

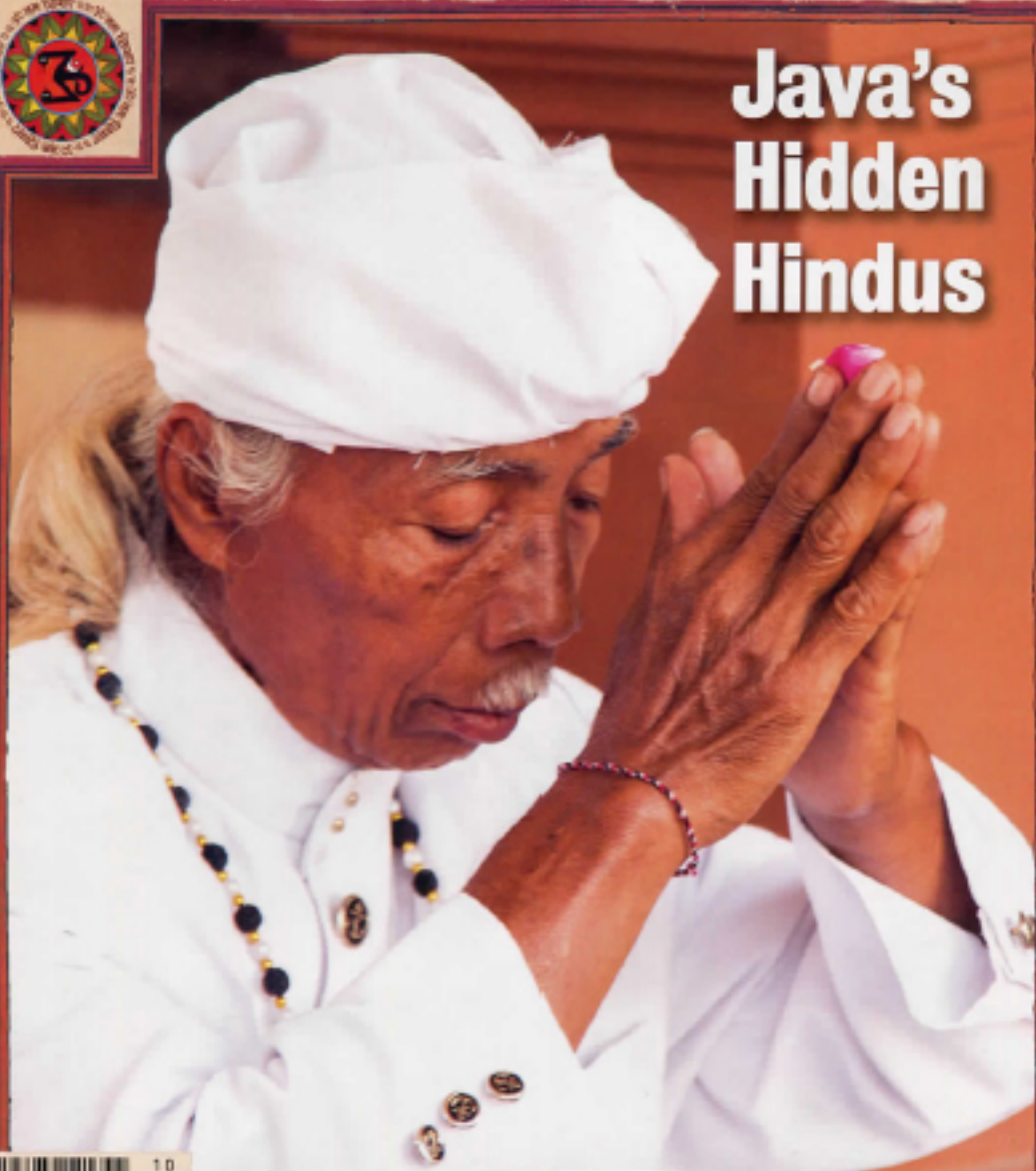
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Mortals Made Immortal

Seeing God through Manjari Sharma's creative lens





BY LAVINA MELIWANI, NEW YORK

A MAJESTIC HANUMAN HOLDS UP A mountain. Ma Saraswati sits resplendent on her tiger; Lord Shiva stands atop a vanquished demon; there is Ma Kali, fierce and blood-thirsty, garlanded with the skulls of evil-doers; and Ganesha, calm and peaceful with a bowl of laddoos in His hand.

These are familiar images of Gods and Goddesses that Hindus have worshiped since childhood and seen in sacred texts, in temples, in homes, in bazaars and in calendar art. Imagine these gigantic paintings, larger than life, in an art gallery surrounded by votive candles, making the ambiance almost that of a temple and making these images accessible to all, believers and nonbelievers.

