics of comics, psychedelia, and science fiction. I mean, I think part of it was just what was happening in my life, that I was watching a lot of *Battlestar Galactica*, and we were in this endless war that we couldn't see. We can't even see the dead people that come home, because you're not allowed to show them on TV, we couldn't see anything. (00:29:58) So, I began to find this place where science fiction and myth meet, and how both of them had these similar kind of nagging, ontological concerns, like who are we, where are we going, what constitutes being human versus non-human, or sub-human, or super-human. How, how do those hybridities happen, what does it mean, what are good frameworks for justice, for ethics, for where humanity should be headed. And so, I started to go in that direction, and some of the, and, somehow ended up in creating – I was thinking about our studio visit at Simon this morning, talking about making images that scare you. So, this actually created a space for me to make the kinds of images that actually really scared me, and the kinds of nightly, nightly sort of fantasies I would have. So, this is a very, very common and annoying ritual for a lot of people, is this, sitting still with you, getting your hair braided thing. So the work kind of began to draw from science fiction, and myth, and one of the other things I really enjoy about the, both of those forms, is how they play with time, and time is not, no longer linear and teleological, but it's actually, sort of folds in on itself, and so, you're always, as they say, in media res, you're always stepping in in the middle of everything, in the middle of life, in the middle of the moment, where the beginning is the middle, and the end is the beginning. And I was thinking about this also in relation to my own interest in sort of fantasy narrative. So myth and fantasy became sort of like the escape hatch that I could go toward, and I don't know if any of you read these books, but you can actually choose, like, seventeen to twenty different endings, if you just go to different places. I mean, now it sounds very banal, but at the time it was really awesome. And, I was also thinking about how there were more representational positions and possibilities that I saw in science fiction, because a lot of myth, also, as we were talking about this morning, involves female characters being sort of a vehicle for narrative action. And a way to forward a particular kind of story. So this is a story – and one of the things I'm fascinated about is how these icons actually travel through time. So, this is a story about a demoness, and she's obviously the right color, and then these other people who are the good guys are the wrong color. And they, so she tries to tempt the hero, and when he figures it out, his brother chops off her nose and her ears. So this

mutilation of her face is the beginning of the conflict in the [WORD UNCLEAR]. And then there's ways in which you can see these kinds of moments being re-enacted again and again. And, not only did I see them in myth, but I also saw them in history. So, I saw how there were, there was a weird rhyming between some of these images, and how icons persist across time to activate certain kinds of geopolitical dynamics, and hierarchies of power, and, which also felt like a sense of suffocation for me, that accompanies all of these being kind of minoritized positions. And then so in relation to that, somehow I thought about this image. Because, one thing I really loved about *Star Trek* is it wasn't about them being black or Asian, they just were there. And that idea that they were just in the mix, without a story about overcoming some kind of identity or assimilation, is something that, is something that still blows me away, that this could still be useful now. So, another way that my work kind of went off the canvas, it went on to, into comics, but after September 11th, I also wasn't able to go to my studio, so I was doing, like, small drawings, on the kitchen table, where I lived, in Williamsburg, and then those actually eventually became wall drawings. (00:35:02) Because I just had really small things to work with, and then I, I made them much bigger. So, those were the two ways that my work kind of diverged from painting, and I, I think drawing does feel more like my language than painting, it feels actually like language, somehow sort of less mediated. And also, thinking about that kind of scale shift was really interesting, and fun, because I was really cramped, and I wasn't able to really draw on something larger than eight and a half by eleven, actually, and then to bring these works into a much more monumental scale is something that I started to do. So, these, this is something like fifteen by thirty-three feet, so this is, like, forty-seven feet, and a lot of the works explore, like, a variety of iconography, that's received but also things that I created over, over time, by just, by the process of drawing. So, this piece is called *Eyes of Time*, and so I had this weird exhibition opportunity at the Brooklyn Museum, where I was invited to do an exhibition, but it had to relate to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. {laughter} So, that was weird! {laughs} And, and one of the things that we always talked about when we went to *The Dinner Party* was it was a little weird that Kali has a fork and a knife and a place setting, just like everyone else, like, is that really how she would eat, or wouldn't she, so, I don't, I just say this because I don't actually work with religious iconography. I work more with the forms that those icons inhabit. But in this particular case, I thought a lot about this, this figure, someone who represents, or an entity that represents time, destruction, change, some kind of a life force, and thought about how,

