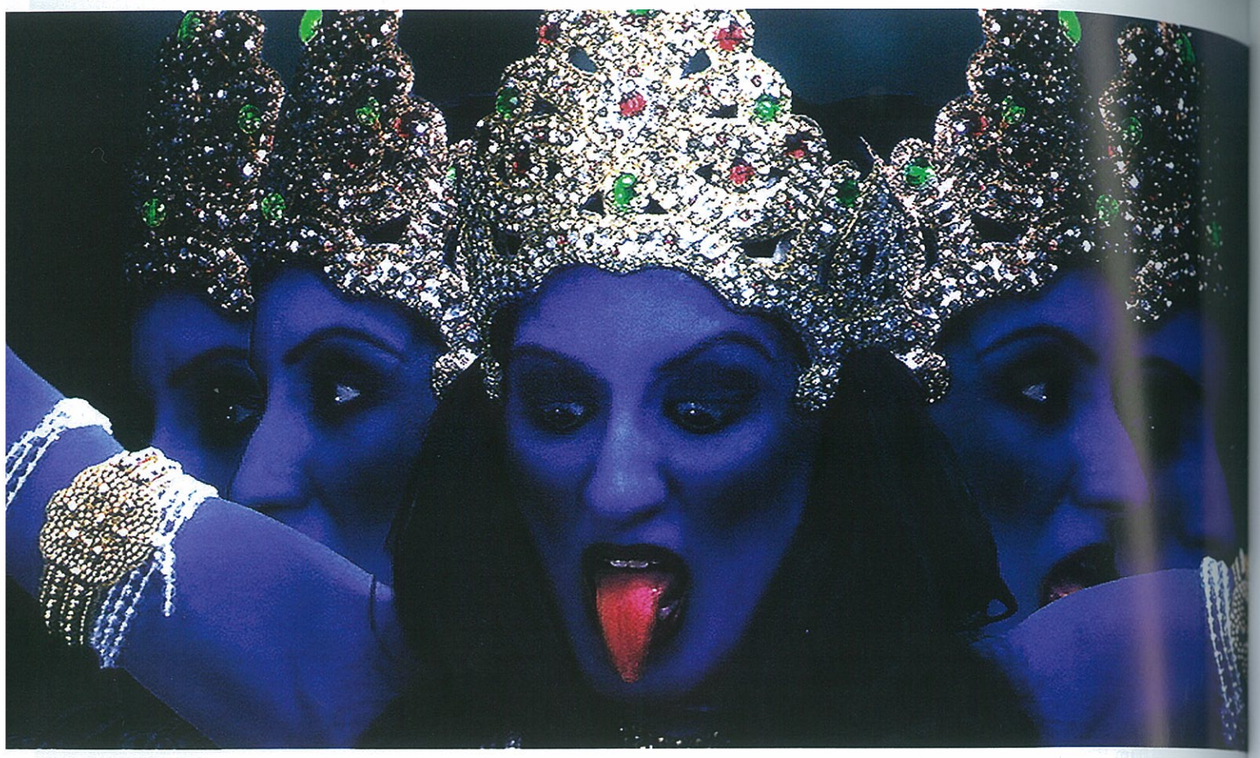


Gods in a suitcase

Toronto based filmmaker and artist Srinivas Krishna's outdoor video installation, which is part of the upcoming Auckland Festival, re-imagines Hindu deities during their most iconic moments. He spoke to Virginia Were.

When I spoke to him in July this year Toronto-based filmmaker Srinivas Krishna was in town checking out the location – Auckland's Aotea Square – for his outdoor video installation, *When the Gods Came Down to Earth*, which will be shown in March as part of Auckland Festival 2013.

To date the work, which is an affectionate and flamboyant homage to the ubiquitous presence of Indian calendar art throughout the subcontinent's homes, villages and cityscapes, has been shown as a large-scale, temporary outdoor installation in Melbourne, Toronto, Vancouver and Groningen, and as a more intimate, gallery-based work on a small screen projected inside a suitcase at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, as part of the touring exhibition *Erasing Borders, Contemporary Indian Art of the Diaspora*, in March last year.

When the Gods Came Down to Earth, which is made using classical Indian dancers, live action cinema, special effects and vivid animations, debuted in June 2008 at Melbourne's Light in Winter Festival held in Federation Square where Krishna reconfigured an on-site LED screen in the form of a three-sided beacon. On each side the lavish and alluring images of Hindu gods and goddesses seen at their most dramatic moments, which he had created, were played in random progression, 24 hours a day for a period of a month.

