



**Tradition
Trauma
Transformation**

Tradition
Trauma
Transformation



REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN BY

Chitra Ganesh

Nalini Malani

Nilima Sheikh

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
March 26–May 29, 2011

ISBN 978-0-933519-52-7

Copyright ©2011

David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University

Images copyright ©2011 the artists

Curated by Mallica Kumbera Landrus and Jo-Ann Conklin

David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University

Women Representing Women

The constitution of India has always assured equal rights for women. India has had a woman prime minister and president, as well as several state chief ministers (equal in power to US governors). As India emerges as a leading global power, and as the country's most powerful politician, Sonia Gandhi, president of the ruling Congress Party, happens to be a woman, many would assume the glass ceiling is therefore shattered in this South Asian country. Unfortunately, the ceiling remains. Whereas the law in India requires that women receive equal pay to that of their male counterparts, this seldom happens. The law also guarantees severe punishment for sexual harassment, yet some women become vigilantes in order to protect themselves and others.

As India develops within a global economy, innovations and technologies previously limited to the urban elite, such as sonograms, which identify the gender of an unborn child, are now also available in rural areas. Unfortunately, a girl child is still unwanted in most parts of the country. If born at all a girl is often neglected, and basic nutrition and education are denied to many girls. This in a country where images of powerful Goddesses are worshiped daily. The village deity—one who protects the village, its land, and community—is most often a local goddess. The most fervent followers of Durga and Kali are men. Yet, in a country of Goddesses who make powerful feminist models, female feticide and infanticide continue to exist. The land of mothers still idolizes male heirs and mourns the birth of a daughter. Traditional India is both cosmopolitan, and rural. These are the facts that inform the artworks presented here, which trace the transitions between tradition, trauma, and transformation.



Nilima Sheikh *Shamiana*, 1996. Installation view, David Winton Bell Gallery



Nilima Sheikh

Nilima Sheikh's contribution to the exhibition is a series of six hanging scrolls entitled *Shamiana* (1996), referring to a ceremonial tent.¹ Ceremonial tents were a major part of Mughal and Rajput court culture, as well as temporary living quarters for nomads and refugees. They are used to host outdoor marriages, feasts, parties, etc. Thus the tent symbolizes movement and dislocation, as well as ceremonies such as weddings conducted within its space, as well as home. Easily transported and erected, tents are used at joyous events to identify a space within which the celebrating community may come together to sing, dance, and perform other ritual obligations. Thus the tent also becomes a symbol of union, and through it, love: the union of two individuals, their families, and communities in general.

Songs sung within ceremonial tents derive from India's oral tradition, and evoke stories of love and devotion. Following that tradition, Sheikh's double-sided scrolls portray love in private and public realms of the world. Both of these emotions are expressed in everyday actions by the female figures represented in Sheikh's scrolls. The figures appear in both flat and deep space because of Sheikh's use of vertical placement that suggests midground and background sections. Despite clearly defined contours, symmetry, and tangential relationships between the limbs of a figure and the central geometric space, the paintings' lyrical shapes and pattern give them a strong sense of motion. The landscape surrounding the female figures adds to the narrative element of Sheikh's works. Child birth, devotion for one's god or lover, the act of cleaning one's home—the stuff of everyday lives—are all depicted with color, abstraction, and figurative idioms to convey emotion and energy.

Shamiana: Chenab 2 (left) is dominated by a large green expanse that gradually blends into browns at the bottom of the painting (denoting land), while reaching an intense blue at the very top (expressing the sky). The

wide expanse of green is a large body of water (the river Chenab); small doodles of color reveal themselves, on closer examination, to be aquatic life. A figure in orange holding a pot as she swims across this wide expanse of water draws the attention of the viewer. For those from South Asia, the legend of Sohni and her lover Mahiwal would be familiar and the iconography of the image clear. Sohni was the daughter of a potter, who drew designs on her father's pots and transformed them into works of art. She fell in love with a young man called Mahiwal (buffalo herder), from Central Asia. As a nomad from Central Asia, Mahiwal would perhaps have lived in temporary accommodations such as tents. Their love was unacceptable to Sohni's family, who married her off to another suitor. Here again the ceremony may be imagined within a shamiana. Despite being married, Sohni continued to meet her lover, who lived across the river Chenab. In order to meet him she swam across the strong currents of the river, as he was unwell and unable to do the same. One night her in-laws changed her baked pot for an unbaked pot, which resulted in her drowning in the Chenab. Thus the shamiana may here symbolize the space within which the lovers met in secret as well as a space within which she was given away to another suitor; the space is therefore one of joyous unions as well as dislocation and disassociation.