how this icon migrates through time, and this is an oleograph from the late 1800's, and this is this. {laughter} So, this thing still happens. And then the different sort of forms of this iconography. So, the work was a way to think about the relationship between myth and science fiction, and thinking also now more about the relationship – so, on a more personal note, one of the things that I've been trying to figure out is how to do my work without injuring my body. Which is something that is, something that I hadn't had to think about before the last couple of years, so, this is like the first installation I did where I actually didn't do it myself, and so what it is it's my drawings printed on fabric, and adhered to the wall, with elements. So just to give you a sense of the scale of the work, this is basically where you would be, you're usually in the middle somewhere, when you, when you look at these kinds of images. This is what I did right before I came here. And, and this, this sense of scale of making monumental something that would be incidental or marginal both comes from the subject matter of the kinds of stories and subjectivities I'm working with, but also my own experience with the statuary, and thinking about that, the visceral feeling that that scale shift creates. And thinking about how that overwhelming scale shift has always been part of art. And how the idea of trying to make sense through, through some kind of a drawing practice of what overwhelms you in the world is, is close to me. So, some of those, some of that monumentality was also done in sculpture and photography. So, this is actually a piece of underwear for the demoness whose nose was chopped off, all thanks to my sewing skills that I learned at Skowhegan. {laughter} So I then made this in my fifty-foot studio, and there was, like, fabric flowing out everywhere. And, that, that also, in turn, led to other kinds of photographic explorations of the kinds of mythic figures I'm thinking about, but in the realm of the real rather than the drawn. (00:40:11) So, where was I? Ok, so, yeah, this was actually, I didn't realize how much this was a reference for me, until much later. So, I'm going to, I'm gonna now move to some current projects, I, there was an entire body of work and a fourteen-year collaboration that's actually really dear to my heart that I didn't have time to talk about, that has to do with absence and erasure after 9/11. I could talk to you about that some other time. But, I, I wanted to continue and end by sharing two recent projects that I did last year. So the first one is two exhibitions at the Rubin Museum; one was called *The Scorpion Gesture* and the other one is called *Face of the Future*. And so, I don't know if any of you have been to this museum, but it's one of the only places where I have seen objects from these regions of the world and this time period, maybe minus like the Menil Collection and a

couple of other places, where those objects are treated as art and not as artifact, or evidence, or evidence of a people who once were powerful. And so, I, I enjoy this space, and what I was asked to do was think about the future, alongside some of the iconography and stories there. So, I created a series of short animations that were related to pieces in the collection that I, I was interested in. And so, the main character that these animations revolve around is called Padmasambhava, he's a second Buddha, he's the person who brought Buddhism to Tibet from South Asia, and one of the things about his, his mythology, is that every couple of hundred years, new stories are supposed, termas, are supposed to be revealed. So, it's this idea of a revelation, of something new, that adds to and also alters the previous story. So, I am, so I, I'm just gonna show you a couple of those animations. So in the museum, they were motion activated, so you just walked up to it and then it sort of revealed itself. There were different, there's different avatars of him, so this avatar is called the maitreya, which is the one that comes out when we're about to have apocalypse, and we need it, like, now. And, and then there were also some astrological materials that I worked with. I am an astrology fan. So, I'll show you a couple of these videos, they're very short. So now I click? Next? [videos play 00:43:35 – 00:45:44] So they're all – oop, sorry – so they're all in a loop, by the way, so they don't necessarily have a beginning and an end. So, I'm gonna show you a couple more. [videos play 00:45:58 – 00:48:09] Ok, so [NAME UNCLEAR] had many fascinating episodes in his life, including this one chapter called Rainbow Body. Where he meets this princess, and their enlightenment is that they went and had sex in a cave for six months. And then they became the rainbow body. And she's usually kind of written out of the story, so I wanted to also think about who the supporting characters and cast of that was. But when you see – so, a lot of the, a lot of what is interesting to me about these texts is also the relationship between enlightenment and transgression, so it's this idea of going towards the things that scare you. In this case, it involves spending time in a graveyard, and in this particular mountainous geographic place what they practice is called sky burial, which is that you leave the body out, and then the vultures eat the body and clean the bones, and so, spending time in a graveyard would actually involve, like, spending time with animals, scavengers, and decomposing bodies. So, that's sort of what the bardo is, which is the in between space to the journey to the next place. So, I, how much time do we have left? Ok, do you think I have – I have one --

