



Chitra Ganesh. *Black Sands*. Acrylic, Sumi ink, sand on paper. 48" x 60". 2005.

## Women on Top

Karin Miller-Lewis finds idealised notions about femininity, form, and sexuality being challenged at a group show in New York.

A VIDEO SEX FANTASY BY TEJAL SHAH AND EXCLAMATORY comic book-inspired works by Chitra Ganesh might seem too brash to be effectively exhibited alongside the evanescent drawings of Nicola Durvasula. But, in fact, this small group's show of big ideas, exhibited at the Thomas Erben Gallery, New York (January 26 — February 18), seemed to hang well together. The artists' common interest in female sexual identity made a compelling departure point for their various meanings and messages. One of them put the funny business back in sex, another brought out its complexities, and the third plumbed its mysteries.

Tejal Shah's *Chingari Chumma* (*Stinging Kiss*, 2000) both parodied and celebrated Bollywood potboilers. Reversing the genre's stereotypes, the 8½-minute, low-res video featured a doe-eyed man as the helpless

heroine. The inevitable dacoit-abductor was a peach-fuzzed, butch woman. The hero seemed to be impotent; one could see Amitabh, racing in clips appropriated from some film, never quite making it in time to the scene of the crime.

The artist's website states that her work aims "to displace the subject position of the viewer", but this earnest theoretical rationale proves as irrelevant as the would-be hero, last seen spinning in his tracks. *Chingari Chumma* derives less from righteous score-settling than from its high-spirited Campy transformation of a convention. The viewer couldn't help but feel both repulsed and tickled watching the heroine grow ever more enraptured while blowing the bosomed bandit's black, plastic prosthesis to the accompaniment of outdated music. Merrily wearing away the divide between the offensive, the





**Nicola Durvasula.** *Static Lines and Where They Take You.* Watercolour, pencil on paper. 11.5" x 8.25". 2004/5.



**Tejal Shah.** *Still from Chingari Chumma.* Single-channel projection. 8:30 minutes with sound. 2000.

stimulating, and the appealing, Shah teased the viewer toward acknowledging that the 'natural' sexual order was a consequence of habit, was variable and expandable.

Like Shah, Chitra Ganesh embraced and subverted popular culture in order to enlarge its traditional scope and themes. Her C-prints drew from Indian comic books that narrate the great Hindu myths, but her frames featured powerful and paradoxical female figures, often tamed or excluded from mainstream representations. Rising out of a pink cloud, the lovely and multi-armed female in *Untitled* (2005) reminded one of the spiritual slayers/life-givers who carry knives and skulls as well as garlands of new buds. However, Ganesh's superwomen did not deliver the calamitous fates that enabled transcendence. They were themselves the subjects of mystifying, overwhelming dramas. Contradictory words spoken to and by them attested to their struggle with self-division. They also fluctuated between self-stimulation and self-mutilation. In the painting, *Black Sands* (2005), a pig-tailed girl, bleeding at the neck, stared wide-eyed at the razor blade in her own grip.

Ganesh's clashing phrases didn't always achieve the surrealist spin they aimed at achieving, and her larger imagery seemed afloat on an indifferently chosen ground. Nevertheless, the works on view passionately conveyed her difficulties with bi-cultural identity, the pain of marginalization in a society that forbids homosexuality, and the ecstatic freedom gained by cutting oneself loose from the false bonds of denial. Remarkably, her pictures did not idealize liberation. They reckoned with the deep wounds acquired with self-knowledge.

Sexuality and identity were no less urgent issues for being elusive in Nicola Durvasula's recent drawings. Reminiscent of Francesco Clemente at his best in the 1980s, each work seemed to ask: What holds me here? Durvasula embodied this search for structure and connection in her faithfulness to the minimal materials of paper, watercolour, and pencil. Partially drawn, evanescent figures made multiple, simultaneous references to Indian and European traditions, high art, and fashion sketches. One witty drawing, *Static Lines and Where They Take You* (2004/5), had a female form, emerging from the blank page with heavy eyelids, parted lips, and a hand hidden behind a horizontal line at crotch-level, delicately reminding us of the transience of tremulous sensations.

The simplicity and isolation of her figures encouraged the viewer to marvel at how a line, a dot, a colouring might stand for something besides itself. Representation for Durvasula has been an investigative, analytic, and expressive act. Although her methods occasionally seem over-cautious and her imagery lacks impact, the series on display proved that the artist knew how to use restraint to amplify an image's ardour or add resonance to a visual joke.

That such different projects could reflect upon each other so vividly also owed something to the organizer's intelligent selections. Among the surprises of this show was the discovery that South Asian contemporary art and its growing New York audience may have found an enthusiastic and sensitive promoter in Thomas Erben.