

“THEY WERE FASCINATED BY MY FEROCITY: REMEMBERING BEPEN BHANA



Bepen Bhana, *For The Love of Leif VII*, from *Leif Garrett Fan Club*, 2013, oil on canvas. Photo: Joseph Griffen.

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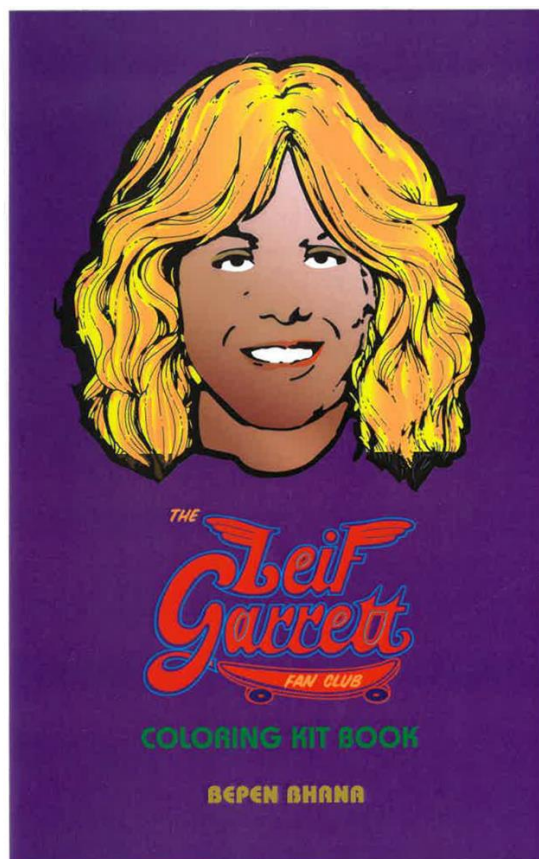
THE FIRST TIME I interacted with Bepen Bhana’s art practice was through *The Leif Garrett Fan Club*, an exhibition of photorealistic paintings of a teen-heartthrob with a Farrah Fawcett haircut holding a skateboard. It was shown in 2013 at Ferrari, a now-defunct garage-turned-gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. The paintings were accompanied by an activity kit which included a colouring-in book, a fold-out poster and felt pens. I didn’t experience this show in

person. Instead, I was in a tutorial at Massey University being told about it by my tutor, Bryce Galloway.

It was playful, elevated fan art. The care that went into rendering this has-been teen celebrity of the 1970s through exquisitely crafted paintings and ephemera tickled me. The marriage of high art practice and a figure who some might deem 'low culture', who seemed out of place in an uppercrust contemporary art world, made this work intriguing.

At that stage I thought of art as a realm largely devoid of lightness and real humour. As a Sri Lankan New Zealander, studying Fine Art at university, I felt like it was essential to incorporate my cultural background into my practice. I thought that was what made me unique in this setting and, therefore, made my practice interesting. I tried to tackle complex histories that I had little understanding of in confronting ways, which is a pitfall that many young minority artists find themselves facing. There weren't any other South Asian students in my cohort at university or teachers among the staff, and that made it difficult to discuss and critically evaluate my cultural perspective through my artwork.

Bepen sadly passed away in April this year. He and his work were an antidote for many of these difficulties that I encountered in the art world.



Cover of Leif Garrett Fan Club Colouring Kit, Bepen Bhana, 2013.

His practice offered an alternative route which, on the surface, looked less weighty. His work was mischievous and effervescent, and what was most remarkable to me was that it was enjoyable to look at. It was the opposite of the arduous, bodily endurance-based performance artwork that I was making at the time, but he still managed to incorporate his experience of cultural hybridity.