Now what if I was to tell you that these are not paintings at all but life-size photographs of living human beings dressed up as Gods and Goddesses? That the ferocious Ma Kali is an artist in real life, Hanuman is a body builder who works in a gym, Ma Saraswati is a television anchor and Lord Brahma is an architect? That Ma Lakshmi went on to compete in the semifinals of Miss India 2014, winning the titles Miss Beautiful Smile and Miss Beautiful Hair?

Does that take away from the sacred context or enhance it? After all, Hinduism has long proclaimed the Divine within each person and explained that the human soul is but

a part of the Supreme Being, or Paramatma. Does that belief shine through this art and show man's Godliness or God's humanity?

We turned to the artist, Manjari Sharma, for the intriguing back-story on this unusual art, collectively titled *Darshan*. Sharma, who received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Columbus College of Art & Design, Columbus, Ohio, and studied at SVT College in Mumbai, has been immersed in the art world in the West.

She explained that to create this series, she conducted exhaustive research on each Divinity, which led to the gathering of a team of 35 Indian craftsmen who created props, sets, prosthetics, make-up, costumes and jewelry to her exact specifications. The final photographs are not the result of digital manipulation. They are images shot in a recreated world, almost like a film shoot. When Sharma finally looks through the lens and clicks the photograph, you get not the ordinary person—gym trainer or architect—but the transformation, the human soul as Divine Being.

Through her elaborate art, you could say Manjari Sharma is imitating the grand play, or *leela*, of the Lord, giving the role of the Almighty to the most unlikely persons. She is a long way from the temples of her youth but is creating a temple for the uninitiated through her art. She had *Darshan*, a solo exhibition, in 2013 at ClampArt Gallery in New York and then at Richard Levy Gallery in New Mexico this year. Her work is currently on view in

Transcendent Deities of India: The Everyday Occurrence of the Divine (May 2–September 14) at Asia Society in Houston, along with the work of the noted artist Raja Ravi Varma and upcoming digital artist Abhishek Singh.

Bridget Bray, director of exhibitions at the Asia Society Texas Center, tells us, "These modern and contemporary representations of the Deities preserve the tangible connection between worshipers and the objects of their reverence, which has an important religious function as well as making the works visually compelling to a broader audience."

Sharma's work has enjoyed great acclaim: it received the 2014 Curator's Choice Award at the Center, Santa Fe, and was selected for New York Times Portfolio Review. Both the art and Hindu worlds are recognizing the strength of these works: Sharma recently received the "Dharmic Arts Award" by the Hindu American Foundation in Washington DC.

"I awarded top honors to Manjari Sharma's *Darshan* project, which stood out in its appearance, inspiration, intent and technique," notes Malcolm Daniel, Curator of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. "To me, these images hover between the traditional art they reference and something wholly inventive, between constructed fiction and straight photography, and between sincere spiritual expression and kitsch. *Darshan* is an ambitious and complex undertaking and was unique among the several hundred submissions reviewed." The



museum recently acquired the Ma Saraswati photograph.

The Gods of Mumbai

So where did this story start? Sharma recalls her childhood days in Mumbai, where pilgrimage to various temples was an important part of her growing up days: "My mother was a spiritually curious soul and still is. There was always spiritual material floating around the house," she recalls. "My dad always said Hinduism is a philosophy of life. And my mom always said it was about learning to let go and trust the universe. I always had positive associations of Hinduism as a practice because it was never a compulsion. Even at a temple, you could walk around at your pace and go explore different parts of it. My parents encouraged questions, lots of them, and still do."

Although Sharma spent her growing-up years in Mumbai, she has spent the last decade in the West. She says, "That has resulted in some incredible cultural and reverse-cultural experiences. Project Darshan, in particular, had me return to India four times within

the past year and a half. I feel the work, the process, is important to me. I feel that's what Sri Krishna told Arjuna and it's what rings true for me. The process, the philosophy, the goal, is the journey and not the destination."

Sharma's work seems to incorporate so many different disciplines. For her, photography is a license to form or find visual and conceptual relationships between related and unrelated objects, people and places: "It is a discipline that at first makes me lose myself in practice but in the end find myself in its result. My artwork is rooted in the study of relationships, personal mythology and experience. I moved from India ten years ago, and the stories I like to tell seem to address, in one way or another, the disparity between these two cultures."

For Sharma, this project has been almost a devotion, a tapasya/austerity, creating these works from scratch, from transforming contemporary TV anchors and models into iconic depictions of a Higher Authority. What was she hoping to convey through these large-scale portraits of God?

