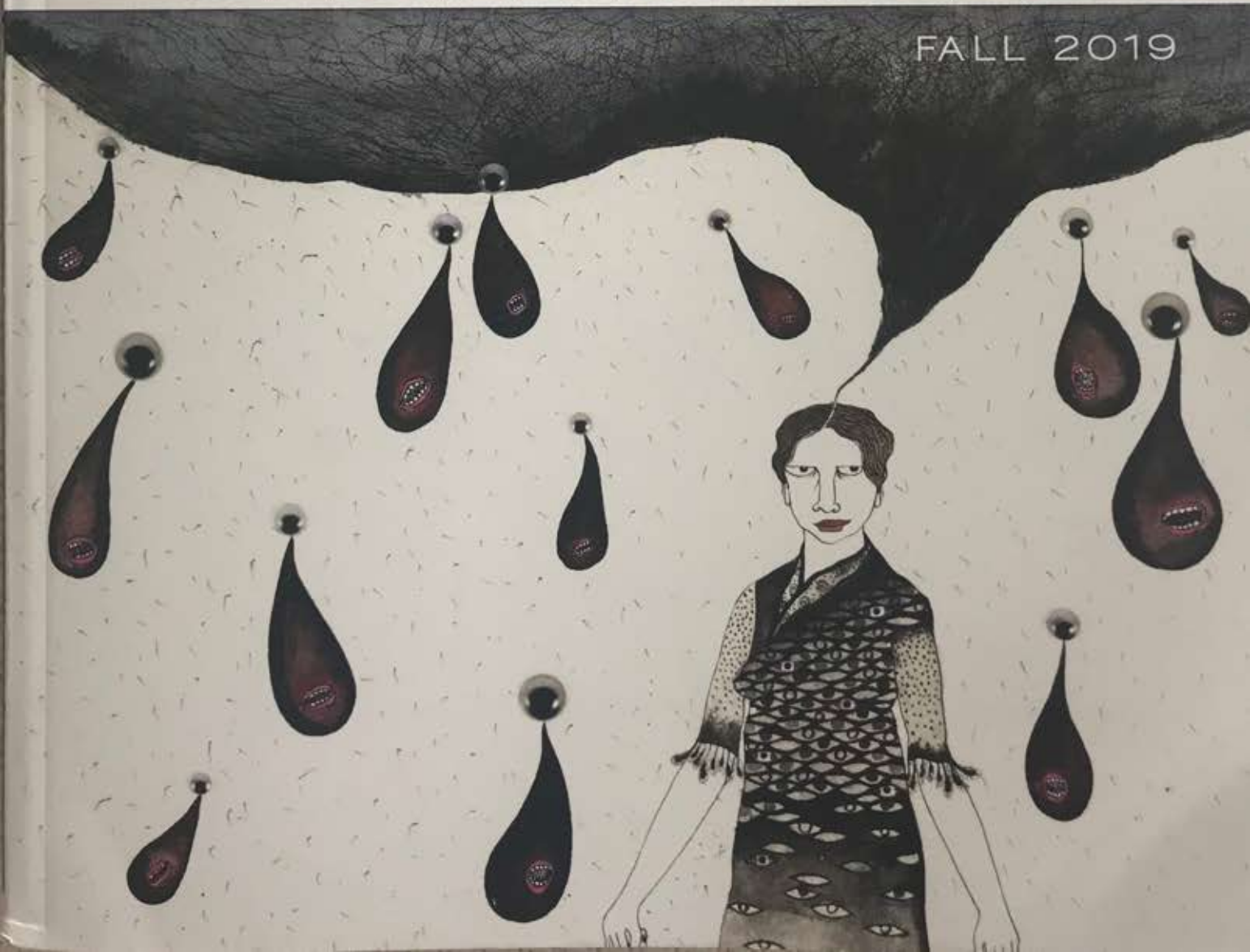




THE GEORGIA REVIEW

FALL 2019





## *“What I Find Funny Is Too Dark to Say Out Loud”*

### INTRODUCTION

“I laugh because I must not weep—that’s all, that’s all,” Abraham Lincoln reportedly commented, echoing Byron’s Don Juan. “Humor is just another defense against the universe,” said legendary director and comedy-writer Mel Brooks. Versions of this idea have been expressed variously in different eras and locales, yet it could also be said that the “that’s all” and the “just another” in these epigrams unfairly diminish humor’s power—to critique, to connect, to convey complex ideas. Dhruvi Acharya’s drawings, paintings, and multimedia works are remarkable for many reasons—a 2010 *New York Times* feature included her in a brief roster of contemporary painters keeping the medium surprising—and prominent among them is the surreal visual humor that informs her singular sensibility.