Audience – Do it!

CG – Ok. [video plays 00:49:40 – 00:51:01] ok. So, I'm just gonna go very quickly through the, the next, so there was another exhibition there which was looking at what, sort of the visual language of this space, and science fiction, and where they came together, so I looked at a lot of science fiction movie posters and iconography from outside the US, and wanted to show it, but really wasn't able to find these posters, and so ended up commissioning, like, using the money I would have spent for the posters to invite younger, young artists to make their own posters. So, for their own science fiction films. So, this is by Tuesday Smillie, and so these were some of the reference images that I, I gave them. This is by Maia Cruz, who was a participant here as well. And, as part of this, as part of the show, I also did some, a number of public programs where I talked about the idea of the future and what the future of different things looks like, like the future of evidence. I did a program called the future of feminism; so, there, I'm showing you this kinds of images because Sung suggested that I also showed the kind of discourse that, the public discourse and the public programming that I tried to do to frame my work, because even though it's a lot more work, it actually is helpful in creating another context for how I'm thinking about things outside of this ancient contemporary us them, India New York kind of, like, binary ways that people would think about my work. So, I'm gonna conclude with this last project, which is, which is, was at The Kitchen, and it's actually based on a, a series of prints that I made based on a feminist science fiction utopia short story from 1905, called "Sultana's Dream," which was actually written like ten years before *Herland*, and it's basically like a utopic, science fiction slash creation myth. So, it's very short, she wrote it in the course of an afternoon, she wrote it in English, she, it was published in the *Ladies Home Journal*, and it's one of these stories that's very popular and widely known in parts of South Asia, it would be like an everyday story, but not at all in other places. And so, as a side note, something that was interesting for me about working on this project, and also the project at the Rubin, is it was an interesting way to think about how to work with iconography that wasn't rooted in Hinduism. And that was also important for me to think about as Hinduism gets deployed in certain ways right now. And how, how to sort of branch out and reconfigure. So, there's a lot of details in the story. So, the protagonist, the first sentence of the story is 'I was lazing in my bedroom one night thinking about the condition of Indian womanhood.' So, she's from what's now is Bangladesh, but at that time it was repartitioned, so it was all, it was all India. Thinking about the condition of Indian womanhood. (00:55:00) And then she gets a visitation from somebody called Sister Sara, who

keeps changing, is like, sort of like a guide, the way that Virgil is in *The Divine Comedy*, like taking Dante through the various circles. So she's the interlocutor of this space. And they arrive at this space, and the first thing that she notices is that all the people on the streets are women, and that the men are actually the ones who are kept enclosed in private space for their own safety. So, there were, like, so many interesting things about this story, including all these systems about water storage that were detailed, and radical gardening, flying cars, a refugee crisis, other images that I'll show you. I won't show you all of them, but there are twenty-seven of them. And, I also did a lot of research for this through, I went to the Bangladesh War Liberation Museum, and I also looked at other forms of relief printmaking that were happening in, in and around the, like, thirty-year span of that time. And thinking about, was also interested in creating a world where the figures, where it was not about a single subjectivity, but always a multiplicity, and where the, the figures and the environment sort of coalesced into one. I did a lot of research on architecture, and I also was thinking about this idea of what was happening in and around that time here. I talked about the Asian Exclusion Act, but in truth, there were people here before that, and then there were people after, so it was this kind of idea about how we had actually always been here, and how to, how to image that, and how to think about that. So, like this is an image from the 1890's of Muslim men who came to the US and married Black and Creole women, and settled all over the east coast, including New Orleans. There was a different set of those men who came to work on the railroad, Punjabi Sikh men who married all Mexican women. And settled on the west coast. So these are some of the other images that I was looking at, at the time, and just thinking about the political provocations that this particular medium, the medium of wood and linoleum cut were to offer us. So, the, these are the prints, and then it was the, the show was a larger installation with the prints and some sculpture. So, I was thinking a lot about what kinds of artifacts would be left behind from this place if we were to land up in there like three hundred years later, and I was thinking about the, the idea of a totem, and, but usually, with a totem, the faces are repeated, and symmetrical, so these are, this is a totem with nine different faces. Many of them were drawn from the actual characters in the story. There was also, there was also an installation that I'll talk a little bit more about later, and there was a, there was a large sculpture, which was this hand. Does this play? Let me see if this is [video plays 00:59:03 – 00:59:19] yeah, so the hand actually has multiple images going across and through it, it changes like five or six times. You're not gonna be able to see the whole thing here. But just to