"I am inviting the viewer to consider the

Gods as real people: (previous page) The final photograph of Lord Hanuman; (opposite) Asla Society Texas Center guests discuss the photograph of a five male Mumbai model transformed into Lord Nataraja; (above) making up Lord Hanuman; (below) setting up for shoots in Mumbai.

photograph instead of the painting or the sculpture as a means of spiritual engagement. I am also inviting the viewer to think about the idea of a darshan and honor the power of life-altering moments."

As she explains, usually a darshan in Hindu temple happens at dawn and dusk and consists of a prayer ceremony accompanied by burning lamps, echoing sounds of conch shells and wafting scents of flowers and incense. A connection with that image of a Deity in the form of sculpture or painting is what a devotee comes in to experience. This experience of seeking and receiving, seeing God and being seen, is called a darshan. She adds, "To me, a darshan is a moment in which you are altered forever. A true darshan will re-



Making arms

Dressing Shiva Nataraja

Ma Lakshmi makeup

Fitting Ganesha's head

Building Lakshmi's set

main with you and burn a hole in your memory. To me, life is really about going from one memorable darshan to another."

To create the technical magic of this darshan, however, was no easy task. All the images were created in India. The plan was followed by the assembly of a crew equipped to handle the production. The first image was Ma Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and fortune. Recalls Sharma, "At the time I had just under 20 craftsmen; that included jewelry designers, fashion stylists, make up and prop artists. This team eventually grew to 35 people. The production was highly involved and meticulous. It usually takes about four weeks for a piece to come together, and about a dozen pieces of film are shot. The final one that wins is always based on the expression on the character's face."

The hardest part was dealing with mortals, and people management was the mantra of the day. Says Sharma, "It was about tempering my expectation of perfection on set, and communicating to people who are used to being on a film set, that the final image will be a six-foot-tall fine art print that people will be able to inspect closely. Most craftsmen in India are used to working on what they called 'mythos' which are television soaps based on Hindu scripture. It's different when you see Ganesha for a second and then cut to a dialogue from Shiva as opposed to staring at a perfectly still high-resolution print on the wall."

Since everyone—from the models to the workers—had to be paid, there was a financial element to the project. Sharma funded it by an innovative and successful Kickstarter campaign and also sold prints of the artwork



MANJARI SHARMA

through her gallery. On Kickstarter, she aimed to raise \$20,000 but the intriguing project bagged her \$26,000. People were lured by the innovative idea, the possibility of getting these prints—and her mom's famous garam masala spice mix—as a reward for a pledge!

How have Hindus reacted to the Darshan project? "The general audience in India is a little desensitized to the subject matter of Gods," says Sharma. "My audience in India is someone who understands that there is a different medium employed than what their eye is used to seeing. It is someone who is conscious of the fact that this is an atypical form of cultural preservation, and also someone

Ma Lakshmi: One of the Miss India 2014 pageant winners transformed into a living Goddess

who appreciates the personal story that has inspired the content. There have certainly been a few art patrons from the East who have supported this project and appreciated it right from the get-go."

Indeed, viewers get to taste the other aspects of a darshan since Sharma incorporates incense lamps, sounds from her favorite temples in Mumbai and also invocations in her mother's voice of well-loved Sanskrit chants, all adding layers of memory and experience to the project.

Asked who her favorite Deity is, Sharma points to Ma Saraswati, the Goddess of Art, Music and Education, who was the last in the series. "I had a strong connection with Her and the journey was really rewarded on so many levels. When the project came to an end, I felt such a sense of belonging with Her. I may have started with Ma Lakshmi so I could have Her blessings to proceed in the project, but the goal of life is to really understand the incredible value art, music and education bring to your life. I ended my project with Ma Saraswati, a figurehead for things that have become most important to me."

The greatest reward of this adventure with the Gods? Manjari Sharma confides, "It was finally being able to stand in between these six-foot images and feel what I had planned as a scribble I could now see and experience coming to life."

See: manjarisharma.com



MANJARI SHARMA

The Camera as Medium of Worship

MANJARI SHARMA'S TESTIMONY

Having left a ritual-driven community in India, my move to the US precipitated an enormous cultural shift. It was this cultural paralysis that motivated me to use my one medium of worship—the camera—to study, construct and deconstruct the mythologies of my land.

The goal was to turn multidimensional memories of sculptures and ornamental paintings of Hindu Gods, into two-dimensional photographs. For centuries, the way that we have experienced darshans (metaphysical connection

established upon sight) is via laying gaze upon a molded figure, a carved statue or an illustration that represents a likeness to avatars described in Hindu scripture. This series of images invites the viewer to consider a photograph as means of spiritual engagement.

"By bridging the gap between the significant ceremonies of my parents' lives and my own mythology, this series has become my reason to immerse, question and push the boundaries of my faith, not only beyond my imagination, but beyond the very frame that surrounds the photograph."