Acharya’s work often grapples with difficult or taboo emotions and experiences, especially those common to girls and women contending with patriarchal society, but Acharya is adamant about her wish to avoid “sentimentality” or “didacticism,” instead inviting viewers in through wild imagery, lush color, and deadpan wit. In line with her refusal to tell viewers what to think, one of her trademark motifs is the empty speech bubble emerging from a character’s head: the figure’s thoughts are suggested instead by her facial expression or body language. Words do at times appear in Acharya’s compositions, sometimes crowding in on the figures; however, usually they are not the protagonists’ own statements but the cultural commonplaces that define what a woman’s life is expected to be, as in her unforgettable *Woman and Men*, in which a gun-toting woman is menaced not just by a trio of demented, eye-patch-wearing suitors, but by a wall of text containing contradictory and likely unsolicited advice to a new widow.

Acharya’s prolific body of work, which incorporates allusions to classical and pop-culture sources (especially comic books), has found both criti-



cal acclaim and a popular following, with her art highlighted by many news outlets as well as in the Indian editions of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and other glossy magazines. The artist, who lives and works in Mumbai, began exhibiting her works professionally in the United States, where she lived for ten years, after receiving her MFA from the Hoffberger School of Painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1998. Since then, she has had solo exhibitions with Chemould Prescott Road in Mumbai, Nature Morte in New Delhi, Gomez Gallery in Baltimore, and Kravets/Wehby in New York, and participated in group shows at the San Jose Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai, and the Queens Museum of Art in New York, among many others.



Dhruvi Acharya

Although Acharya's art is not always straightforwardly autobiographical, it often engages with her own life, which in the past decade has been marked by devastating losses; in 2010 her husband, filmmaker Manish Acharya—with whom she was raising their two young sons—was killed in an accident. Her father died in the same year. For some time she went on hiatus from making or exhibiting art, not wanting her grief to distort her perspective, but in recent



years she has dealt more directly with it in her work; a 2016 solo show, *After the Fall*, included a large-scale installation re-creating a marital bedroom adorned everywhere with drawings and text testifying to a shared life.

Despite her personal tragedies, however, it would be reductive to understand Acharya's humor as merely a coping mechanism to deflect pain. At times she is subversively political, as in her treatment of women's bodies and bodily functions and of the toxic social relations women must navigate; at other times, her work seems to express great playfulness and joie de vivre, even if within bizarre and potentially confusing realities. A large-scale quadriptych, the most flamboyantly surreal of the works featured here, depicts a parade of grinning, otherworldly beings dancing and cavorting in nature; it is titled *Life*.

Dhruvi Acharya answered my questions via email from Paris this summer, where she was traveling with her now-teenage sons, the elder of whom will be a freshman at Swarthmore College this fall. They had previously attended the Venice Biennale.

C. J. Bartunek

\*

C. J. Bartunek (CJB): Critic Gayatri Sinha describes your work as using "a pastiche of comics, homilies on 'goodness' from *Amar Chitra Katha*, and the great reservoir of mythology." The emotions and situations in your art are likely recognizable across cultures, but some of your specific references may be less widely familiar to audiences in the United States. Would you say a little about some of the sources that have informed your work?

Dhruvi Acharya (DA): *Amar Chitra Katha* are a series of comic books which illustrate tales from Indian mythology and history, which many of my generation grew up reading. After graduate school I asked my mother to send them to me in NYC to include them in my book collection, but when I re-read some, I was taken aback at how I had accepted as normal the misogyny and status of women in some of the stories. To be fair, along with scantily clad damsels in distress, tempting nymphs, and princesses awaiting their princes, there were stories of the great strong Indian queens too. Anyway, in my work I started collaging speech bubbles from these comics, like "It is said a father who does



not give his daughters' hand in marriage is a sinner" and "My father has no sons to carry on his line, will you grant him sons?"

While in graduate school, an exhibition of the Padshahnama miniatures from the British art collection at the Smithsonian impressed me, particularly the attention to patterning, detailing, and the strange perspective, and these attributes influenced my work.

I started painting in the USA because I was homesick, and then I studied painting there, so American art, especially the all-over painting aesthetic, was influential in my early work.

