

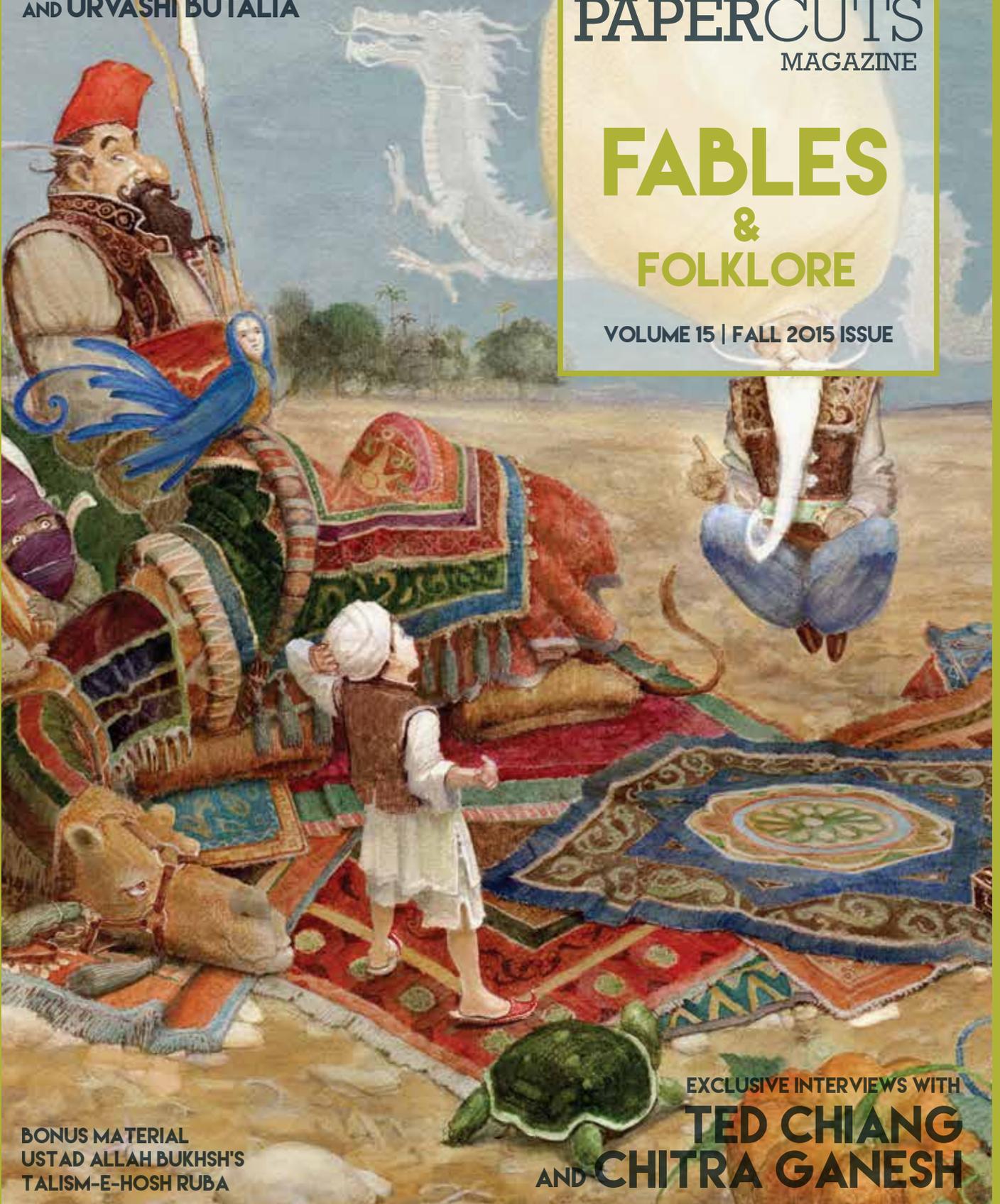
FEATURING WORK BY
AAMER HUSSEIN
SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI
AND **URVASHI BUTALIA**



