

## *The Emergent Body*

Audre Lorde wrote “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,”<sup>1</sup> in 1984. Had the timing been different, she could have easily been thinking about artworks by Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh. In her essay, Lorde, a lesbian of color, spoke out against the corrupting power of the patriarchy and the fear of difference, finding strength in her position as a person who “stands outside of this society’s definition of acceptable women.”<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Lorde laid the groundwork for a re-territorializing of discussions of agency by asserting herself and her narrative as central. In Leigh and Ganesh, Lorde would have found sister artists in the struggle.

In *Divine Horsemen*, Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh’s two-person exhibition in the Mason Gross Galleries at Rutgers University, Ganesh contributes a wraparound wall painting of linear, large-scale figurative images painted on top of lush washes of blue and orange in a tripartite horizontal stripe. In a departure for the artist, the linear figures painted over these sunset colors seem to have come as much from studied observation as they do from invention. There are motifs that firmly connect them with the artist’s previous work though – one figure sprouts multiple pairs of insect wings, and a constellation of eyes swirls around another. Leigh channels a retro-futuristic energy with a massive suspended ceramic sculpture of more than a dozen cast watermelons, rubbed dark with graphite, boot-kicked, and fitted with long-handled toilet plungers. The watermelons are interspersed with pendulous breast-like forms sprouting radio antennae. At once insect, vegetable, and chandelier, the sculpture channels a painful past, connecting it with an emancipatory future. And like a renegade radio wave, Leigh’s drawing in gravel on the floor, anointed with Kool-Aid, appears to reach out to entangle the braided hair of one of Ganesh’s painted figures who’s been smeared into white-face.

One of the artists’ touchstones for this exhibition, apart from the long-standing affinities each has for the other’s work, is Maya Deren’s film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 1953. The movie is still hailed today as one of the definitive sources of information on the religious practices of *Voudoun*. In a turn from the filmmaking for which Deren had come to be known, the artist plunged into committing representations of *Voudoun* rituals to over 18,000 feet of film. Her role as a participant in these events, as well as their documenter, offered some anthropologists pause. It may be precisely this passion that generates the film’s enduring *frisson*. Rather than functioning as a ‘scientific’ or so-called objective opinion, Deren’s methodology instead offers a nuanced embodiment of cultural relativism. “What standards,” it seems to ask, “are the basis for our judgments and comparisons of the world?” Deren’s *Divine Horsemen* is a profound report, filtered through an artist’s emergent perceptions.

Interpretations of tradition are engagingly at play in both Leigh and Ganesh’s works. And it is in these artists’ experimental approaches to time-honored forms that they produce new meaning. If in Leigh’s ceramics we sense ancient, ritualized devotional objects, their form – as in a chandelier of watermelons branded with the unmistakable suggestion of lynching – is entirely contemporary and undoubtedly provocative. We might also consider Ganesh’s involvement with the typically South Indian artform of the *kolam*, a ritualistic form of geometric line drawing made with rice flour. Typically executed in doorways, the drawings are said to bring prosperity and equilibrium to the household. The *kolam* is as much an activity as an object, where the making and the result are continuous. Ganesh also draws as a devotional activity, investing lines with intense emotional charges, seeking an equilibrium of her own. She takes drawing to new extremes as her images float over walls, and the reverent powers of her invented bodies loom over us, monstrous, mystic, and powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. California: Crossing Point Press Feminist Series, 1984. 110-114.

<sup>2</sup> Lorde, 112.

*I asked a man what the Law was. He answered that it was the guarantee of the exercise of possibility. That man was named Galli Mathias. I ate him.*<sup>3</sup>

Written in 1928, Oswald de Andrade used *anthropofagia* [cannibalism] as a metaphor, and not without a sense of dark humor. In his narrative, a dominant *arriviste* culture attempts to colonize an indigenous culture, and is literally consumed. The colonizers' world is turned inside out when the indigenous culture asserts itself as central, re-territorializing the discourse, as Lorde did. It is also apt to Ganesh and Leigh's work: if the body of 'the other' is another body, the artists posit a third possibility beyond these either/or and subjective/objective dualisms – an *anthropofagic* reading in which traditional dualisms continually consume each other until their scope extends well beyond either of them in substance and meaning, creating a complex, hybrid, even abstract body. Like Deren's exercise in her *Divine Horsemen*, her participation in *Vodoun* rituals complicates the notion that she is either an insider or an outsider. Leigh and Ganesh make a similar point in their *Divine Horsemen*. In Ganesh's work, references to Hindu deities and popular Indian comics mix with others of B-girls and images suggesting erotic desires – bodies that are both real *and* imagined. In Leigh's work, this turning inside out is temporal as well as physical; if her ceramic sculptures look ancient, they simultaneously suggest futuristic possibilities, like totems for righting wrongs that have already passed, and reminders of histories we should avoid repeating.

If, in the time since Lorde wrote her scathing essay, things have changed for the better, we still have a ways to go. Increasingly apparent now is the destabilization of the patriarchy, assailed from a spectral proliferation of positions that undermine it as they assert their own centrality, speaking truth to power. The center cannot hold. Ganesh and Leigh both push the envelope on the limited positions afforded to the out-moded notion of the participant/observer by simultaneously occupying both positions, stretching the skin until it explodes, revealing a new emergent body.

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<sup>3</sup> de Andrade, Oswald and Leslie Bary. "Cannibalist Manifesto." *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 19, No. 38 (Jul. – Dec., 1991), pp. 38-47.