Born in 1945 in Delhi to parents who were both doctors, Nilima Sheikh read history at the University of Delhi before entering the University in Baroda for an MFA in painting. Although in the 1960s the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda was identified with modernism, she developed an interest in the history and traditions of pre-modern Indian art. She explored the miniature style of painting by visiting and watching miniaturists paint. From them she also learned to make her own materials, brushes and ground colors. The works exhibited are on primed calico cloth painted to the point of saturation with casein tempera. To prepare this material, Sheikh

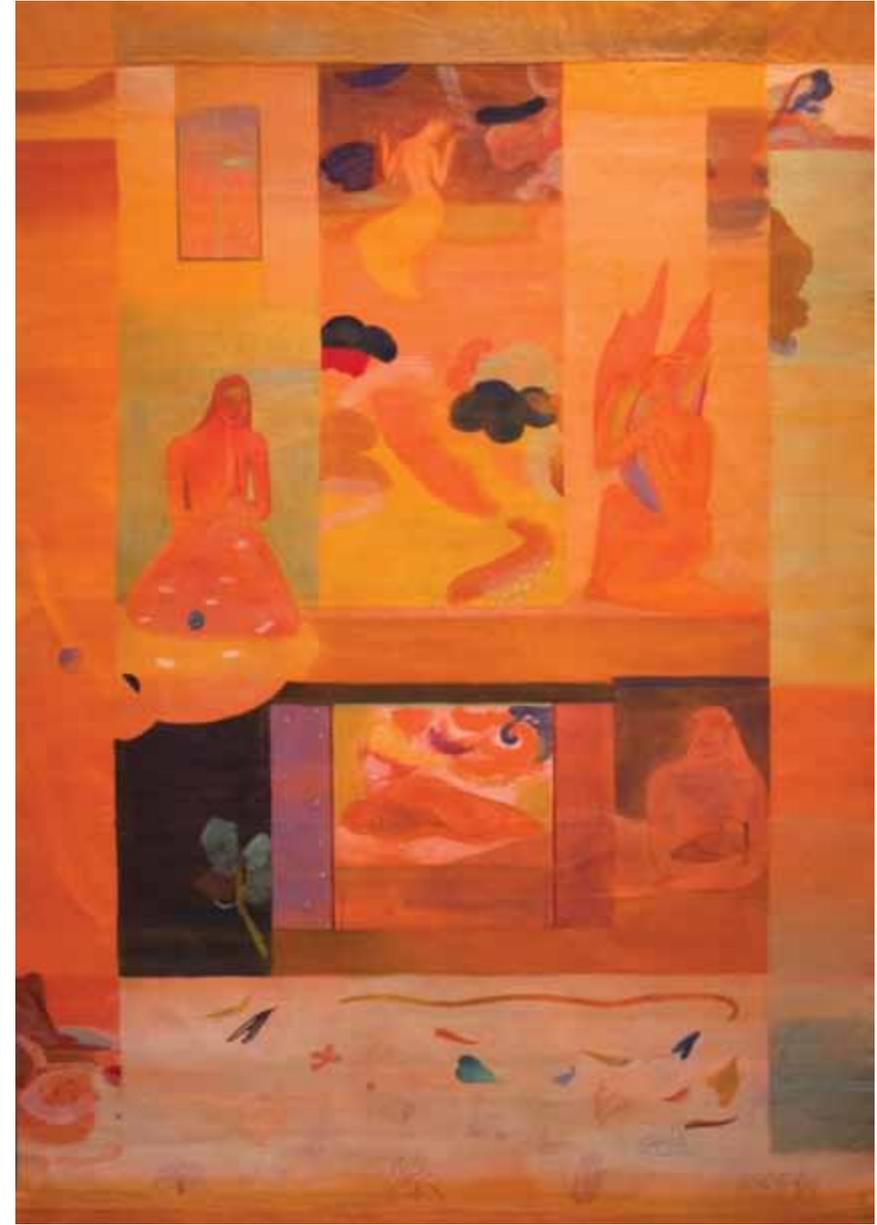
¹ The six scrolls are the sides of the tent. Sheikh's piece also includes a canopy that is not displayed here.