CJB: Sinha writes that as an adult you were startled by the "blatant sexism" of stories like "Sati Savitri," which celebrates an idealized, self-sacrificing wife. What are some of the cultural narratives about girls and women that you seek to challenge in your work? More specifically, what are some of the threats represented by the eagles, piranhas, and weapon-wielding men that assail your protagonists?

DA: In my work I often address the expectations and the prevalent treatment of women in Indian societies. In general, the way women are treated in India is very disturbing. Women too often have to deal with unwanted advances by men, unmarried women and widows are perceived differently than married ones by society, women are expected to do all the housework and childrearing duties even if they work outside the home, women (not only girls) are expected to be obedient, the bearers of their families' "honor" . . . All these issues are important to me and crop up in my paintings.

CJB: One unfortunate sexist trope is that women are not funny, but it's obvious from your work that you are! What role has humor played in your life? Is this a trait that was encouraged when you were growing up?

DA: Oh, I hadn't heard this one about women not being funny! I don't think of myself as a funny person, because what I find funny is too dark to say out loud. But I guess in my work I can somehow convey the emotion.

Basically I dislike didacticism. I believe people become more accepting of differing ideas when they are given space to make their own conclusions, and I believe there is nothing like humor for doing that! Also, I think with the



passage of time after a tragedy, there is the potential for one to step back and try to see the dark humor even in the most awful situations.

CJB: Are there certain artists who have most influenced your technique or aesthetics?

DA: I think soon after graduate school it was the works of Barry McGee, Takashi Murakami, and Lari Pittman that made me more confident about using humor, which had started cropping up in my smaller works in school. Many painters have inspired me over the years: Hieronymus Bosch, Arpita Singh, Kerry James Marshall, Matisse, Julie Mehretu, Marcel Dzama, and Atul Dodiya, among many others.

CJB: In a profile by Dhanishta Shah for the magazine *G2*, you are quoted as saying, "I believe art has the power of making you feel positive. That is the power of the medium." Even though your art often deals directly and unsentimentally with some of the most difficult emotions in life, it does not feel bleak or depressing. Why do you think that is?

DA: I guess it depends on one's attitude towards life and on one's circumstances. My late husband used to tell me, "If you must, compare yourself to people who do more and to people who have less." Everything is relative, and we all know from history that things can suddenly get worse! I am an extremely lucky person, and I appreciate life. And I don't want my work to be melodramatic.

CJB: Several texts about you mention your long-time use of drawing as a form of daily journaling; in the Shah profile you are quoted as saying, "Painting for me is actually the way I make sense of the world. It all starts with my drawing books." How and when did you develop this practice? What are some of the questions you've worked through over the years in your art?

DA: When I moved to the USA I became very homesick, and I started drawing my memories of home. It just helped me deal with my emotions—it was the time of expensive, weekly five-minute phone calls home, no internet. That practice continued in life—drawing basically gives me the quiet time to focus



on my thoughts, make sense of what I am going through, what I am reading, what I have heard, and sometimes it helps me clear my head.

CJB: Some of the women in your more recent work appear to wear superhero masks. Are they becoming more empowered? How have your “characters” evolved over time?

DA: My works are based on my drawings, and my drawings are based on my thoughts at a particular time. So I guess over time, along with me, the subject matter of the works has changed as well. I don’t know if the masks were a conscious decision as they appeared in my drawings, but it may be to do with the idea that we often have to put on a mask to navigate this world. I used to paint my sons wearing masks, but that was because they actually did!

Images appear courtesy of the artist. Copyright © 2019 Dhruvi Acharya.

*Life* (fold-out) has been slightly cropped to fit the page.

JACOB BAYNHAM

JONATHAN BLUNK

EAVAN BOLAND

MARIANNE BORUCH

KEYIN CLARK

NAN Z. DA

JUDITH DANCOFF

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS

JACK DRISCOLL

REGINALD GIBBONS

MARGARET GIBSON

GENESE GRILL

RICHARD JACKSON

MURIEL LEUNG

JERRY MCGAHAN

ANDREW MENARD

TIANA NOBILE

JANISSE RAY

J. ALLYN ROSSER

LAUREN RUSSELL

ANYA SILVER

MOLLY SPENCER

BRIAN SWANN

MORGAN TALTY

MALCOLM TARIQ

VIVIAN WAGNER

WILLIAM WALSH

WILLIAM WENTHE

MARTHA WISEMAN

ANNE WRIGHT

ART BY DHRUVI ACHARYA

