Chitra Ganesh: The Eye That Cannot Cry

"Tools of her Trade? A spider web, a rainbow and an eye that cannot cry."

Radical embodiment is a confusing double negative for people of color. The words “radical” and “embodiment” bump into one another as each aggressively attempts to proclaim singularity. Eventually, they will fuse, into the inevitable overlap of a racialized identity. To attempt to simply live collides with daily efforts to live wholly. One cannot stand up straight in a crooked room. And inside of that room, one’s actions are inscrutably considered radical. For persecuted bodies, responding to oppression is aligned with survival. Our positionality affords a “radical” label where living outside the margins is a declaration of one’s truthful existence. But what happens when our conditions are inherently inclusive of survival? We deliver. Therefore, radicalism isn’t a trophy: our lives play out as a consistent and larger duty to self. For artists of color, it is a poignant commitment to self expression and political warfare.

Artist Chitra Ganesh considers this across a cultural landscape with a queer feminist lens. This year, her mural of the goddess Kali “ Eyes of Time,” was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum. Currently, Ganesh is the 2015–16 Estelle Lebowitz–endowed visiting artist in residence at the Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities at Rutgers University. It has been a year of hysterical unrest — a rent crisis on both coasts, dying black bodies, black teacher pushout, all bookended by the California drought — and Ganesh's painstaking response has been to work. She created 13 complicated pieces in five months, centering on the psychological implications of living in a hostile environment.

On a hot August morning, I interviewed Ganesh in her Brooklyn studio. Her work surrounded us — earnest and “fresh out of the oven” before it left for her latest solo show, *Protest Fantasies* at Wendi Norris Gallery in San Francisco. We discussed art, queerness, and how we stay nourished during this deficit year of transition.

IMAGE 1-CHITRA IN HER STUDIO

ERICA CARDWELL: Tell me about the show.

CHITRA GANESH: The particular theme of this show came about by just being really struck and amazed by the power of protest in this moment. It’s been an ongoing part of my life, whether in 2003/4 to protest the Iraq War or any number of things, but then really looking at a lot of the images of die-ins and talking to another artist friend of mine, they look almost like history

paintings. The gestures are just extremely performative. There are so many versions of how people are thinking about protests now.

IMAGE 2 -INSERT CAMERA HEAD BODY

EC: What are some sci-fi models that inspire your examination of the future, these “protest fantasies”?

CG: Growing up, we had really misbehaved in English class, and so our teacher always [had us reading] Ray Bradbury and Philip K Dick. So really from a young age, I have been able to see how predictive these sci-fi writers are and were. But also the thing I loved about science fiction is that race has an embedded presence.

IMAGE 3-GAS MASK Painting with braids

CG:This is the figure from Baltimore, the man who cut the hose.

EC: The energy is really powerful in these pieces. They feel like murals or public art. You have managed to collect a lot of different voices. They look and feels like something a community created. Can you tell me about this painting of the women with eyes in their foreheads?

IMAGE 4 - LARGE PAINTING OF WOMEN WITH EYES

CG: These are the women who survived the Bangladesh sweatshop collapse, and this is their one-year anniversary performance, getting ready to march and sing. It’s indistinguishable from performance art. Similar to monks who set themselves on fire as a form of protest against China’s oppression of Tibet.

IMAGE 5 - POWER FIST PORTRAIT

EC: I love the “femme power” fist with fingernails. Tell me about her tears.

CG: I wanted it to capture the rich emotional texture of wanting to resist — tears of rage that ferment into something. It brings out the part of an otherwise peace-loving person that can’t deal anymore.

EC: Your work teaches women, especially women of color, to release respectability, and that trauma can be a springboard, conditioning life and leading us to develop a survival vocabulary.

This is how we live on our own terms and within another world of our creation. In your piece "Melancolia I (The Thick of Time)" (2010), the phrase "an eye that cannot cry" responds to this isolation. The three-armed brown woman has her gut sliced open-- revoking pleasure, rest, and narrative winning. Could you tell me more about that?

CG: The "eye that cannot cry" is also the larger vision of time, or the eyes of time. Time is the protagonist in this poetic fragment, loosely. It is the eye that sees everything, in waves of both joy and suffering. The position of being able to see the world with open, clear eyes and not be paralyzed by the trauma and suffering or throw one's hands in the air. But to engage with life and power dynamics in their full complexity. The eye that cannot cry (anymore): being all cried out from having a long-term understanding and experience of the pain of others and the infinitely painful consequences of oppression; being ready to move beyond tears, to not allow the tears to limit the humor, joy, action, strategy, or anger in planning and protest. Perhaps it also alludes to moving beyond being victimized and navigating moments of emotional suffering to channel these into powerful, collective love and action.

IMAGE 8 - PUSSY RIOT PAINTING

EC: You have a painting of Pussy Riot, but they're brown and that's really cool. So it's contentious, right? They're definitely magical superheroes. What do you think about trauma as superpower in regards to your work?

CG: I do think that is a reading. I want people to engage with a multidimensional lived experience. Growing up with racism, as a person of color you have to put your best foot forward. You can't air anybody's dirty laundry. I feel like those very bold performative gestures [in the piece] are directly engaging trauma. I was talking to the artist Simone Leigh, and we were saying that people don't have empathy, for example, with black pain. And you could say that about people who are in poverty. [Observers] are just so used to seeing certain people struggle, they feel like it's fine.

EC: And it needs to stay that way. Maintained.

CG: I feel that exposing that pain with a sense of agency is really powerful. It's not a kind of victimization. I think empathy is as important as fantasy. And art enables empathy. And if you remove some of reality from the story, people feel more comfortable empathizing with a different character. I think that's how science fiction works, for example.

EC: And Afrofuturism. As a writer, if I "fictionalize," internally, my story, I am able to write it. And others are able to engage with my story.

CG: We're artists, and our role is also that of translator — to translate things from one mode of expression to another within our own practice. To get from journal to memoir to essay to a poem, and use that translation to invite the audience to step in. I feel like myth does that too.

EC: After discussing trauma and myth, how would you describe political art?

CG: This is something that I've felt challenged by differently during my practice, because a lot of people think of political art as being didactic, both artists and audiences. But I think people that appreciate art and see it on the street don't have any problem with that didacticism — murals, for example. Or, not that they they don't have any problem with it …

E: It's not as surprising … ?

C: It becomes part of the sights and architecture of the everyday. Also, in different time periods political art has had different looks. Right now, I think it [uses] video installation and photography as media, which is also something that I have done or do. Previously, it was more murals, like Mexican muralists. Or in India, people who depicted goddesses in the nude had to live in exile. Even a man painting a naked woman in some contexts could be very radical, even though it doesn't feel like that now. So, I think it's also the context. Political art is also, of course, drag.

EC: And sometimes the imposition of political art on bodies of color is frustrating and tricky, because in what context are our bodies inherently political? When we're the creators, we can dictate that, but not always. From my perspective, art is political when it predicts our future.

C: And somehow it can transcend more people's belief systems. I think sometimes more fantasy enters my work when [my art] is immediately read autobiographically, or like a news story.

"Oh you're commenting on the plight of women in South Asia."
"No, actually, South Asia has a much more vibrant discourse of feminism than all of y'all would ever imagine in the US."

The plight of (x) creates power differentials that I don't want to be involved in.