used curdled milk-glue to which earth and mineral powders were later applied.

As our eye moves through and around *Shamiana* we are aware that every plane, every view, even those at various angles of perspective, are directly addressed to the gaze. Simultaneously, the paint surface, built up in transparent or semi-transparent washes, advances as a material presence, delicate but insistent in its buildup.

The double-sided paintings expand into a grand formal display of representational space that intensifies the experience of a place. The closest compositional comparisons to these panoramic layered narratives are the cave paintings at Ajanta and Dunhuang. It does not take one long to appreciate and share Sheikh's interest in traditional art forms and techniques. The central aspect of Sheikh's art is the interconnectedness of her creative



processes. Hers is an art of patiently looking through various methods, materials, forms, techniques and her own surroundings, as well as historical and literary texts to find those of special value. Through traditional symbols Sheikh represents contemporary everyday life. There is a keen interest in letting all the disparate elements that are around her find new, fresh, or unpredicted orders. It is an intuitive combination of something new, something

old, some things that flow together compassionately. Indeed this is a philosophical departure from any kind of established comfortable modern or contemporary format. In accepting and incorporating the traditional in her works, Sheikh does not reject modernism but rather develops and articulates her own idiom.

Nalini Malani

Nalini Malani is a prolific artist of incredible energy and power. She creates honest, intense, cathartic, and uniquely imaginative works that speak directly to the human psyche. Malani has often reflected on questions of equality: How far have we come in solving gender-based violence? Is equality still an illusion? Malani combines painting, photography, and video, to revisit political turmoil, such as the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. A great number of women and children—on both sides of the border—became targets in the inter-communal violence that followed partition. Malani was barely a year old in 1947, but her family's decision to leave home in Pakistan and move across the border to India meant a refugee status for her and her family. These early traumatic moments, relived through family and community retellings, are embedded in Malani's very being, fostering ideological debates and a dialogue that forces the viewer to address socio-political pressures and gender-based violence.

Violent communal riots have become a distinct feature of communalism in modern India. Although all in society suffer, women and children are a large part of the list of innocent victims. Malani's videos are severe and demanding of the viewer. Through her work, Malani explores the power of sound and art to reveal a hard reality. The two works shown in the exhibition employ single-channel videos showing linear narratives. In *Unity in Diversity* (2003) a seating arrangement, display of photographs, and area lighting evoke a domestic setting into which the viewer enters. A reproduction of Raja Ravi Verma's painting *Galaxy of Musicians* (1893) is projected onto the wall, within a large frame. Images of women holding guns and of dissected flesh overlay the painting, in combination with a soundtrack of gunshots, screams, and a narratives written from the front lines. The eleven women depicted in the painting represent different geographic and cultural parts of India. Their differences unify and represent one nation, and portray