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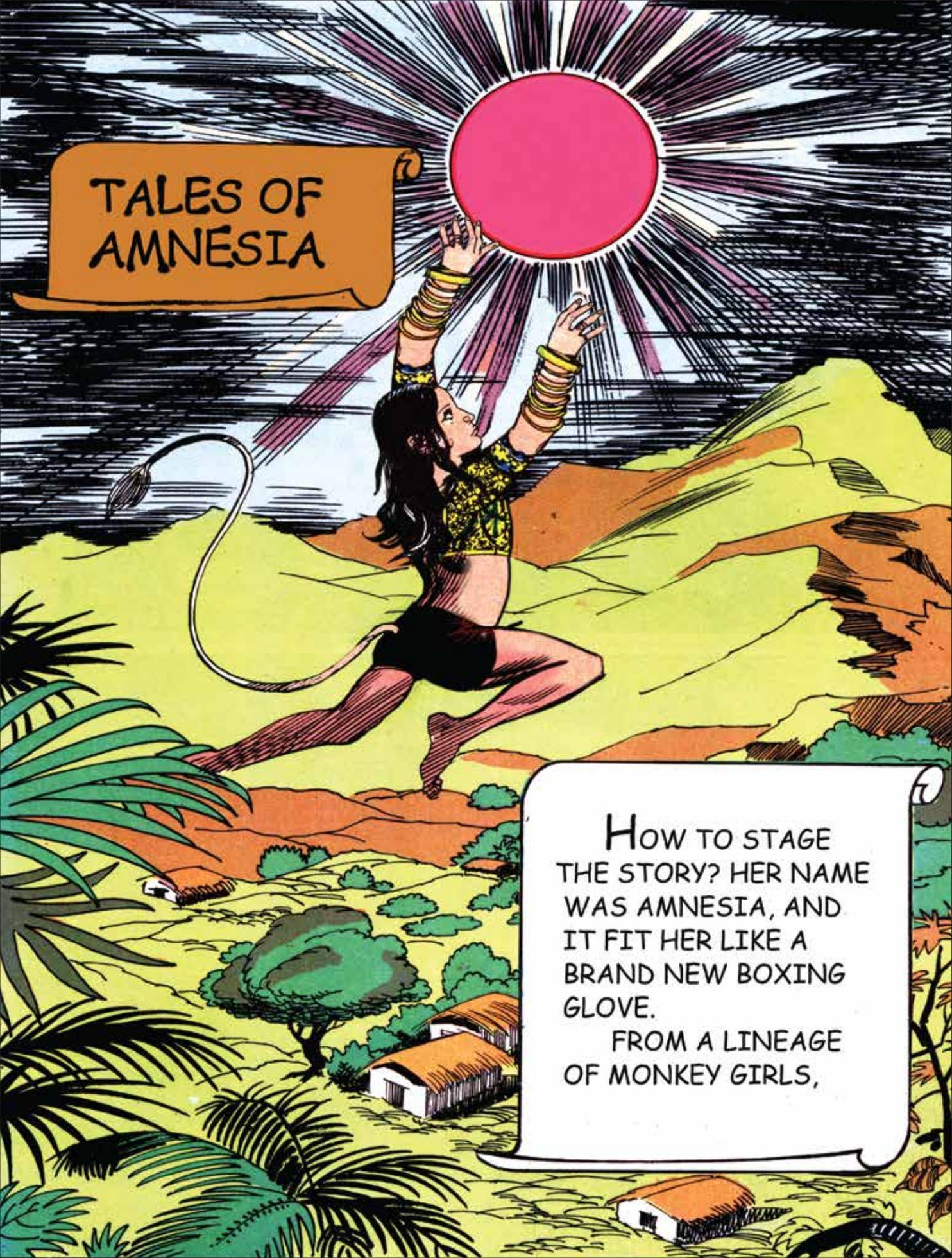
FABLES
&
FOLKLORE

VOLUME 15 | FALL 2015 ISSUE



BONUS MATERIAL
USTAD ALLAH BUKHSH'S
TALISM-E-HOSH RUBA

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS WITH
TED CHIANG
AND **CHITRA GANESH**



TALES OF
AMNESIA

HOW TO STAGE
THE STORY? HER NAME
WAS AMNESIA, AND
IT FIT HER LIKE A
BRAND NEW BOXING
GLOVE.