In the following years, I came across other works of Bepen's that brought back that same sense of joy and optimism, like in *BOOM! BOOM! DELUXE* originally shown at Papakura Art Gallery in 2012. For the show, he created 23 soft toy replicas of Basil Brush—a cheeky fox hand puppet and titular character of *The Basil Brush Show*, a British children's sitcom that aired from 1968–80. Bepen used the skills he developed during his studies in pattern-making to dress each replica in individual designer suits. They were made with imported fabrics that used designs from the fashion houses each model was named after, such as *Chanel II* and *Gucci III*. As a former viewer of *The Basil Brush Show*, I hadn't thought about that fox puppet in years and to find so many of him handsomely dressed in the window of WORLD, a designer store on one of the main streets in central Pōneke, was an exciting surprise. I only realised these were Bepen's creations a while later when I was looking into his practice, and at the time I gleefully thought, 'of course that was Bepen!' He applied his craftsmanship to a retro icon and spoke about our mass engrossment with consumption, celebrities and branding. From there, my intrigue deepened.



Bepen Bhana, *BOOM! BOOM! DELUXE: Louis Vuitton I*, Bepen Bhana, 2012. Wool, cotton, acrylic, leather, vinyl, linen, felt, plastic, glass and metal. Photo: Steeve Rood.

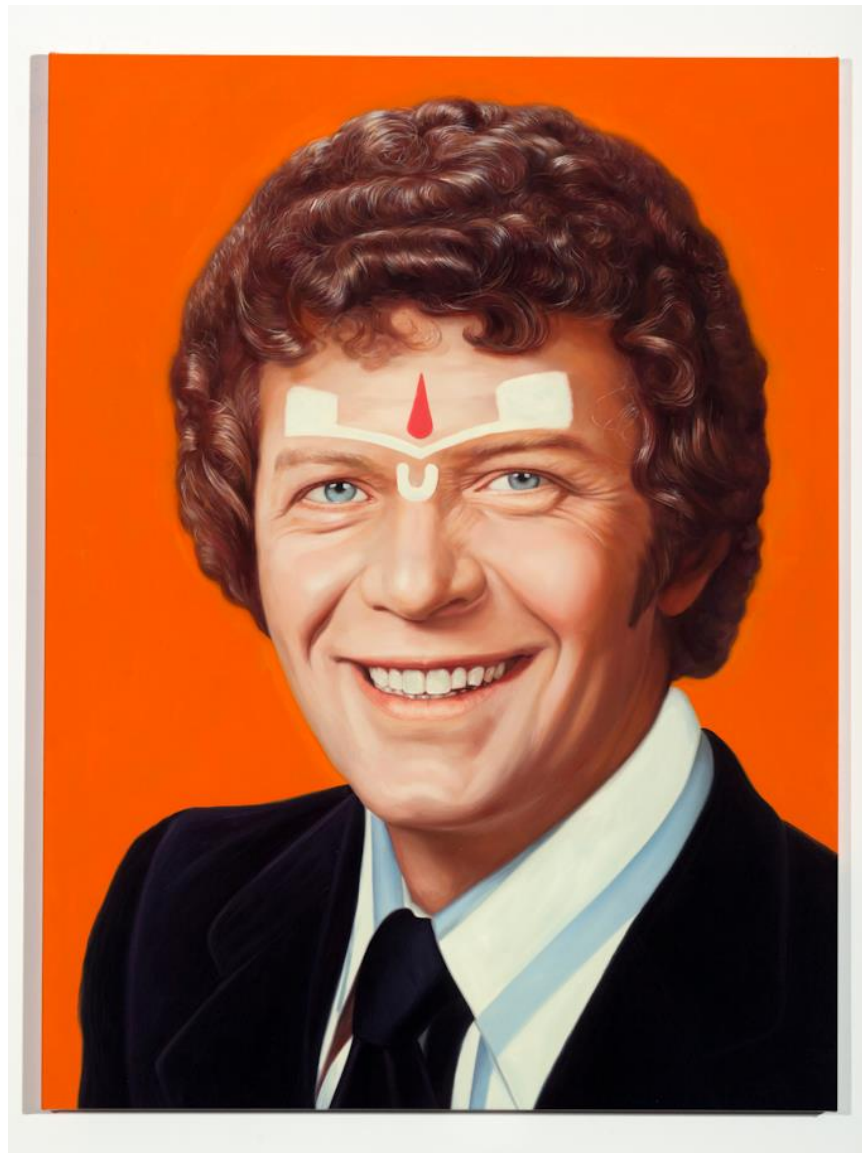
I am still an avid consumer of television, and Bepen's fascination with popular visual media brought a part of my private everyday life into the art world. I found this both challenging and comforting, since I did my best to keep those two sections of my life separate. For years, I didn't want my art to show that I binge-watched *Gilmore Girls* on a daily basis. I felt like it would negate my ability to be perceived as a 'serious' artist dealing with important Sri Lankan subject matter if I was constantly watching white characters play out their sheltered lives. Bepen, however, understood that the media we consume recreationally echoes the culture that we exist in and informs our outlook. He frequently explored the commodification of culture by playing with practices of replication and merchandising. In the early 2010s, he turned his signature practice of large-scale photo-realistic painting to the cast of *The Brady Bunch*, but in keeping true to his style, there was a twist. In each portrait, the family members sport a bindi, tilak, or caste-marker—coloured markings on the forehead common in many South Asian cultures. The paintings mimic the perfectly posed studio photographs taken of the *Brady Bunch* actors to promote their TV show, down to the block-colour backgrounds. Bepen titled this series of paintings *The Curry Bunch* (2013), which, according to him, was a take on a slur hurled at many South Asian New Zealanders: 'curry muncher'.¹ Bepen planted this token in the title, expressing his disdain by highlighting names and signifiers of mockery and hurling them back to the audience.