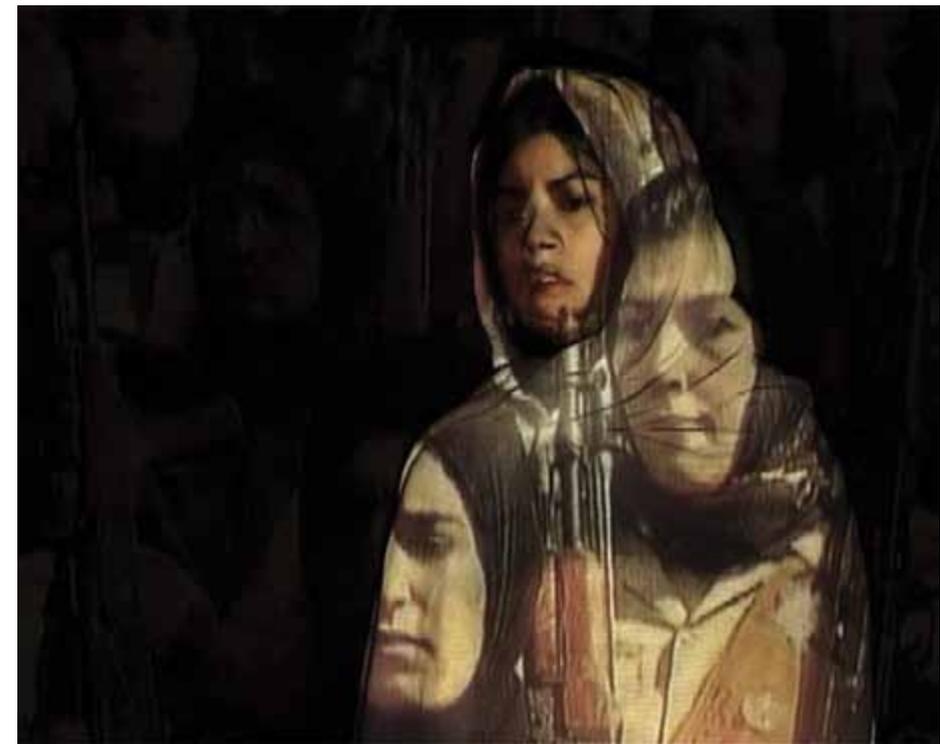
the phrase "unity in diversity," used to characterize post-colonial India. This state-created motto supported the foundation of a secular modern democracy that arose from distinct and varied parts of a British colony.

Malani contrasts this early painting with the brutality and violence of contemporary communal riots, particularly the riots of 2002 in Gujarat. It is hard to watch flesh—representing the victims and the land—quite literally being torn apart in the video. Such communal riots in India, and persistent tensions between religious groups, belie the notion of a tolerant India. However, many, including the artist, chose to live in this diverse country, where the persistence of general communal harmony amid occasional outbreaks of disharmony suggests an essentially accommodating nation, one that is capable of living with and absorbing difference.

Memory: Record/Erase (1996) is Malani's interpretation of Bertolt Brecht's "The Job." An animated critique of gender roles, the video is narrated through the process of drawing and erasure on a parchment, which represents the memory membrane of the protagonist. The drawings, texts, and sounds narrate the story of a woman who takes on the persona of a man in order to work as a *chowkidar* (night watchman). She is a widow, with two children, and a "wife" to complete her disguise. The point is that anyone, man or woman, can do any type of work. Male and female should be able to act in private and/or public in any type of manner. Despite being a success at her job, when the woman is finally exposed, sexism prevents her from reclaiming it. Society and culture create conditions that require people to assume their "right" roles, defined solely by their gender, and not by their abilities or interests. The view that women should perform only feminine work lingers.

