

# ARTNEWS

## CHITRA GANESH RESPONDS

BY [The Editors of ARTnews](#) POSTED 05/26/15 3:30 PM



*Chitra Ganesh, The Fortuneteller, 2014.*  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DURHAM PRESS

The following is a response to Maura Reilly's article ["Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes"](#) about the current statistics of Women in the Art World. Our coverage begins with our [Editor's Letter](#).

Born in 1975, lives in Brooklyn, New York

The majority of my colleagues are women. Because my work opens up narratives to offer alternative representations of sexuality and eroticism, it is considered feminist. I bear the legacies of being a woman artist and at the same time using imagery that many people would consider foreign or inaccessible in an American cultural context.

At a moment when so much is contingent upon an artist's market success—inclusion in biennials and museum shows, attaining gallery representation, higher-level grants and commissions, and mainstream visibility—it is difficult for artists whose cultural materials, art-historical referents, or formal approaches are not readily apprehended in the context of the mainstream market.

I experience some of this in the reception of my work, with its combined presentation of figuration, sexuality, dark-skinned bodies, and seemingly "foreign" influences that a viewer located in the West might not be able to connect to American history or Western art history. Because of its apparent "illegibility," support for my work is at times more institutional than commercial.

It is only within the last ten years that African American artists have garnered mainstream institutional attention in the United States. And for those of us whose parents are foreign born, it

might take a few more decades to attain legibility and recognition as “American.” “America Is Hard to See,” the new Whitney Museum’s inaugural exhibition, for instance, includes one artist of South Asian descent in a roster of over 400 participating artists. I read an interesting article about the “unrecognized woman artist” which points to how prevalent this narrative is: it says “She is unrecognized,” not “We didn’t recognize her,” and so evades naming the structures that produce this lack of recognition.

At this moment, popular entertainment merges with the consumption of contemporary art via art fairs, blockbuster shows, and the like. How can the imbalance be addressed when the subject of a MoMA retrospective is the female artist Björk? Not that art needs to be esoteric, but what is considered “art for the people” needs to be broadened and reevaluated.

There’s still a struggle between the specific and the universal in categorizing contemporary art. The universal remains an unmarked, transcendent category, while marked categories are specified, of “special interest” rather than broader appeal, and with less institutional power. Many remark upon the fact that contemporary art never gets called white male art, but women artists, African American artists, or queer artists seem to be labeled as such in order to qualify their work. Many have expressed a desire to buck these categories, to “just be able to make whatever I want”—everybody from my students in their 20s to extremely renowned artists who have been working for decades.

It has been eye-opening and a relief to exhibit my work outside of the United States—most places have a much richer, longer sense of history and have likely had a relationship with or awareness of the South Asian subcontinent from centuries past. In India specifically, I feel liberated from the burden of having the “Indianness” of my work be the first and foremost engagement. There, my work is able to breathe differently and transmit via other channels, and can be approached and engaged as being, for example, about temporality, iconicity, science fiction, nostalgia, rather than being placed within a specific identitarian context. Everything we’re discussing here is only the tip of the iceberg.

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