



*HOW TO BE A MONSTER*  
MAYA MACKRANDILAL



*Untitled (Kali), 2015, Digital image*



*“He looked like a demon”*

-Officer Daren Wilson describing Michael Brown, from the official record of his grand jury testimony.

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*“The monster is that being who refuses to adapt to her circumstances. Her fate. Her body.”*

-Bhanu Kapil, Incubation: A Space for Monsters

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*“But as E.H. Gombrich has taught us in another context, the ‘innocent eye’ is an illusion, for what we see is coloured by our cultural expectations. To put it slightly differently, when the West turned its cultural mirror toward the Other, what it saw reflected in it was its own Self.”*

-Partha Mitter, Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art

## *HOW TO BE A MONSTER*

Maya Isabella Mackrandilal

This project explores how dominant cultures imagine “The Other”—an imagination that is both painfully current but also deeply embedded in our histories. I’m interested in how visual culture intersects with social discourses (critical race theory, feminism, queer theory for example) and examining the genealogies that both led to our present social dynamics as well as alternate ways of thinking about the past in order to intervene in the present.

I used Partha Mitter’s study of Western reactions to Indian Art as a starting point. In his study of early writing by Westerners about Indian figurative sculpture and painting, he notes that European writers were in fact unable to accurately describe what they were seeing, and instead fell back on Western depictions of “demons” and “monsters.” For instance, many writers described Hindu gods that had horns and hooved feet, a well-established motif in western depictions of the demonic, but completely absent in the South Asian sculptures they were looking at. The term “monstrous” (to describe both scale, and aesthetics) is used repeatedly in Western texts, and Mitter ties this language to the Western dichotomy of the rational/irrational, with the absolute otherness of Hindu art standing in as the “irrational” “degenerate” and over-abundant foil to Western rationality, racial purity, and aesthetic valuation of mimesis as art’s highest goal.

For this project I entered into and inhabited this space of “Western” (standing in for cis-het-white-male) imagination (an imagination that obscures understanding or empathy), enacting its nightmares, but queering those nightmares, decolonizing them, entering into a dialogue with them. I performed as incarnations of Hindu goddesses that are a pastiche of the past and the present, a collision of “Western” and “Non-Western” artistic traditions, visual culture, and signifiers.