give you a sense of what it looks like. So, that was, so that, this is made of aluminum and raw silk, and then it's projected on, so it was the integration of animation into the rest of my practice. And then this is, there was a video installation which was inspired by the, this, all the skills that are mentioned in the story, and thinking about modes of skill-sharing now. So this is a how-to video that is put out by a school that teaches elderly women how to ride scooters, so they can get mobility and escape from their families. And then this, there were many, many videos that were part of this installation that were also, people contributed. (01:00:08) So, that, oh yeah, and then there was, so these are some of the other things, they were slower than this, but I just wanted to show you the cycle of images on the hand. The hand is at twelve times the scale of my hand, which is, a, six by twelve inches, so this is six by twelve feet. And I also did some digging about, about The Kitchen, and found this guy, Sidhar Bhupat, who was one of the founding members of The Kitchen, who was erased from his history, because like a lot of immigrants, people of color, etcetera, who are here without support, and he had mental illness, and he had issues, and he basically died homeless, and then he was sort of erased from the history of the place. So, we screened his films, his experimental films, and we invited all these really eccentric old timers who were like his best buddies, one of whom made holographic images of him and Nam June Paik and all these people. So he actually survived because of Nam June Paik paid all of his medical bills, all of his hospital bills, all of his stuff, all the time. But, so, there was an installation of this work, his work, and also there was a film screening about a film that is in reference to sort of queer futures in India right now. So, that's it. And I'm gonna stop here. Flying cars. And then she wakes up, at the end of the dream. She falls out of the car, and she wakes up. So, thank you! {applause, cheering} Thanks! Thank you, thank you. It's over! Awesome. I hope you have a question for me. Ask a question. Ok. So now we're gonna do questions.

Audience: [PHRASE UNCLEAR]

CG: What color is what? Oh, the mic. Ok.

Audience: Oh, I guess I'm starting. Hi. Thank you so much --

CG: Oh, hi! Hi Hannah.

Audience: -- that was amazing. I can't tell if this is a silly question, but I'm very curious. I'm just wondering, this is a two-part question, if you do show your work a lot in India, and how it's received. Or if you choose not to, and why.

CG: No, I show my work all the time in India. I am really liberated by not having to have my work be about me being Indian when I show my work in India. Cause 1.2 billion people are Indian, so who cares. So my work comes read in other registers, like about time, about nostalgia, about drawing, I mean, iconography, of course, but, yeah. And I am showing this last project that I just did in a different form in Bangladesh in February, and I have also shown my work there. And in Afghanistan.

Audience: Thank you.

CG: It's not my job, ok.

Audience: Hi.

CG: Hey, Yomi.

Audience: I'm like over here wondering what your relationship to minimalism is.

CG: Um, yeah, I think my relationship seems to be more to maximalism.

