

## Mouth of Flowers profile piece "Testing Boundaries"

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Artists have the ability to push the boundaries and Footscray's Gabrielle Bates is no exception. **FIONA O'DOHERTY** writes



Gabrielle Bates revisits the controversy of her Malaysian art.

Picture: ADAM ELWOOD 14/11/2003

# Testing boundaries

## ART

**A** PAINTING of the Hindu god Krishna giving the finger stirred up some controversy recently for Footscray artist Gabrielle Bates.

The painting was withdrawn from an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on the advice of the curators who were afraid it would offend a culturally diverse but sensitive Malaysian audience. "As one said to me 'I have received death threats over lesser things than this,'" Bates said. Bates was attending a 12-month

artist exchange last year when she was invited to take part in an exhibition titled 60.13 Superstar in which artists focused on celebrity. "I began to play around with the way we depict celebrities using western and eastern gods and goddesses who were acting out like Britney Spears or Paris Hilton," she said.

Other paintings included one of female Buddhist deity Kuan Yin surrounded by paparazzi and a magazine cover of Jesus and Mary Magdalene speculating about their "on again, off again" relationship. Despite being aware of the cultural

## EXHIBITION

**When:** Now until April 12  
**Where:** Trocadero Gallery, Level 1, 119 Hopkins St, Footscray,  
Wednesday to Saturday, 11am-5pm  
**Details:** 9687 6110

conservatism of the country, Bates said she was surprised that her image of Krishna caused concern. "It was so cartoon-esque, I was amused more than anything else that this had happened but I also

started to think about the ins and outs of censorship," she said. The result was her most recent exhibition, Mouth of Flowers, now on at the Trocadero Gallery in Footscray. It includes a copy of a sign commonly seen in Malaysia of a couple kissing with a red line through it.

"The actual offence is 'no indecent behaviour'," Bates said. "It just marked the differences between our cultures. I didn't want to make a judgment in any way because I was a guest in another country. It was just interesting."

Ink drawings and watercolours were used to create other works in the exhibition featuring images of the artists, dancers and musicians Bates met in Malaysia. In many cases, their mouths have been sewn shut with golden thread or appear stuffed with and silenced by flowers.

"But I don't think the figures are victims. There is a peacefulness with them. They are OK with the situation," she said. "The work in the exhibition is about the process of coming to terms with a new culture rather than something angry or vitriolic."