

NEW YORK

Chitra Ganesh, Simone Leigh

Tilton Gallery // May 1–July 13

IN THIS DUAL SHOW, some of the oldest materials Earth has to offer—charcoal and terra-cotta—are mined for their evocation of the past, with results that feel surprisingly contemporary and vital. The upstairs gallery features Ganesh's large-scale charcoal renderings of iconic scenes of early cinema from the East and the West: the techno-romanticism of the robot Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*; a scandalous four-minute kiss, still shocking in India today, between the lovers in 1933's *Karma*. Ganesh's charcoal coats the paper in dusky black, so thick it appears almost liquid. This renders the past, depicted in each sci-fi or mythic scene, both visually confusing and hyperreal, and artfully reveals the way that visionary era's avant-gardism merged with its naiveté.

This dreamlike quality appears elsewhere in the exhibition, as viewers encounter a set of small antique photographs in ornate frames. Using 19th-century photocollage techniques, Ganesh combines pairs of recognizable types of that period: a succession of buttoned-up Westerners and white-robed Indians. As the figures regard each other within the crowded frame, the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized collide, their geographic and cultural differences at odds with their sudden proximity.

Downstairs, Leigh presents another aesthetic-political investigation of the past. The space is dominated by glazed busts of female figures, their nearly featureless faces recalling African sculptural traditions, their heads crowned with unwieldy headdresses of handmade, tightly packed ceramic roses. These ornamental flowers strike one as anachronistic and vaguely sinister, and sure enough, they become infectious—eating into another bust's face, clinging to watermelon-shaped orbs like carbuncles. Elsewhere, an antique baby carriage is disconcertingly filled with molded clay breasts. Leigh seems to suggest that the very obscurity of forms that have been understood as "primitive" frees them to be recombined and reimagined in contemporary terms.

Her engagement with Afrofuturism expertly continues and troubles the legacy of the "anonymous African female pottet," so often credited in place of a name in natural history museums.

These are expansive themes, and at times the shows feel a bit too broad in their respective purviews. Both artists claim an interest in representations of femininity; Leigh's work integrates this concern more skillfully within her larger project of articulating, rather than combating, anonymity

within historical narratives. By contrast, Ganesh's powdery drawings of delicate male actors, often cast in female roles in early Indian cinema, provide an intriguing historical tidbit without carrying much

contemporary weight. Likewise, her renderings of the great cinematic beauties of that era, such as Theda Bara and Devika Rani, register a gauzy admiration with otherwise little impact.

Despite this occasional conceptual overreaching, the astute combinations of media (film and drawing, sculpture and pottery) and the carefully chosen materials unite the artists. Ganesh and Leigh cannily probe the nexus of art history and cultural politics, bringing the smoothed-over surface of the past jarringly into our variegated present. —Nova Benway

Simone Leigh

Cowrie (Blue), 2012.
Terra-cotta, porcelain, cobalt epoxy.
11½ x 19½ x 11½ in.