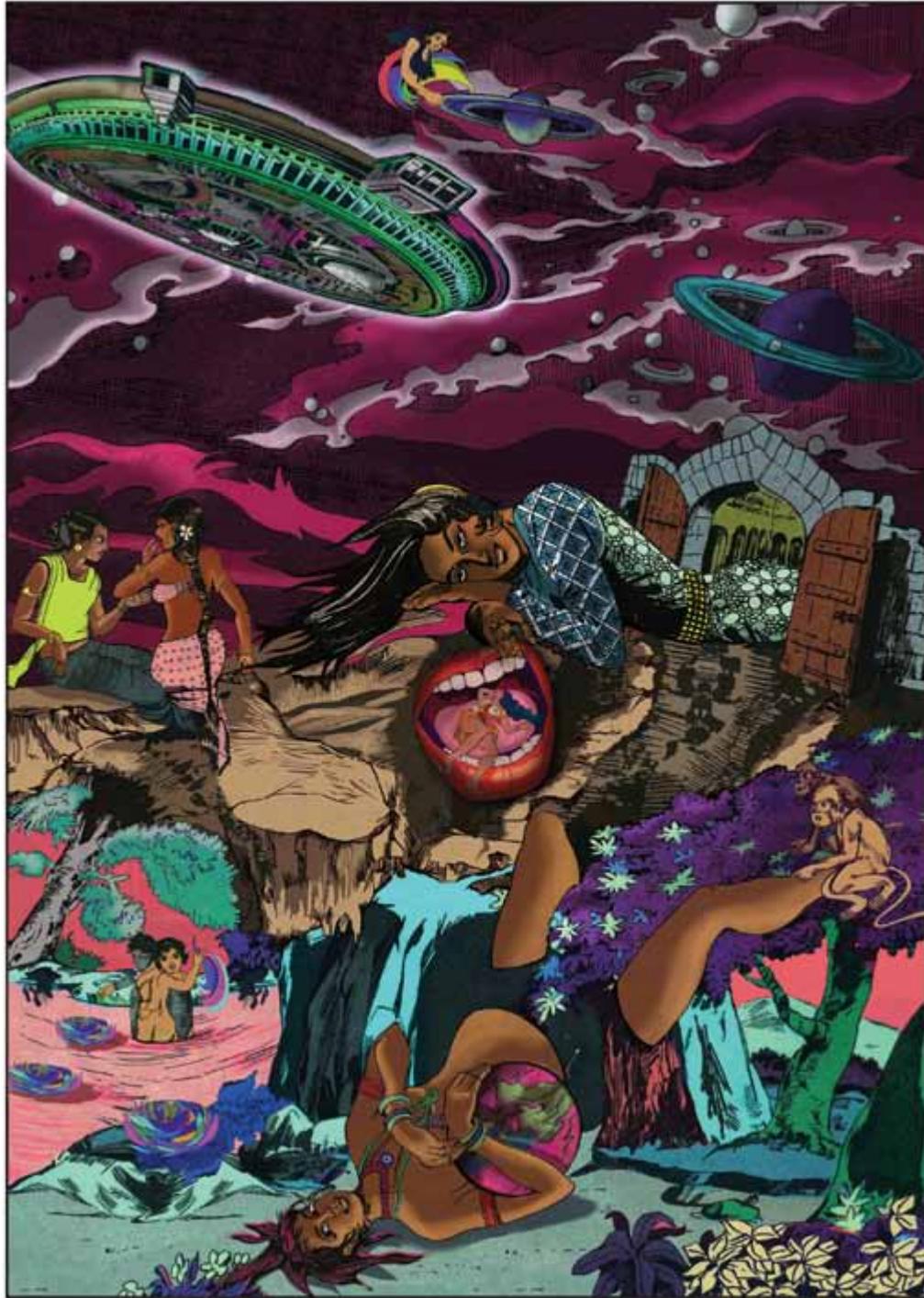
Through her work Malani thus captures the symptomatic moments of social crises by restaging them in visual form. The strange voiceovers and sounds create an uncanny resonance. Her works, and especially her

videos, are narrative instruments as well as vehicles for pure affect. They compel one to register the consequence of blurring sound and image. Malani creates art with urgency. Her idiosyncratic drawings move back and forth between abstract meanderings of the hand and representational musings of the mind. Her figures morph and dissolve, emerge and submerge, always confident and with a focused purpose. There is nothing random about Nalini Malani's concepts.





Nalini Malani: *Stills from Memory: Record/Erase, 1996*



Chitra Ganesh

A generation younger than Sheikh and Malani, Chitra Ganesh received her BA in comparative literature and semiotics from Brown University and her MFA from Columbia University. She has spent many years navigating the cultural terrain of living within the Indian diaspora in Brooklyn, where she was born in 1975 to Indian immigrant parents. Ganesh draws freely from both the East and the West, in both media and content. Her works impressively engage with and embrace challenges of the diaspora. Her works, though nourished by two cultures, do not involve dichotomies such as past versus present, or India versus North America, but rather exist in a space somewhere between where memory, melancholia, dreams, and fantasy bleed and blend together. Filtered through her personal sensibility, works emerge featuring female figures that portray time, distance, loss, violence, and sexuality, often humorously.