"Each scene has a narrative and in Melbourne we took fragments of the images from each scene and created multiple shots, which played randomly on the screens. Periodically you would get a continuous scene happening," he explains.

The installation was seen by well over a million people, more than holding its own amongst the energetic, noisy clash of traffic, pedestrians, old and modern architecture that characterises downtown Melbourne: the striking angular glass shapes of modern buildings in Federation Square opposite the grand old sandstone buildings of the CBD. The clash between antiquity and modernity, and between the secular and the divine, which is inherent in Indian calendar art – and perhaps in modern India itself – is fertile ground explored in *When the Gods Came Down to Earth*.

Though some reviewers have described the work as "irreverent" Krishna describes it as "absolutely literal".

"There's a response in art culture that we can't accept religious imagery in public space unless it's a parody. That

Opposite page: Uupekha Jain as Kali in Srinivas Krishna's installation *When The Gods Came Down To Earth*. © Srinivas Krishna and Divani Films Inc.

This page (from top): *When The Gods Came Down To Earth*, video art installation by Srinivas Krishna, Federation Square, Melbourne, 2008. Photo: courtesy of Divani Films Inc.

Mala Pisharody as Lakshmi in Srinivas Krishna's installation *When The Gods Came Down To Earth*. © Srinivas Krishna and Divani Films Inc.

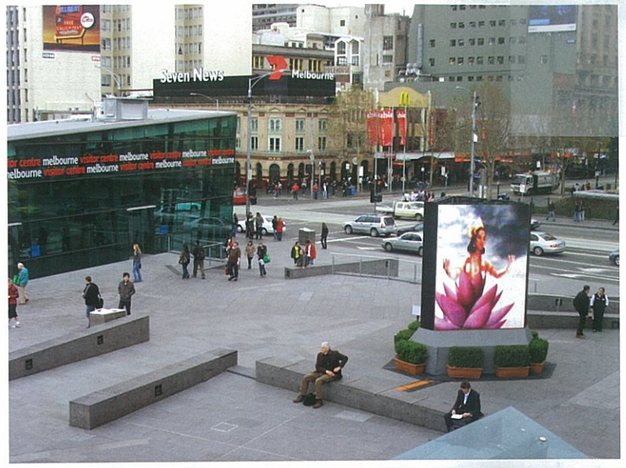
Junior Prashad as Arjuna, Biplob Kar as Krishna and Rajesh Pisharody as the Visva Virrat Roopa in Srinivas Krishna's installation *When The Gods Came Down To Earth*. © Srinivas Krishna and Divani Films Inc.

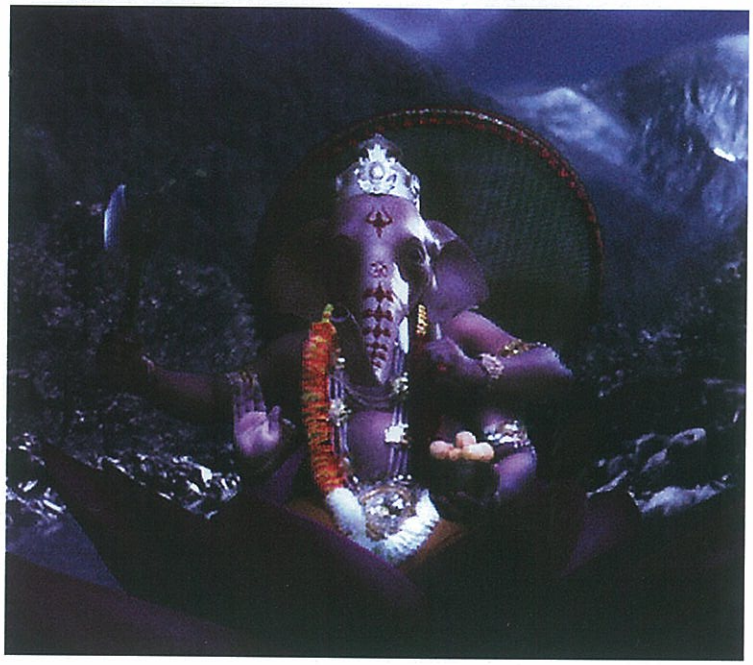
was a revelation for me because the work wasn't intended to be satirical. In India you see this bleeding between the so-called secular and sacred, but what is sacred about a piece of advertising which people frame and worship for a while and then throw away when a new picture comes along? Where does the sacredness of that image lie? That interchange between sacred and profane is an inspiration for the work."