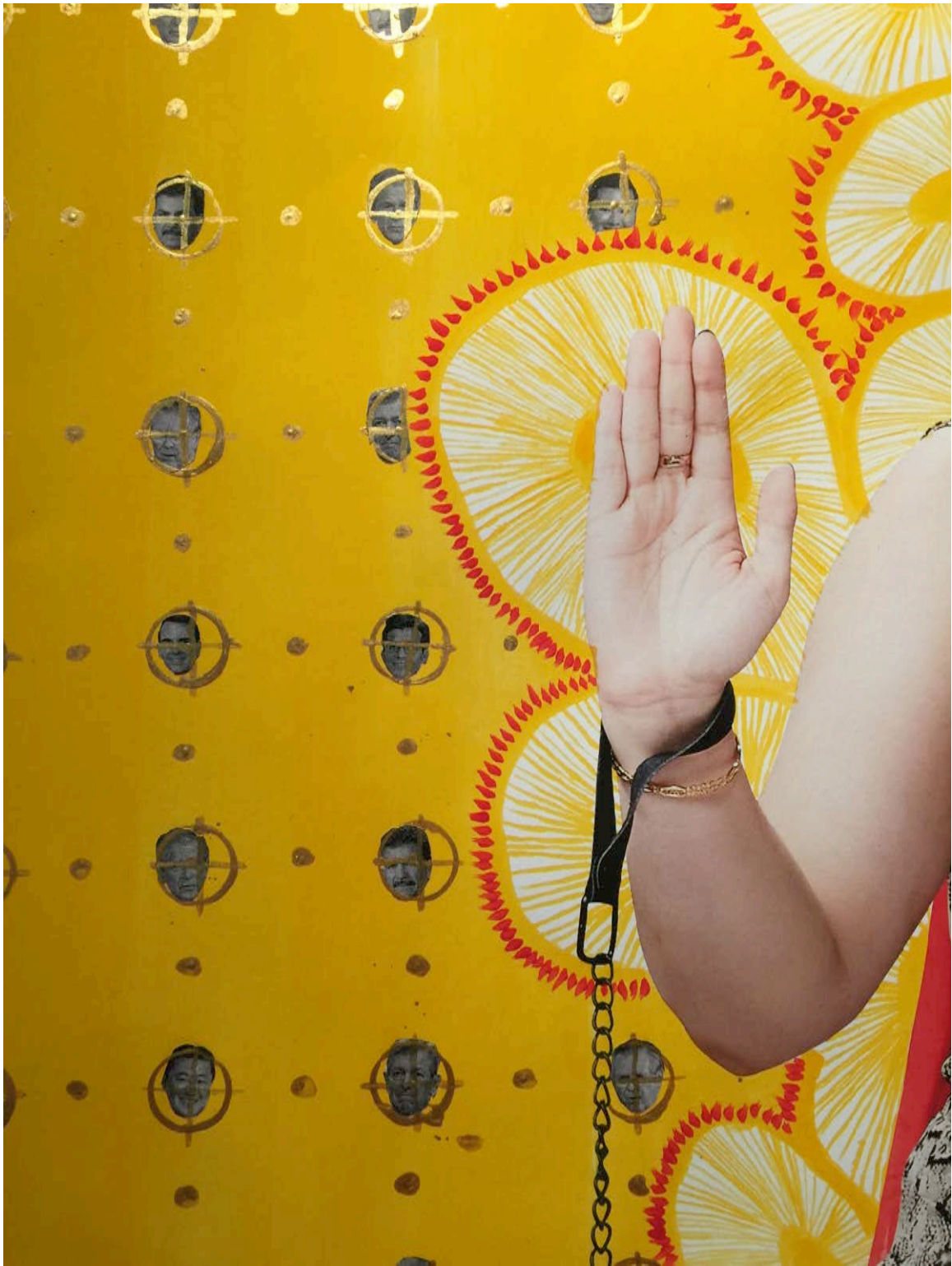


***The Goddess Durga as Phoolan Devi*, 2015**

Pigment Print on Bamboo Paper with Flashe Paint and Collage

With performance by Jacob Young and photography by Dave Rentauskas

66 x 44 inches



*The Goddess Durga as Phoolan Devi*, 2015  
Detail

OUT IT. I HOPE YOU'LL GET IN TOUCH.



*How to be a Monster*, installation view



*"I watched this being who had erupted from my brow get on her knees, open her mouth, and drink the red river that surrounded us. With every drop of blood, she became more excited, her black skin more radiant. At one point she looked up at me, smiling with all her teeth exposed, her red tongue dangling, and I understood that she hadn't manifested to kill. It was pleasure she sought, the sweet savour of life.*

*It was at that moment that I recognized her as myself*

*Kali, I whispered."*

*-Vivek Shraya, She of the Mountains*



***The Goddess Kali as Pietà*, 2015**

Pigment Print on Bamboo Paper with Flashe Paint and Collage  
With performance by RLB and photography by Dave Rentauskas  
66 x 44 inches