FROM A LINEAGE
OF MONKEY GIRLS,

THE UNAPOLOGETIC LORE OF CHITRA GANESH

by SAIRA ANSARI

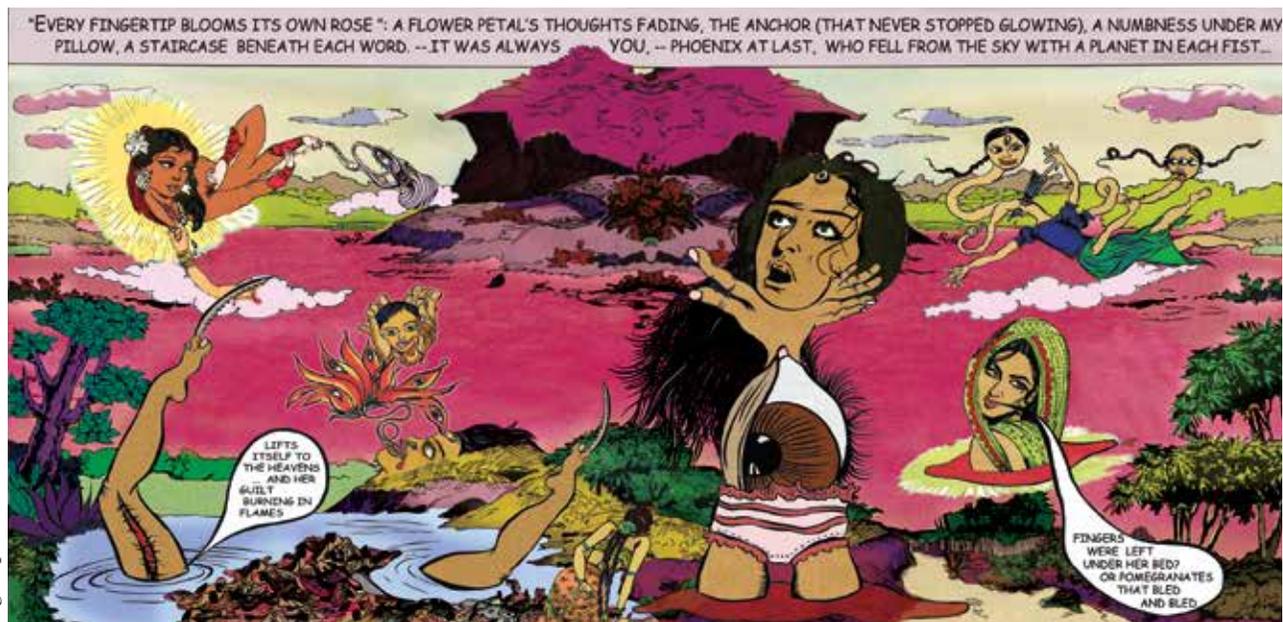
“I think art can simultaneously feature a number of representations that may be seen as conflicting,” she said. “For example, ideals of beauty can also be seen as extreme versions of the absurd, grotesque, or psychologically opaque/challenging material. I think the most important aspect of an artwork is to trigger viewers to have a transformative visual experience, a substantive intellectual encounter, and to trigger reconsideration of issues or events that seem familiar in a new and illuminating way.”¹

An acid colour landscape sets the backdrop to multiple naked Indian women, some looking straight at you – the dark brown skin, the long shiny black hair, the big kohl rimmed eyes fitting a clichéd, albeit necessary, characterization. However, one’s unfazed stare, another’s legs unapologetically spread apart, pink vulva-like gaping openings in the stomach, and comfortably dismembered limbs are not so stereotypical, and definitely not easy to digest. Here stand some of Chitra Ganesh’s many manifestations. Part goddess, part street urchin, the figures fit into a unique universe of fantasy, horror and ecstatic dreamscapes.

Feminine, feminist, maker, breaker, aggressive, sensual, intelligent, curious; these are all the qualities that define Chitra’s protagonists.

Much of the artist’s practice has been preoccupied with both acknowledging and challenging a monolithic Indian feminine ideal, and that means engaging with the baggage that comes with it. She challenges the normative ideals and expectations that came from the community she grew up in to conform to a vision of the good Indian girl who should find success in a family life of her own.

Beyond the confines of this community, Chitra has often spoken about how she encountered a further set of expectations in a Western context – again, an Indian girl with the burden of her own background.