Audience: Yeah, that's --

CG: But I think that one of the ways I also dealt with the oppression of minimalism, at least in the New York-centric post-minimalist '70's context, was by thinking about other trajectories of work that were happening, like in, on the west coast, artists like Jess [?] and a lot of the street art there. Knowing about the work that artists had been doing in places like Houston, and also thinking about minimalism through other kinds of modernisms. (01:04:59)

Audience: Thank you so much, Chitra. You've taught me a lot about, I don't know, you just piqued my curiosity about New Orleans, and I just want to thank you for that. My question is, concerning --

CG: It's, the book is called *Bengali Harlem*, by the way. And you can all read it. It's about how these guys came to sell the same kinds of tchotchkes that you see guys selling on the street now, but in the 1890's, all the way from New Jersey down.

Audience: Did you write that down? Oh, ok. So my question is about After Effects. I'm assuming you use After Effects, I don't know, you can --

CG: I do, but I didn't do, I'm not very good at it, so I didn't do this animation, I got, I worked with animators.

Audience: Yeah, so --

CG: I mean, I did some of the simpler stuff. But no, yeah.

Audience: Yeah, I'm curious about that. Just, like, the production for that. And just like bring, what it means for you to bringing other people into the space where you're creating your own world.

CG: So, it was really great. I didn't show it, but I had, I had made a couple of animations before this, but they were so labor intensive, they just traumatized me. And, cause I did all the drawings, so even for this, where you see, like a rotoscopic effect, I still did, like, fifty of the drawings, and then someone else did the in between drawings. So, it was really great, it was really great to work with, like, a team of people. So, not that, I mean, there were only a couple of people, but just to have other eyes on my work, during the process, and each of them went through, like, ten drafts. I don't think that I would have managed that, like, on my own. So, it was good. But it increased the feeling of having art homework all the time, because I had to, like, turn things in in a timely fashion, and like, we need this now now now, in a different way than I would have felt if I had worked on my own. But it was also great because they did the projection mapping for the hand. Like, I ended up developing a relationship with them, so they came, and they mapped it, and they were also really helpful with picking projectors, because you can't see this in the Rubin, but the walls are like navy blue and purple and maroon, and they're a bitch to get a clear image on, you know? So that was, it was also helpful in that way. Oh, I'm not calling on people. Oh, Mai. [?]

Audience: Thank you for your talk, after your studio visit. I'm curious about so many things, perhaps the most prominent question in my mind is about you create your own version of those stories, using certain images repeated, maybe you could call it motifs, and perhaps specifically eyes, I see a lot of eyes in how you, what is your decision making process into placing them, or using them in your character?

CG: Well, I mean, I think that some of my decision making process is intuitive, but some of it also comes from the idea of like a third eye, or another way of seeing, so something that would sort of alter our visuality and how we experience the world, as well as endowing objects with more human qualities, through something like the eye. But I've done, I'll show you, like I have a whole series of failed projects with eyes, that I was thinking about during our studio visit today. Including a whole costume made of just eyeballs. {laughter} But there's like, there's a lot of them, a lot of bad stuff with eyes as well.

Audience: Chitra, thanks so much for the lecture, it was really great. I just want to make a comment and then turn it into a question. I find that the work is just so lush in terms of color, super psychedelic, and then I'm jealous, of course, because the level of symbolism you get to play with is the most visually seductive I've ever seen. And so in a way I want to ask you a question in terms of, is that part of the challenge that you have in terms of luring a whiter audience to sort of fall into? (01:10:00) I noticed a lot of video starts in, and then you just go deeper and deeper into these spaces that you make. And then also, have you made any gods of your own, I mean, I guess the last project was the last one, right?

CG: I mean, sometimes I find that the lushness of my work is actually a challenge. I mean, it does lure some people in, but it also is something that some people don't always take seriously. And it doesn't feel like serious, and hard, and clean, and it could feel, I think sometimes people experience it as also claustrophobic, so I, so I think sometimes it draws, I mean, it's what I think of, like with comics, I think we know how to read them. Like, I didn't even talk about that, but we know how, we know this is a speech bubble, this is a thought bubble, we know that the gutter is the space between two panels, and meaning happens, there's a, we already know a lot of things about how to read this material, including animation, and so, so yeah, I think for people who do know how to read that already, it's like another level. And I think that the thing of sort of falling into the world is more specific with this work, because it's about going backwards and forwards

in time. What was the one? Oh, last – gods, no. Not really. I guess these figures, but, yeah, I'm not really, I mean, despite all of the iconography I use, I'm not really, like, into deities. As such.