In India calendars are traditionally given as gifts and distributed in the period between Divali and New Year. Calendar art, which followed the introduction of chromo lithography to India in the 1820s, is characterised by colour-saturated and mass-produced images of Hindu gods and goddesses (the most popular of which are Lakshmi and Ganesh); landscapes, and portraits of national heroes and movie stars. The mass circulation of these lithographic images led to the democratisation of religious and secular imagery, which was once only available to India's wealthy elite.

Widely used in advertising and marketing, these images have become synonymous with kitsch, and represent a fascinating hybrid of different cultural traditions – British and Indian. In colonial India, calendar art was produced for the anglicised Indian elite, and thus represented the westernisation of bourgeois Indian taste. Over time, however, it made its way into the homes of the nation, and the credit for popularising calendar art goes to painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848 – 1906) who fused Indian traditions with the techniques of European academic art. Varma set up one of the earliest lithographic presses in India and set about reproducing his mythological paintings by the thousands. It's this potent visual, cultural and colonial history – and the way it reflects on issues of modern Indian identity and nationhood – not to mention the incredibly rich bank of mythological images the genre contains – that interests Krishna, and which are interwoven into his kaleidoscopic video installation.

When it's shown in Auckland, *When the Gods Came Down to Earth*, will multiply like the arms of Kali, the goddess of time and change, one of the goddesses featured in Krishna's video. As well as being played on an LED screen in Aotea Square, it will be shown in an art gallery for the first time – as a giant wall projection in the Mangere Arts Centre. The festival organisers are also exploring options for the work to be played in public shopping areas.





Left (from top): Biplob Kar as Vishnu, Hiroshi Miyamoto as Brahma and Mala Pisharody as Lakshmi in Srinivas Krishna's installation *When The Gods Came Down To Earth.* © Srinivas Krishna and Divani Films Inc.

Santosh Pisharody as Ganesh in Srinivas Krishna's installation *When The Gods Came Down To Earth.* © Srinivas Krishna and Divani Films Inc.

Srinivas Krishna

"So when you see these images playing in different contexts – the public square, the mall, the marketplace and the gallery, which is probably our equivalent of the most sacred space you could go to – you become aware of how images travel and are used for different purposes," he says. "That is ultimately what the work is about and finally here in Auckland I feel it will reach its fullest realisation."

When the Gods Came Down to Earth was born of Krishna's desire to develop new motion picture experiences outside the cinema – and to shake off the encoded expectations viewers bring with them when they visit the cinema. Although these days we're accustomed to seeing large-scale video installations in public spaces, Krishna notes that the phenomenon is relatively recent.

"In North America it's the unfortunate reality that almost all public imagery is advertisement," he observes.

He notes Catalan artist Jaume Plensa's interactive *Crown Fountain*, permanently sited in Millenium Park, Chicago, since 2004, was one of a very few video installations in existence at the time he became interested in developing large-scale projections. Plensa's spectacular 'fountain' comprises two 50-foot-high glass block towers at each end of a shallow reflecting pool. Images of Chicago residents are played on the towers' LED screens, and water flows through outlets on the screens, giving the appearance that the water is spouting from people's mouths.

Like New Zealand filmmaker Vincent Ward, who has straddled the worlds of filmmaking and visual arts, Krishna had early success in the world of film with his first feature, *Masala*, which he wrote, co-produced and starred in when he was just 25 years old. *Masala* premiered in 1991–92 at the Toronto and Sundance film festivals and then became an international hit. It has been described as an audacious comedy, which is distinguished by extreme cultural double vision, and follows the lives of a bunch of middle-class Indians who live in Toronto. The British Film Institute voted it among the Top Ten South Asian Diaspora Films of the 20th century.

Krishna's current installation, *My name is Raj*, inspired by the legacy of pioneering Indian filmmaker, Raj Kapoor, was shown at the TIFF Bell Lightbox, a cultural centre and skyscraper in central Toronto, last year, and his production company Divani Films continues to produce his extremely varied artistic projects as well as the work of other filmmakers.

Like the calendar imagery from which they're drawn, the lavish mythological characters in *When the Gods Came Down to Earth* will continue to travel and multiply. In March 2013 Auckland is their next point of transit.