

Riya Chandiramani: Cereal Boxes Filled with Food for Thought

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Every morning before we set off to complete our routines, sugary and filling cereals are likely to be a handy option for us to fuel ourselves for the tedious day ahead. But what if...cereals are not packed with sugar and carbohydrates but instead, an artist's critique on gender issues?

Born and raised in Hong Kong, artist Riya Chandiramani is known creating cereal boxes that contain not cereals, but paintings and mixed media works that nourish one with food for thought. By fusing a multifold of elements and iconographies from Indo-Persian and Tantric miniature paintings, advertisements, and Chinese Maoist-propaganda posters, Chandiramani explores religion, and gender issues. She also explores intricate issues about nourishment and female representation under censorship and sexualization of their bodies.

Growing up with an ample passion for art, Riya Chandiramani first started her artistic journey when she was a student at German Swiss International School. Her studies at University of Pennsylvania furthered her understanding of media consumption, popular culture, and gender discourses, which later became the critical elements in her oeuvre.

Chandiramani's work, however, contains much more than her manifestations of her understanding of different greater discourses. The artist's personal encounters, and her relationship with food also fuels her creative renditions.

"At university, I was a young woman with little to no self-esteem—a completely high-strung, a straight-A perfectionist, never feeling like what I did was good enough. In my second year, I was sexually assaulted, and soon after, I developed a severe eating disorder. Two years later, I was close to death and told to leave school for hospitalized

treatment."

Upon her recovery, not only had her body and her relationship with food changed, but a raging anger was also planted in her, which later became part of the themes that she manifests in her art.

"I became stronger, mentally, and I was angry. I wanted to scream to the world that I did not develop this eating disorder because I 'wanted to be thin like a model'—it was due to the societal conditioning that women experience, telling them to shrink themselves away—be quiet, serve others, not to be assertive or strong-voiced," said the artist.

Chandiramani also thinks that the female body is subjected to being stigmatized and sexualized for consumption. Parts of the female body like periods, breastmilk are seen as "flaws" yet they are also the body parts that enable women to "give life and feed."

Working around the major themes of feeding and nourishment, Chandiramani's recent body of works feature three key elements—branding of food, female representation in Mughal miniature paintings, and Maoist propaganda posters.

Her inspiration from Mughal miniature paintings stems from her wish to reimagine how women were depicted in the miniatures.

"During the Mughal period, women were kept in closed quarters and were not actually visible to court painters. The lack of differentiation of women depicted, and their lack of

representation over history made me want to reimagine this style by portraying strong warrior mother goddesses who fight and feed."

She also takes on capitalism, advertising, and propaganda in her own voice. As the artist comments, "advertising and propaganda are two sides of the same coin. The fusion of Western branding, and Indian and Chinese art are representative of my mix as a Hong Kong born Indian woman with an international upbringing."

Among a plethora of compelling works that she created, Chandiramani chose two of her works to share with us.

Behind Every Man (Fig. 1) is a painting that explores the themes of female power and the nurturing of life. Referencing the phrase "behind every man is a great woman," Chandiramani celebrates the female body by reminding us that even though the society is male-dominated, every one of us was given life by a woman, and we came to life from the female body.

"The male mascot of Frosties, Tony, sits as a teacher of sorts, with the chakras, the energy points of our bodies, running through him, the top one (Crown chakra), traditionally connected with consciousness, being replaced with a vagina. Tony sits on a lotus flower, a symbol of purity that features throughout my work. And behind him is the strong woman—the goddess—that he originated from. Tony holds a breast in his right hand—in Taoist texts, it was believed that breasts emit medicinal fluids to relax the body and mind, causing energy to flow. Sanskrit letters surround him on left and right, the sounds of the universe stimulated by feminine energy."

Created this year, Chandiramani's *Where Do Babies Come From* (Fig. 2) depicts women being freed from society's expectations and constructs.

"At the front of this reimagined



Riya Chandiramani in her studio.
Photo by courtesy of Young Soy Gallery.

cereal box, a woman holding a husk of corn rides Cornelius, the male cockerel mascot of Kellogg's cornflakes, away from the willow pattern scenery. She is independent, embracing her own nature away from society's expectations of her. According to the history of the blue and white willow pattern, two lovers were not allowed to be together and were killed in their attempts to do so; here, the woman is allowed to be whatever she wants to be and with whomever she would like to be with, away from the confines of constructs that limit her freedom, and this is what gives her power."