The Curry Bunch brings into question the idea of the ideal family and how this ideal ends up being coveted by many of its viewers, even by those whose families looked nothing like the Bradys.

As Bepen describes it, the *Curry Bunch* series was the amalgamation of the television show and the living room in West Auckland from which he watched it. Bepen described himself as a 'first-generation Kiwi born of Indian ethnicity'.² His father arrived in Aotearoa in January 1949, two years after the partition of India, and Bepen himself was born in Auckland. In their West Auckland home, the family spoke their native tongue of Gujarati so the children would not lose their language, and Bepen learned English through watching popular TV shows that aired on New Zealand television. The room's walls were covered with calendar art featuring Hindu deities framed by flower garlands and bearing the same forehead markings that Bepen had given to the 'Bradybhai' family. These images framed the television set and became Bepen's portal into the curated lives of the perfectly blended caucasian American family.

It was settings like this that likely birthed his interest in pop culture as a third culture kid. His painted re-creations suggest that the idea of the Brady Bunch embracing South Asian cultures seems laughable: how would American television allow for those two cultures to merge without it seeming like a threat to the ideal of whiteness that the Bradys represented? *The Curry Bunch* brings into question the idea of the ideal family and how this ideal ends up being coveted by many of its viewers, even by those whose families looked nothing like the Bradys. Though this cultural hybrid seems absurd, it existed in Bepen's family home and in many other immigrant

houses where there were few other options of television shows—including my own childhood living room with *Gilmore Girls* playing in the background.



Bepen Bhana, *Here's The Story, Of A Man Named Brady Mikebhai Bradybhai*, from *The Curry Bunch*, 2013. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

I did not know Bepen for long, but my relationship with him was meaningful. To have received his encouragement and generosity in the time that I knew him is extraordinarily significant. We were able to share our successes, opinions and knowledge. Not only was he one of the few South Asian colleagues I had in this field, but he was, like me, a grumpy and critical South Asian arts practitioner. I shared his grievances and felt connected to the experience that he had when he was told that there wasn't an audience for his practice in Aotearoa.³ I wanted to be a part of remedying that assumption and exhibiting Bepen's artwork was the ideal way to go about it.

Just as he showcased visual commentary on hardships resulting from racism, he also embraced forms of artistic expression associated with South Asia, such as theatre and luxurious embellishment. In two exhibitions, *Postcards from the Edge* at Te Tuhi, Pakuranga in 2013 and *Frankie Goes to Bollywood* at Te Uru, Titirangi in, 2016, Bepen created a suite of works that married Indian cinema and Aotearoa, referencing techniques used by graphic wallahs who would create large painted Bollywood movie billboards. The latter exhibition reflected the work Bepen did at the McCahon House Residency from January to April 2016, and featured idyllic Aotearoa landscapes populated by famous Bollywood actors in romantic and sensual embraces. The expressions shown in the faces of the couples are palpable and the picturesque backgrounds encapsulate the theatrical work that is put into Hindi cinema.