Audience: Thank you so much for your presentation.

CG: Thanks again.

Audience: I just was interested, in the beginning of your presentation your work showed a lot of text. And there was, I think a little bit of a poetic kind of text that was happening, and I'm wondering if you think about that now in your work, or how it might, you know, does it come back, or do you think it might come back in that same way, or how does --

CG: Yeah, I don't know, actually. I mean, it does come back, from time to time. I also used a lot of text in that project, *Index of the Disappeared*, so we, we, the text came back in the form of proverbs and testimony and kind of poetic work like that. And, yeah, I would love to use more text in, integrated into my work. But it's usually there, it's like there in the drawings and the comics more.

Audience: Hi. I, you --

CG: Hi, Jeffrey.

Audience: Hey. You started mentioning, sort of like this kind of slipperiness that sort of happens between the comics and your more fine art practice, for lack of better words. And I sort of remember during my time in grad school, this whole conversation between craft and fine arts, like, kept coming up. So I'm sort of curious if you see, I guess, the commercial art world or fine art world, or fine art work, do you see these two works kind of informing how you make?

CG: Do I see, sorry, what --

Audience: Sort of what your comics and animation --

CG: Between the commercial and the fine art world --

Audience: Like, do, at any point, do they sort of inform the way that you make or think about one another?

CG: The commercial world and my work? No.

Audience: Sort of the comics versus let's say for instance the installation that you did at The Kitchen.

CG: I mean, the comics, I think the comics circulate more because they were made in the digital zone, so they reproduce as they were meant to be seen, and I think that's really helpful. I also love making ephemeral work, because I love working on the wall, and knowing that all of those things that I showed you for the most part don't exist anymore. And, I think that, mm, and then, you were asking about grad school as well? So I think there are different parts of my practice, so some of it helps me do the other part of it. And also, I have jobs and get grants, as well.

(01:14:56) But, if you, if you notice, there are just not a lot of artists of South Asian descent hanging around museums, galleries and institutions.

Audience: Hi.

CG: It's changing now, but I think that that's part of it, too. Hi, Sharif!

Audience: Sorry!

CG: That's ok.

Audience: I didn't know how loud this thing is.

CG: Hey! {laughter}

Audience: I don't, I've never used it before here, but {laughter} I really wanted, I wanted to say that your lecture made me feel at home in a way that I haven't felt, like the art you presented was, made me feel, in a strange and beautiful way, at home. And I was kind of thinking --

CG: Thank you so much.

Audience: -- about, you mentioned hybridity just a tiny bit, just like, you said hybridity {laughter} but, like, I've read stuff about it, and there's a lot, you know, like, Homi K. Bhabha, or something, and, but I wanted to see if maybe if you had some words towards what it is to be a first generation American, and being an identity that is kind of just mixed between so many things culturally, and, you know, your heritage, and all those things.

CG: Well, I think everybody has a really different experience, is what I've come to understand. So my experience is specific to being in New York City; I grew up in a place where I didn't speak English at home, and neither did most of the people I knew, and it wasn't an embarrassing fact that needed to be hidden, it was just happening all over the place. My parents particularly were pretty anti-assimilationist, so, no nicknames, no name change, had to take Indian food to school, etcetera, etcetera, so I think that's different from, I had it exploding in my bag, and that's different from other people I know, who grew up in West Palm Beach, or, and I think those questions are also really, they're related to like location, and class, and age also. But I think that it was, it was also different for my generation, I think, because people went back and forth less frequently to live. And that's also for where I'm from, there's, I have lots of friends who can't go back and forth, or can't even go back. So, that's a whole other way of experience hybridity, experiencing hybridity is through some version of feeling like one is in exile, you know? I think, so yeah, so I think my experience was really specific to those, to those things that I talked about, and growing up in a very immigrant space. I mean, a multi, multi-national, but pretty immigrant. Yeah. And I feel fortunate to be able to travel back and forth as much as I do, and it's like a luxury.