Chitra, born 1975 in Brooklyn, is a New York based artist of Indian origin. Trained as a painter and a printmaker, she has worked across multiple media, and collaborated with a number of likeminded artists, to produce a remarkable body of largely illustrative content. Working predominantly with the female figure, and liberally using Indian mythological imagery as building blocks, Chitra plays with the concepts of femininity, representation, identification, sexuality and sexualisation, and gender, ethnic and religious concerns. In the last decade and a half, Chitra's work has come to be recognized with its inquiry into the representation of South Asian Hindu women in the west, further bifurcating problematics of representation and reception in the dual audiences of the non-Indian west, as well as the Indian diaspora.

Chitra's work has been read in multiple ways, and perhaps that is where its true magic lies. One may end up reading into it the very tropes that the artist is reproaching people for not looking past, or one may find oneself immediately identifying in them a personal, long-buried

narrative. To call it beautiful is too simple; to pick up on the erotic is only an initiation; to think it is a celebration of an ancient and exotic culture is incredibly naïve. Yet, as it reinvents and retells history, it is not empty of any of these either. Much of the artist's practice has been preoccupied with both acknowledging and challenging a monolithic Indian feminine ideal, and that means engaging with the baggage that comes with it. She challenges the normative ideals and expectations that came from the community she grew up in to conform to a vision of the good Indian girl who should find success in a family life of her own.

Beyond the confines of this community, Chitra has often spoken about how she encountered a further set of expectations in a western context – again, an Indian girl with the burden of her own background. In the eyes of the Other, her breaking free is often perceived as an attempt at liberating herself from the oppression of the East, while still retaining the allure of the exotic that is hard to shed. The work still has to be Indian. To cite an example, the violent and erotic imagery in her

work, inspired by the hyper-narratives of ancient Hindu and Greek texts, are often misread in the West as an outcry over the violence against women in India. Chitra works every nuance at play, with the deliberate use of cultural and religious symbols offering these multiple readings and misreadings. In a way, the warped interpretations help refer back to what it means to look at a South Asian woman within the context of the non-Indian spectatorship. Her mode of work – comic strip illustrations – may seem juvenile to those not familiar with her, but Chitra has a Bachelors in Comparative Literature and Art Semiotics from Brown University and an MFA from Columbia University, equipping her with the knowledge that she then breaks down and rearranges.

The early inspiration to work with comics and illustration stemmed from reading Amar Chitra Katha children's publications. These comics, which could be found in Indian convenience stores across the US, were brought back and forth from frequent trips to India. Founded in the 1960s to teach Indian history and lore, ACK acknowledged

another kind of absence of representation – the loss of Indian religious and cultural storytelling in the face of increasing westernized education and entertainment for Indian children. However, these too present a partial picture at best, including only token references to issues of caste and religions other than Hinduism. Chitra took this format a step further to create an archive of an alternative history including both original content as well as the re-telling of lesser known chronicles.

Feminine, feminist, maker, breaker, aggressive, sensual, intelligent, curious; these are all the qualities that define Chitra's protagonists. Female forms, reminiscent of Hindu and Buddhist deities, populate her works. Most recently at a site-specific project at the Brooklyn Museum (Eyes of Time, 2014), which was on view at the Museum from December 2014 through July 2015, Kali came with all her unapologetic glory: three breasts, a belt of decapitated demon limbs, and a handless clock for a face. Kali is terrifying, Kali is destruction, but Kali also gives birth to the new. Chitra puts the timing of this mural into perspective: the Hindu calendar calculates that we are living in Kali Yuga, meaning the 'dark ages' – an age of destruction and obscurity. Few would argue with her on that. But Chitra's work is a welcoming of change, life and creation, some of the main attributes of Kali. From the dirty, impure menstrual cycles, to the flushing of the inner walls at birth, creating life isn't a pretty job, and it is this cacophonous madness that defines what it means to be beautiful in Chitra's world.

Chitra's work also looks towards science fiction and technological interventions, with futuristic visual and narrative elements fused with mythological symbology, often placing the female protagonist in a parallel space-time system. Traditionally, science fiction has been ominous in its tone, yet it has often glorified man's capabilities

far beyond what was in the realm of reality and foreseeable possibility at the time the literature was composed. Authors like Frank Herbert and Arthur C. Clarke have been careful to play with the juxtaposition in a very calculated way: the Universe, Cosmos, Space, and unearthly Nature are all integrally stronger, infinitely complex and vastly different than anything man understands. And Science and God are far superior forces that dictate the birth and destruction of these systems. And yet, Man always aspires to seek dominance inspite of all of this, or perhaps because of this. Chitra joins the milieu of space romantics and merely replaces the Hero with Heroines in her own epic journeys. It is not simply for the need to place a female in these roles to fill a void but rather to embark on a new adventure for a new civilization.