Ganesh has had an ongoing love-hate relationship with *Amar Chitra Katha*, a popular Indian comic series that focuses on religious and mythological narratives. For generations, children in India and the diaspora have been raised with these comics, which are intended to culturally educate the South Asian population. The characters in these comics provide accepted models of nationalism, private and public behavior, good versus evil, male versus female, and sexuality. In her digital collages, Ganesh combines female characters from the series with her own drawings and texts, offering alternate expressions to the prescribed models of the comic series. Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* is clearly one of her many direct references. Close examinations of the space within the frames of her works reveal a dreamscape of earthly, heavenly, and demonic bodies.

In her recent works, such as *How we do at the end of the world* (left), the comics intersect with her interest in science fiction. The images compel the audience to engage with Ganesh's visuals, which then allows access

to intimate private moments and connections with otherness. There is something ephemeral about experiencing these works that engage with memory and melancholia on a completely different plain than our reality. Her works are simultaneously easy and difficult to look at. Drawn in by their psychedelic colors and pop aesthetic, viewers soon realize that all is not goodness and light. A feeling of discomfort sets in as one feels compelled to look at every multiple-armed female nude, dismembered body part, bleeding torso, and mutilated figure, as well as depictions of feminine power expressed through self-pleasuring.

By exposing her women, Ganesh also exposes the underlying objectifying narrative of this "exotic other." The viewer is forced to face the sexualized nature of Western perception of the Asian woman. Simultaneously, the viewer is also led into questioning the time and events portrayed, and the role played by the figures in the circumstances that surround them. Ganesh's women do not assume the subservient roles reserved for them in the *Amar Chitra Katha*, but rather act as independent powerful heroines. These women may be demonic or at the same time, Devi, the great goddess, wielding her many weapons in her multiple arms. Reclaiming sexuality, Ganesh's female characters do not represent the ideal sexual fantasy of a patriarchal society. In *Melancholia: The Thick of Time* (2010) a woman with a vulva-shaped rupture in her stomach reveals the universe within. In *Sorrow's Refrain*, Ganesh reworks Albrecht Durer's famous etching *Melencolia I*, incorporating and transforming numerous elements from the original—including the figure, scale, hourglass, rainbow, ladder, dog, and keys. The seated figure is now nude and many-armed; keys that hung from the figure's belt now hang from a piercing at her hip; the globe on the floor has become a fiery-tailed planet, birthed from a disembodied pair of legs; the star is a spiderweb, and "Durer's solid" (a polyhedron, seemingly of stone) is, in Ganesh's



version, a crystal. To this the artist adds a needle with intravenous line in one of the figure's right arms; an infinity sign drawn on her inner thigh; and a multi-breasted/eyed torso with blood dripping from its blade-like arms. In these works one finds the banal, the sublime, and the transcendent all working and existing together. Life, death, and birth are here synchronous with women and their sexuality.

The concept of time in Ganesh's work is similar to the time construct of the ancient world. The inner world of fantasy and mythology is meshed with reality, everyday ideas, blurring all boundaries, and moving between the constructs of time and space. Like parts of her figures, time is dismembered from the single structure and then arranged into pieces, wandering in space as the past, present and future all overlap. Ganesh

conceives her own unique world that conflicts with the real world, resulting in strange and even absurd figures and gestures. Using comic book images works well within this alternate world. Depending on how we may interpret or deconstruct Ganesh's reality or fantasy, her works certainly resonate with many viewers. The works provide a whirlpool of cosmic energy that pulls many of us into periodically intriguing vortexes. Ganesh inhabits a space that meanders through perceptual systems and narrative conventions, leaving a charged footprint in art informed by feminism. Her expansive interrogation of the other includes questions of post-colonialism, migration, citizenship, and sexuality. The content of her works is prescient in the way it opens a wider frame of political reference and incites the urgency of critical recall.



Contemporary artists in India and the diaspora abroad use various techniques to revisit pre-colonial and post-colonial themes of complexity that represent cross-cultural global issues. The exhibition, though concerned with India, does not limit interpretation of the works to South Asian issues. Artists were chosen for the exhibition for the originality of their work. Thus the works represent the individual artists, and are visually exciting, thought-provoking and informative. They are timely and personal, expressing ideas that include all that has passed in the artists lives and the world at large.