***The Goddess Kali as Pietà***, 2015  
Detail



***Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth*, 2015**

Pigment Print on Bamboo Paper with Flashe Paint and Collage

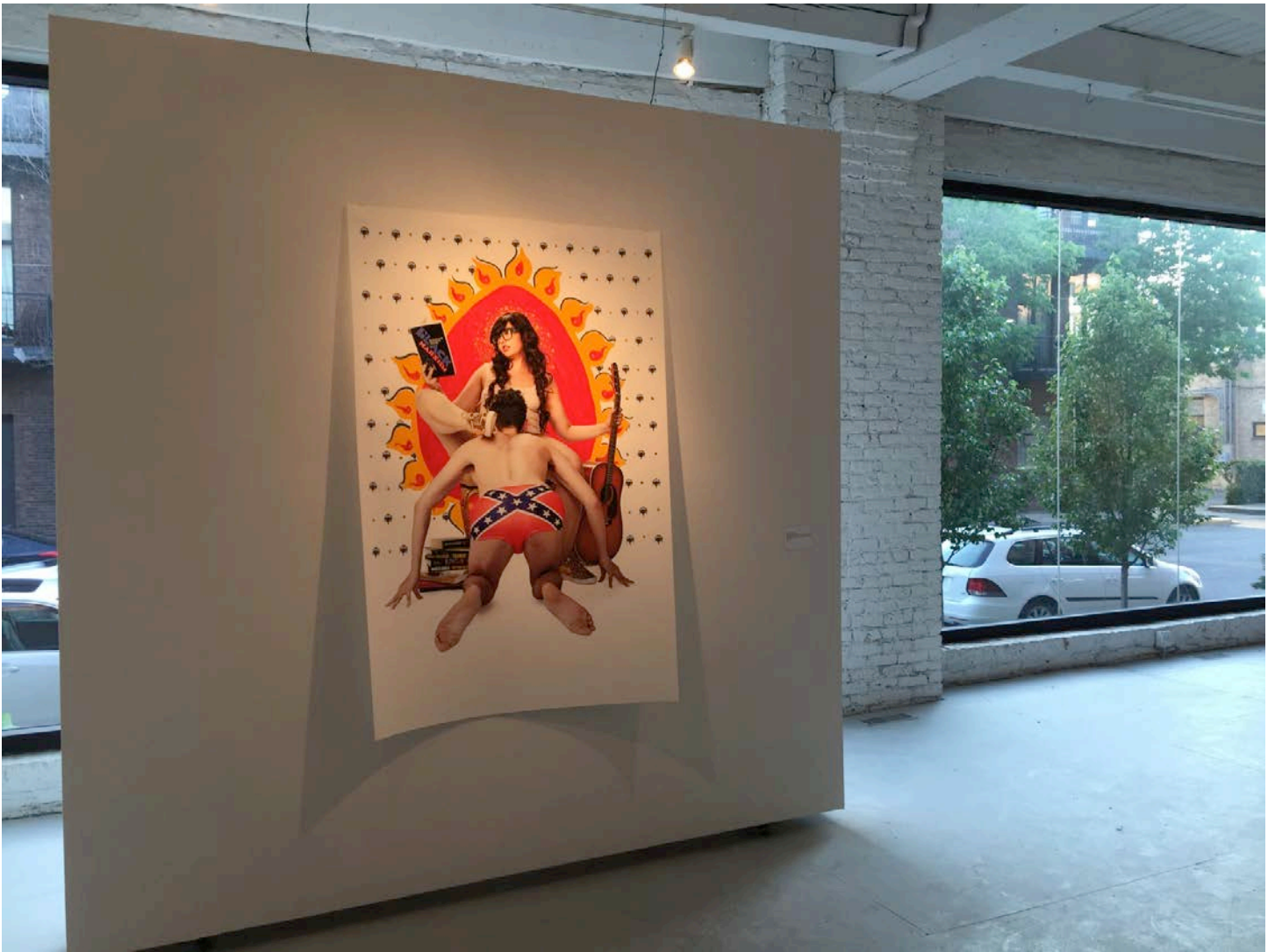
With performances by Jacob Young and RLB, and photography by Dave Rentauskas

66 x 44 inches





***Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth***, 2015  
Detail



*How to be a Monster*, installation view

VI

The devotees come at her sideways  
Full of flattery  
Bright eyes and smiles  
Never mind the claws  
Never mind the teeth.  
She says she is afraid she is being erased  
Of being whited out  
She fears for the memory of her ancestors  
She fears for the bodies of her brothers and sisters  
He listens for a while, then says "but, you look white."

She made a skirt of their severed arms  
And wove flowers into her hair.