"On the back (Fig. 3), a multi-headed and armed goddess is perched on a lotus, showering

children beneath her with the nourishment they need. Her energy permeates all of us. She is the provider, creator, and sustainer of the universe. The characters 我们 wǒmen meaning “we, us” play with the English word “women”—representing that women create us, women require freedom to do so, and this answers the question that titles the piece. This came to me quite suddenly, I had been stuck on what to include on the back and was reading something, and the word ‘women’ popped out at me as ‘wǒmen’ and I immediately wrote down the Chinese characters and pinyin knowing I would incorporate it somehow.”

Chandiramani’s works certainly shake her audience with how she carefully weaves a web of diverse visual elements that speaks of her thoughts on broader issues in society.

Being an active young artist who is contributing to the ever-expanding Hong Kong art narrative, her creative voice almost encapsulates how Hong Kong as a city has a culture that is too diverse to have a rigid and homogenized definition.

When asked to define “Hong Kong art,” Chandiramani says, “I don’t think there really is one specific definition for Hong Kong art—Hong Kong culture itself is hard to define—which can be considered both a strength and a weakness.”

Instead of defining “Hong Kong art” geographically by saying that only art produced in the city is “Hong Kong,” the artist believes the “lived experience” of the artist will filter into their works in different forms—ranging from what the artist would want to share with the public, to how they create their works.

She also added that even though she considers Hong Kong her home, and that she was born here and have lived here her whole life, her inability to speak Cantonese makes

some doubt her identity of being a “true” Hong Konger and hence—she herself may fit under the concept of being a “Third culture kid,” and so does her art.

Figures

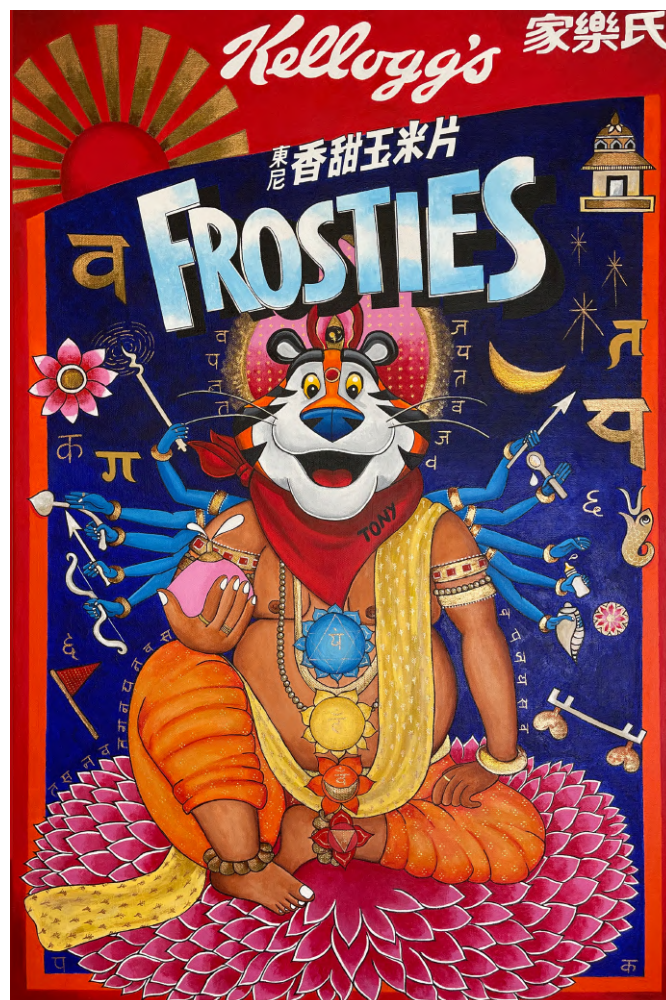


Figure 1
Riya Chandiramani, *Behind Every Man*, 2021.
Acrylic on canvas, 61 × 91.4 cm.
Image provided by the artist.



Left

Figure 2

Riya Chandiramani, *Where Do Babies Come From*, 2022.
Acrylic on wood with Perspex Box, 47 × 30.5 cm.
Image provided by the artist.

Right

Figure 3

Details on the back
Riya Chandiramani, *Where Do Babies Come From*, 2022.
Acrylic on wood with Perspex Box, 47 × 30.5 cm.
Image provided by the artist.