Bepen's work demonstrated to a large group of people that part of their culture can be shown and appreciated in visual art made in Aotearoa. His contribution is invaluable to a community like ours that has been overlooked and plagued with undesirable stereotypes.

I had the pleasure of including three pieces from *Frankie Goes to Bollywood* in *Prophetic Visions*, an exhibition held alongside the 2021 Performance Arcade. Each of these works are 3.6 metres wide and, in the exhibition, were publicly visible from the glass-fronted building on Courtney Place in Pōneke. While hosting the exhibition, I had South Asian viewers excitedly recognise the actors, many asking, 'Is that Shah Rukh Khan?' As someone who has been a host in several gallery spaces throughout Aotearoa, this was the first time that I had seen this many South Asian visitors coming into an exhibition space, joyfully engaging with such familiarity to the artwork. Bepen's work demonstrated to a large group of people that part of their culture can be shown and appreciated in visual art made in Aotearoa. His contribution is invaluable to a community like ours that has been overlooked and plagued with undesirable stereotypes.



Bepen Bhana, *Ko Genelia Rāua Ko Riteish I Te Henga / Genelia Aur Riteish Te Henga Par (Genelia And Riteish At Te Henga)*, from *Frankie Goes to Bollywood*, 2016, Oil on canvas. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

Before his passing, Bepen was in the process of completing his second doctorate at Massey University where he was studying the actor Sajid Khan. Like Leif Garrett, Khan had a short time in the limelight, but gained worldwide attention after his role in the 1966 film *Maya* alongside young Jay North. From the few images I've seen, Bepen focused on the close relationship that these characters shared as well as Khan's teen heart-throb aesthetic. Bepen collected a large amount of ephemera related to Khan over the years, like he did for many of the subjects that he took interest in. Unlike in his Garrett project, however, Bepen chose to focus on an Indian actor who was fleetingly fetishised by the Western world as an exotic import. Bepen's last suite of works stayed true to some of the main pillars of his oeuvre. They amplified his obsession with media from the 1960s and 1970s, advocating for why this history is still important, and discussed his commitment to presenting Indian culture through his perspective of cultural hybridity. I only saw this new work at his memorial. Viewing this series evoked the same feelings I had I always had when I viewed a series of Bepen's works for the first time—I was charmed, puzzled and captivated. This feeling was followed by the great sadness of realising that I wouldn't be able to hear him speak about it, see them in person or even, about it in one of his catalogues and ultimately understanding that there couldn't be more of his new explorations for me to delve into.

“...he refused to take on any of the characteristics of a ‘grateful model minority’: someone who appreciates any level of inclusion or credit that those around them are willing to give. It is for this same reason that we often see practices that present a palatable and generalised reflection of a minority experience.”

Bepen was not afraid to share his disappointment in our representation in wider media and in our underrepresentation in the field that he committed his life's work to. In an interview that I conducted with him in 2018 for a piece that I wrote for *Extended Conversations*, he asked, ‘Why is there such a dearth of South Asian art in this part of the world?’⁴ I admired this about Bepen because he refused to take on any of the characteristics of a ‘grateful model minority’: someone who appreciates any level of inclusion or credit that those around them are willing to give. It is for this same reason that we often see practices that present a palatable and generalised reflection of a minority experience. Bepen's catalogue of works, however, is a showcase of his passion for and equal criticism of the culture he consumed and that surrounded him. He turned these circumstances into artwork that was visually refreshing and exciting, layering the nuances of these complicated themes through bright veneers. His ability to simultaneously showcase his obsessions, joy, frustration and criticisms in these elaborate forms has amazed me in each of his works.

It is for this reason that Bepen's work needs to be circulated and discussed on a much greater scale than it has been. Not only just for the sake of better representation, but also for a better cultural awareness within South Asian communities of our arts practitioners. There are large

generational gaps between practising and enterprising South Asian artists, for example—Bepen himself only became aware of two South Asian students who attended Elam before him.⁵ In my own art school education, Bepen was one of the only practising South Asian artists that I was made aware of. No matter which generation we belong to, South Asians in Aotearoa have had similar experiences in the arts and have had to face the stark reality of apathy towards our work.