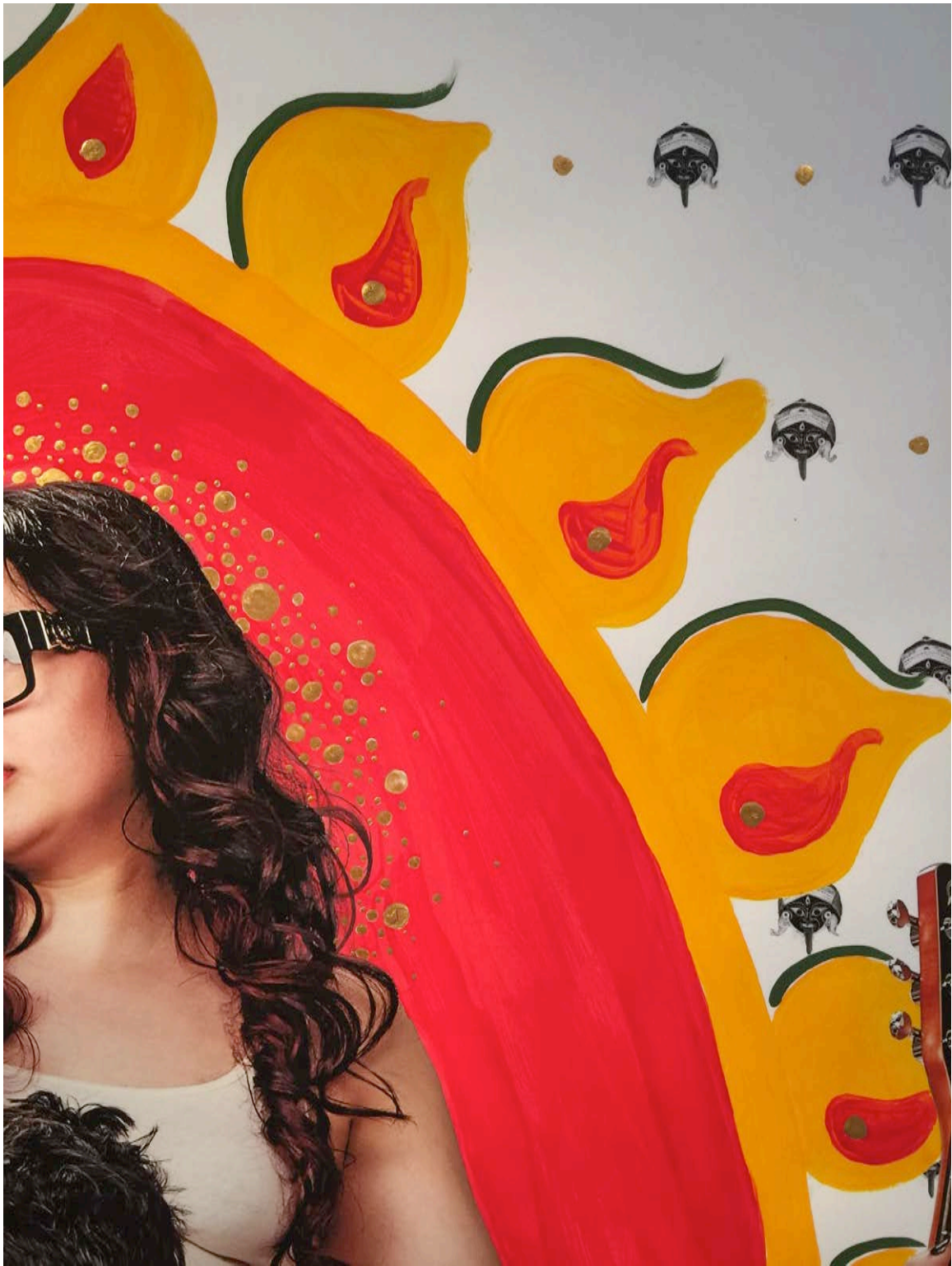
-From the Artist's Book "How to Be A Monster"



***Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge and Art (Black Marxism)*, 2015**

Pigment Print on Bamboo Paper with Flashe Paint and Collage  
With performance by RLB and photography by Dave Rentauskas  
66 x 44 inches





***Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge and Art (Black Marxism)***, 2015  
Detail



***Study for Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge and Art (Woman, Native, Other)*, 2015**

Pigment Print on Bamboo Paper with Flashe Paint and Collage

With performance by Jacob Young and photography by Dave Rentausaks

17 x 20 inches





*How to Be a Monster*, Installation view (artist's book and THUG/LIFE cards)