Many South Asian artists, especially women, are thrust into the unasked-for role of being torchbearers for an entire culture – with gender, religion, country all thrown their way in a volatile mixed bag. Chitra might work with these concerns, and these might provide her content, but she breaks definitions and barriers when she refuses to adhere to these stereotypes. And in doing so, she has inadvertently come to be a poster child for those that don't fit the mould.

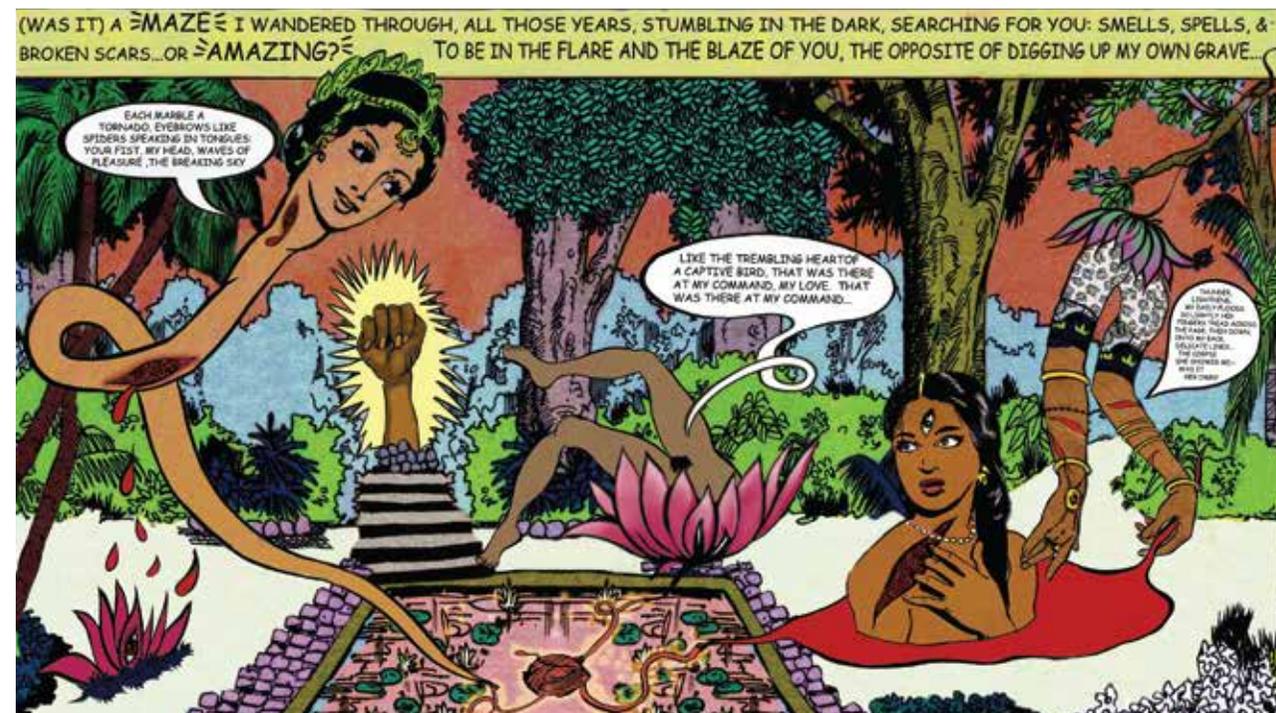


Image: CHITRA GANESH - Dazzle, 2006, 21 x 36 in, digital print.

