

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

Chitra Ganesh

Mark Jenkins, 'The artists revealing the multiplicity of the human body' The Washington Post, 5 March, 2025



Chitra Ganesh, "Delicate Line: Corpse She Was Holding," 2010.

The self is an enigma — clouded or fragmented, then illuminated or reconstructed — in "Body Transformed: Contemporary South Asian Photographs and Prints." This is cleverly expressed by one of the first pieces encountered by visitors to the National Museum of Asian Art show.

Pakistani artist Rashid Rana's 2004 portrait of famed Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan is constructed from hundreds of small images of faces of unfamous men photographed on the streets of Lahore. They are nobodies, but without such people to constitute his audience, Khan too would be a nonentity.

The show offers works by seven photographers, two of whom work as a team, and three printmakers. The selection draws from the recent gifts of Umesh and Sunanda Gaur, whose contributions have been smartly curated to illustrate themes of identity and change, as well as to highlight evocative visual similarities.

Built from lived experiences and spiritual beliefs, or literally other people, the bodies portrayed by these artists are forever in flux. Thus Rana's photo collage hangs near a pair of 2002 prints in which Jitish Kallat partly abstracts photographs of individuals on the street in Mumbai, reducing them to energetic smears and obscuring shadows. Elsewhere in the show, Kallat uses simple means to fracture himself: The mirrored walls of a department store dressing room yield kaleidoscopic views of his lone body, shattering into infinity. Even the show's most straightforward images suggest multiplicity.

Working in the 1980s, Ram Rahman photographed two folk performers to make pictures that are perhaps the show's most traditional. Yet here they lead to Naveen Kishore's 1999 series of 12 intimate close-ups in which the actor Chapal Bhaduri makes himself up as Sitala, a goddess of healing, to perform in Bengali folk theater, folding boundaries of gender, sexuality and performance.

This theatrical incarnation can be seen as a reflection of Hinduism's idea of the avatar, a physical embodiment of a divine figure. In Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni's staged photographs, Pushpamala poses as various goddesses. The duo's 2000-2004 collaborations speak to artistic as well as religious heritage, since they're modeled on pictures by a 19th century Indian painter.

Hindu imagery of metamorphosis gets a raw and contemporary update in the work of Chitra Ganesh, who was born in New York to Indian parents. Her 2009-2010 series of 11 prints (10 of which are on exhibit) depict women in dancer-like poses, their bodies contorted and sometimes damaged. Eyes peer from unexpected places, disembodied fingers reveal bloody stumps, and flowers on thorny vines grow from orifices and wounds. Made with multiple print-making techniques, and supplemented with glitter and plastic, Ganesh's pictures are simultaneously lovely and grotesque.

A different sort of synthesis of myth and modernity animates Jyoti Bhatt's print "Man and Machine." A humanoid rendered in bold green and blue is printed atop a red mechanical drawing of industrial machinery. The resulting cyborg appears oddly prehistoric. Bhatt is known for photographs of rapidly changing rural India, and he brings a folkloric feel to this nominally futuristic image. "Man and Machine" was made in 1975, but there's also a 2022 piece in the show by Bhatt, who's about to turn 91.

The body becomes subsidiary to architectural patterns in the prints of Krishna Reddy (1925-2018), who was born in India but spent most of his life in Europe or the United States. Grids and circles create a sense of depth in such pictures as one sparked by a clown's performance at a circus the artist attended with his daughter. Reddy was also inspired by demonstrators he saw in Paris in 1968, but he reduced them to a string of abstract uprights, powerful yet indistinct. Perhaps he saw the figures as inseparable waves in a sea of rage.

Some of Reddy's compositions also have a kaleidoscopic quality, linking them to other works in "Body Transformed" that portray people as splintered and mutable. The images are indelible, the selves impermanent.