Bepen Bhana, *Ko Deepika Rāua Ko Shahrugh I Maukātia, Muriwai / Deepika Aur Shahrugh Maori Khari, Muriwai Par (Deepika And Shahrugh At Maori Bay, Muriwai)*, from *Frankie Goes to Bollywood*, 2016, oil on canvas. Photo: Sam Hartnett.

Knowing that institutions and curators infrequently promote and showcase South Asian artworks in Aotearoa to the same degree as artworks from what some would see as more relatable or significant cultural backgrounds, Bepen often took the dissemination of his work into his own hands. He had a sense of protectiveness over his work, a sentiment that many minority artists understand and practice because of recurring instances of misrepresentation. Bepen had fun with this set of challenges, though: the ephemera that he created for *The Leif Garrett Fan Club* was not a one-off, and prior to many of his exhibitions he undertook an involved process. For the *Frankie Goes to Bollywood* catalogue, he had the exhibition's title printed onto miniature t-shirts with matching clothes hangers fixed onto small plastic suction cups, as if they could be used as a windshield decoration. Often, he would have all of his works photographed by photographers like Samuel Hartnett and Steve Rood, printed in purposefully designed catalogues, and commission essays by invited writers or include texts he wrote himself. The sections written by Bepen would outline each conceptual and visual element that he put into the series of works, sometimes including quotes from Kim Kardashian as a way to layer the levity with dense analysis. The passion for his work and for his subject matter made experiencing his practice that much more enjoyable, because it was evident how much time and care he had put in. I myself am continuing to learn from his commitment to all parts of his practice, and how grandeur can be built from true dedication. For the rest of my career, I believe his practice will remind me of the triumph and satisfaction that diligence offers.

Though I was not a student at Manukau School of Visual Arts or Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design where Bepen taught, I learned from him. As a young artist, Bepen expanded my definition of what it meant to make culturally responsive art and how to do it. Bepen expressed

his personal interests, cultural histories and the treatment of South Asian cultures in Aotearoa—a combination which is unfortunately uncommon in the Eurocentric context that we live in. Prior to this, no one in this field had shown me that my practice could be larger than just an interpretation of my ethnicity and that by solely focusing the content of our creative outputs to places that we originate from, we limit the understanding of our complex worldview.

Bepen's contribution to the arts was immense and so was his dialogue about his experience as a South Asian New Zealander. The works I have mentioned in this text provide a glimpse into his practice. In his lifetime, he was willing to address the racism we face with a wicked sense of humour and a perceptive vision, while also demonstrating the dedication, talent, wit, and playfulness that made his practice distinctive. In my eyes, Bepen was the paragon of a practising artist.

Notes

The title of this text quotes Blair Waldorf in *Gossip Girl*, Season 6, Episode 6, 'Where the Vile Things Are'.

¹ Bhana, Bepen, 'I'm not a snitcher. I just tell it like it is'* in *The Curry Bunch*, Tāmaki Makurau Auckland: Mangere Art Centre Ngā Tohu o Uenuku, 2013. *Quote from Cindy 'Thindy' Brady, Season 2, Episode 10, 'The Tattletale'.

² Bhana, Bepen and Pinker, James, 'Questions for Bepen Bhana: A conversation with James Pinker' in *The Curry Bunch*, 2013, 56.

³ Bepen Bhana, interview with the author, 28 June, 2018.

⁴ Bepen Bhana, interview with the author, 28 June, 2018.

⁵ Shruti Yatri graduated from Elam in 1995 and Parbhu Makan in 1975.

About the author

Dilohana Lekamge is an artist, writer and curator based in Tāmaki Makaurau. She is the current Gallery Coordinator at Fresh Gallery Ōtara and an Archivist at Satellites. She recently completed the writer's residency at RM Gallery and Project Space. In 2022 she curated the exhibition *The house is full* at Te Tuhi. In 2021 she was the Associate Curator at the Performance Arcade and was a Facilitator at MEANWHILE from 2017 to 2019.

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A newly commissioned film by Dilohana is featured in *Like water by water*, curated by Simon Palenski and Amy Weng, at Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru, until 3 September 2023. Presented in partnership by The Physics Room and Blue Oyster Art Project Space.

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