MALLICA KUMBERA LANDRUS

Chitra Ganesh was born in Brooklyn, New York, where she currently lives and works. She graduated from Brown University in 1996 with a BA in Comparative Literature and Art Semiotics. Ganesh attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and received her MFA from Columbia University in 2002. Her work has been exhibited locally and internationally, including at the Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum of Art, The Asia Society, Bronx Museum of Art, White Columns, Momenta Art, Apex Art, and PS1/MOMA (all in New York), and internationally at the ZKM, Germany; MOCA, Shanghai; Saatchi Museum, London; Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna; Fondazione Sandretto re Rebaudengo, Turin; IVAM, Valencia; Spazio Oberdan, Milan; Gwangju Contemporary Arts Centre, and in 2011 at the Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai. She is the recipient of numerous grants and residencies, including awards in 2009 from the New York Foundation for the Arts and Printed Matter, and in 2010 from the Art Matters Foundation, Lower East Side Printshop Special Editions Residency, and the Joan Mitchell Award for Painters & Sculptors. Her work is represented in collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, Devi Art Foundation, Deutsche Bank, the Saatchi Collection, and the Burger Collection.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Melancolia: The Thick of Time, 2010
Lambda print, 68¾" x 51¼"
Lent by the artist

Melencolia: Sorrow's Refrain, 2010
Lambda print, 68¾" x 51¼"
Lent by the artist

How we do at the end of the world, 2011
Lambda print, 68¾" x 51¼"
Lent by the artist

Cosmic Butterfly, 2011
Site-specific, mixed media wall drawing,
approx. 14' x 22'

Nalini Malani was born in Karachi in 1946 and lives in Mumbai. She studied art at the Sir J. J. School of Art, Mumbai, and in Paris through a French Government Scholarship for Fine Arts. Equally well known for her paintings and video installations, Malani has exhibited internationally, with solo exhibitions at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA; the New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY; and the Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai. She has been included in group exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery and the Tate Modern, London; IVAM, Valencia; the National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo; and in international exhibitions, including the 51st and 52nd Venice Biennale, the Istanbul Biennale (2003), the Asia-Pacific Triennale (2002), the Third Kwangju Biennale and the Seventh Havana Biennale (both in 2000), and the First Johannesburg Biennale (1995). Her work is held in collections around the globe including at the Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society, both in New York; Burger Collection, Hong Kong; National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay; British Museum, London; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Wilfredo Lam Center, Havana; and the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Memory: Record/Erase, 1996
Single channel video; 10 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Walsh Gallery, Chicago

Unity in Diversity, 2003
Single channel video installation with sound,
gold frame, framed photograph; 7 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Walsh Gallery, Chicago

Nilima Sheikh was born in 1945 in New Delhi, India. She currently lives and works in New Delhi and Baroda. Between 1962 and 1965 she studied history at Delhi University. She studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University in Baroda, where she received her MFA in 1971. Nilima Sheikh has lectured extensively on Indian art both locally in India and internationally, as well as being part of various Indian artists' delegations abroad. Her paintings are part of permanent collections in India as well as international collections such as Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, and the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, United Kingdom. Her work has been widely exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in India and abroad, including at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai; National Gallery of Modern Art, India International Centre, and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, all in New Delhi; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia; Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai; ARCO Madrid; IVAM and Casa Asia, both in Valencia; Kunstmuseum, Bern; Grosvenor Gallery, London; the Asia Society, New York; Seattle Art Museum; Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; and in international exhibitions including the Third Asian Biennale, Dhaka (1986); First Johannesburg Biennale (1995); and Asia-Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia (1996).

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Shamiana, 1996
Six hanging scrolls, casein tempera on
canvas; 8'4" x 5'10" each
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation,
purchased 1996.



Right and cover: **Chitra Ganesh** *Cosmic Butterfly*, 2011.
Installation view, David Winton Bell Gallery