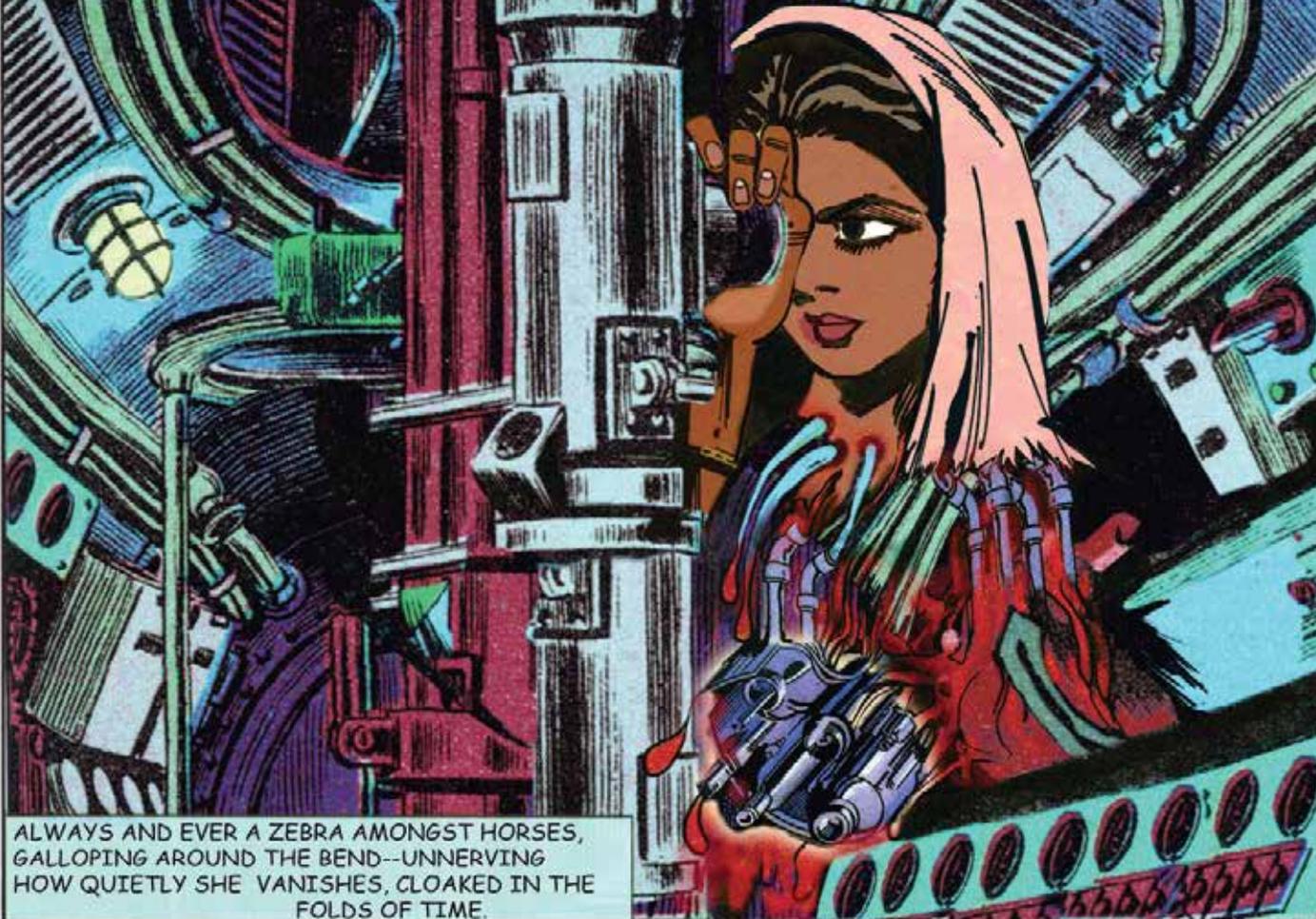


Image: CHITRA GANESH - Zebra Among Horses, 17 x 23 in.

ALWAYS AND EVER A ZEBRA AMONGST HORSES, GALLOPING AROUND THE BEND--UNNERVING HOW QUIETLY SHE VANISHES, CLOAKED IN THE FOLDS OF TIME.

A CONVERSATION WITH CHITRA

Saira: You've cited your interest in the writings of Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai. Can you speak a bit about these and other South Asian literature that you read and find influencing your expression?

Chitra: Both Manto and Chughtai have had a profound influence on me. I love the audacity and brutal frankness their characters convey, the interconnectedness of everyday beauty and daily brutalities. Also their own commitment to fashioning narratives that probe complex interactions, and from points of view that are (still) not typically explored or richly articulated – of the grittiness of urban life lived on the margins, the ways in which these stories rupture social codes, gendered and class expectation, the complexity and eroticism within very highly wrought family relations – taking up topics such as queer sex and sex work. *Lihaaf*, for example, blew me away. I was just rereading excerpts from the obscenity trial around this story, where words like 'chest' and phrases like 'collecting lovers' were deemed as obscene. It is sad to say that at our current

cultural moment, and the various fundamentalisms that proliferate that at times, things seem to have not changed much at all; whether this is our conservative government leaders' determination to decimate Planned Parenthood and a woman's right to choose, the Modi backed BJP government's ban on beef and the murders it caused, or the Islamic State/ISIS controlling the ways in which fruit sellers showcase their displays, because certain configuration of fruits and vegetables are suggestive of sexual organs. *Lihaaf* continues to be eons ahead of its time, and ours (as was seen in its being visually quoted in *Dedh Ishqiyia*).