Audience: Thank you so much, Chitra.

CG: [PHRASE UNCLEAR]

Audience: I wanted to – yes, all right. So, your show at The Kitchen, did you use a black light? To, to light some, like the large totem that's in that space?

CG: No, it was, they're gels.

Audience: Gels.

CG: They're just lighting gels, and they're at positioned in different positions, and then under the hand, there's also a flood on the bottom that's on at like fifteen percent, so that whatever shadow of the projection mapping that might have fallen out, you wouldn't necessarily see.

Audience: Ok.

CG: And so that lighting for the totem was also, like, I was interested in thinking about, I mean, the show is called *Her Garden, A Mirror*, so I was also thinking about the garden, and this space as like a psychological space that the story creates. And I was also thinking about garden lighting at night in, for example South Asia, which involves these insane garish colors and lit fountains and all kinds of other stuff. I mean, probably happens in a lot of spaces, but that's what, one of the things I was thinking about. So, some, like one was at thirty percent, you know, the other one was at forty percent – I think there were four gels on it.

Audience: Cool. Yeah, you answered my question, thank you.

Audience: Hey, Chitra, thanks for your presentation. I, for some reason, was, I've seen your work before, but this time was focusing on the figure and ground relationships in your work. (01:19:58) And found it really fascinating to see how, how that has, like, became more and more complicated, through the progression of the work that you showed us, and I was wondering if you wanted to say something about that. And the moment that I think really drew my attention to it was actually the animation, where visually there was so much going on in terms of embodied object – I mean, sorry, what's the word for that, when like a god enters an object, or divine being takes, like, an object? Incar, I don't know, I don't know what the word for that is, but --

CG: Like inhabiting?

Audience: Yeah, like animating in the form of an object. But that the sound was, like, I was kind of expecting for there to be voices, also maybe because of the text that has accompanied some of the other images, which is in first person. And realizing that this was like amore ambient kind of sound, that accompanied it, kind of, yeah, just made me wonder about how you're thinking about relationships of background and figure, and how that's gone through your work, yeah.

CG: So I, at some point, I started to feel like there was a profusion of two-dimensional images which contained a figure on a plain ground. And I felt like the insistence of that, and the saturation of that kind of image, it just felt like it was connected to a growing sense of this, like, hyper focus on the individual. And the individual, and the selfie, and all of these ways of just foregrounding one figure against a white background. And it started to, the political and implications of it started to bother me. The pictorial implications were boring me. In my work. So, I was thinking about that, and I was also thinking about, like, with the woodcuts, with relief,

it's like, it's really about a balance between the background and the foreground, and between black and white, and about the weight of one part of the image versus the other. And I think that it was connected to this story, and what I'm interested in thinking about, which is about a more integrated sense of human and environment. So that's how I was thinking about it in the prints. So, with the sound in the animations, so, it was complicated, because I, they didn't have sound at the Rubin. And then, I was putting them together for Kochi, for the Kochi Biennale, and they were all gonna be together. So the, like, you can't totally tell, but there's also a surround, there's, like, a few tracks, so there's like a surround element, and then there's the individual elements, and then there's a couple of other elements, that sort of interject, and I'm still not totally happy, actually, with the sound. I mean, it was, it's, I think that, I'm not sure exactly why or how, I think part of it is because the, there were two people working on it, and they didn't necessarily, like, see eye to eye, and so that was just one part of it. But I also was interested in those diegetic sounds, because in the text, you, when you read about these places, it's really about the environment, and like, how things move is related to, like, when you see the staff, and the silk hanging off the staff, that's about how the wind runs through the silk, and it's just, there's a lot of moments that actually have to do with, with sound, in terms of experiencing the story. So, that was one of the other ways that – and about, like, high altitude, and about some kinds of sounds that would penetrate, like, a black night, and all these kinds of things, so.

Audience: Thank you. (01:24:50)

CG: Great. Can we be done now? {laughter} {applause, cheering} You're so sweet, thank you.

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