Extremely influential also were Mahashweta Devi's *Breast Stories* and Rani of Jhansi, Amitav Ghosh's *Shadowlines* for its beautiful interplay of memory and narrativity, and more recently, Kuzhali Manickavel's *Insects Are Just like You and Me except Some of Them Have Wings, Give Us This Day of Feast and Flesh* by N.D. Rajkumar, the PAO Anthology, and other collections of contemporary desi graphic-novel literature.

I was also thinking about the ways in which my encounters with South Asian Literature were also mediated by my context (growing up in the US, to parents whose own idea of the canon may have included a couple of desi writers, such as Romila Tharpar, Salman Rushdie, J. Krishnamurthy, and R.K. Narayan, but how their own idea of the canon was also formed within a colonial orbit, and an everyday people frame - equal parts of James Herriot, Kipling, P.G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, Jules Verne, Jane Eyre, and so forth). Beyond that, there was also the question of access in the US - Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Rushdie, and scant writers were available here

in mainstream bookstores in the 80s and 90s. Going to bookstores in India, independent and university bookstores, and more recently, Flipkart, has all been life-changing.

You write yourself and have discussed before that you use it as a form of automatic expression that accompanies the work. Have you considered working on text alone – fiction or non-fiction?

I have considered it! It would more likely be a graphic novel, or a volume of poetry, or perhaps a combination of genres. Playing with and across textual forms is a rich and productive part of my process - this is something I'd imagine would also play a prominent role in any purely (or mostly) text-based works I create.

Science fiction writers Neil Gaiman and H.G. Wells, among others, have been cited in your previous interviews. Can you speak a bit about the role of sci-fi literature in your creative practice? Can you also talk about your experience with South Asian sci-fi literature?

Sci-fi captivated me from a young age. My earliest memories include seeing Uhura and George Takei on *Star Trek*, and being in a very rowdy humanities class in Grade 5, where one of the only ways our teacher could calm us down was by reading to us. I must have heard the majority of Ray Bradbury's completed works read aloud to me that year. Stories that stay with me most are *The Veldt* and *The Martian Chronicles*.

On a very elemental level, sci-fi generates a space that fundamentally questions and disturbs the dynamic between the Self and the Other. What is understood as Other might ultimately be subverted, deconstructed: the category We is far from what the reader might

assume at the beginning of the story, as in *The Martian Chronicles*. What is seen as familiar, or a controllable fantasy, may ultimately wake up and have a life of its own, as in *The Veldt*. Margaret Atwood is also a huge favorite. Equally influential are contemporary movies and TV shows – the *Battlestar Galactica* remake, *Torchwood*, *District 9* – which are engaging metaphors of colonialism and deploying sci-fi as social critique.

Of desi sci-fi, there are *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, Jagdish Chandra Bose's *Palatak Toophan* (Runaway Cyclone), and most recently, a truly brilliant short story I read by Manjula Padmanabhan called *Culled*, published in the Delhi Noir collection. I didn't connect as much with other stories in this anthology but *Culled* is spectacular. It takes as its point of entry a crumbling urban dystopia scarred by the brutality of unbridled capitalism and stark inequalities, including economic segregation in relation to housing and health care, to tell a truly chilling tale. I know there is a robust current output in regional language literature, often serialized in magazines, which I don't have immediate access to as I don't read Kannada, Bengali, etc.

Is it safe to say that many ancient Hindu texts can be read beyond the realm of



Image: CHITRA GANESH - Sugar and Milk, 2008, 26 x 41.5 in, digital print.



fantasy, bleeding into what would be sci-fi in the future?

Indeed! So much of myth seems to extend into the far future. I was always puzzled by this, specifically in relation to *kaliyug*, in terms of how a time period in the far future could be predicted in the recent past? As well as how much these myths stand up to time; for example with A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarok*, Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, and one of my all time favorites EVER, Osamu Tezuka's *The Life of Buddha*.



Title Image: **CHITRA GANESH** - Page 1 from *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002, 8 1/2 x 7 in, inkjet print.

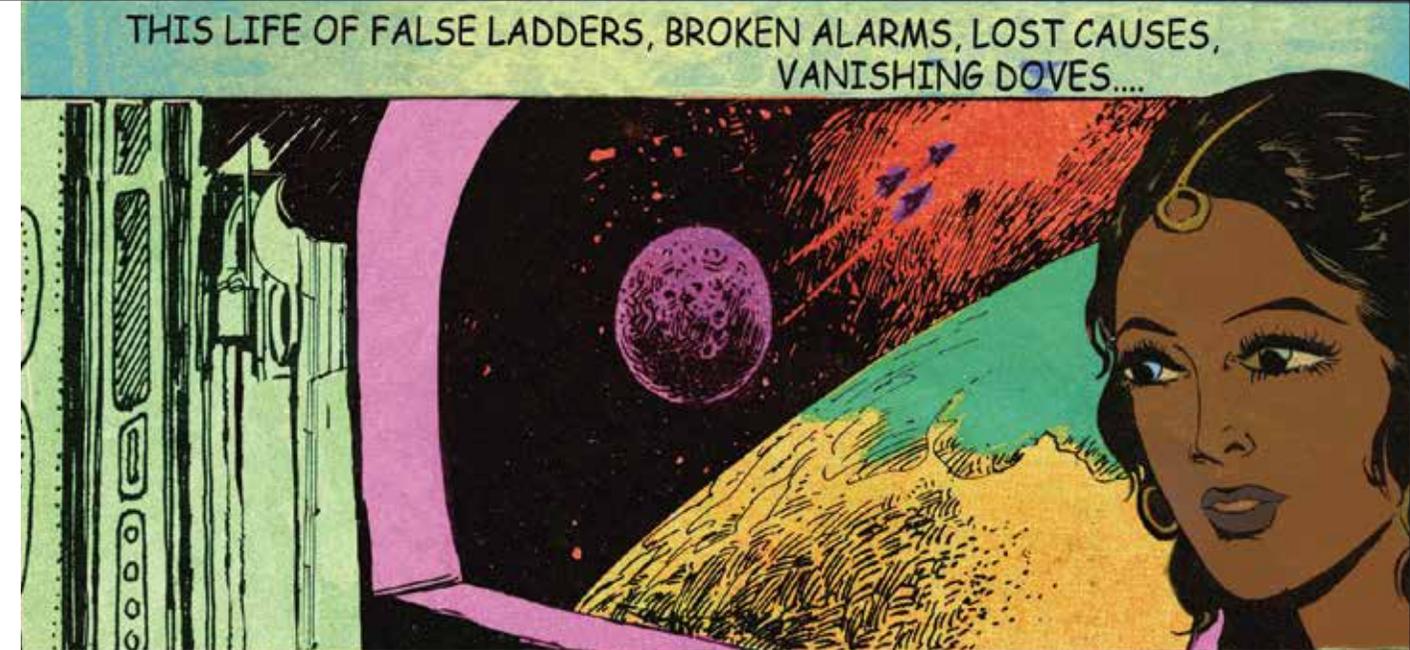
Top Image: **CHITRA GANESH** - *The Ocean Itself*, 2009, 20 x 24 in, 3-phase lenticular print.

Middle Image: **CHITRA GANESH** - *Earth Babies*, 2011, 56 x 64 in, mixed media on canvas.

Bottom Image: **CHITRA GANESH** - *The Awakening*, 2004, 15 x 24 in, C-print.

Footnotes

¹Excerpt from 'Innovative Multi-Medium Artist Chitra Ganesh Shares her Creative Passion', by Poorvi Adavi, May 22, 2015. <http://www.india.com/arts-and-culture/innovative-multi-medium-artist-chitra-ganesh-shares-her-creative-passion-382114/>



Top Image: **CHITRA GANESH** - *She the Question, This Life*, 2012, 13 x 28 in, archival lightjet print.

Bottom Image: **CHITRA GANESH** - *Architects of the Future - Away from the Watcher*, 2014, 24 3/4 x 31 3/8 in, woodblock and screenprint.

All images courtesy of the artist.

PAPERCUTS

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