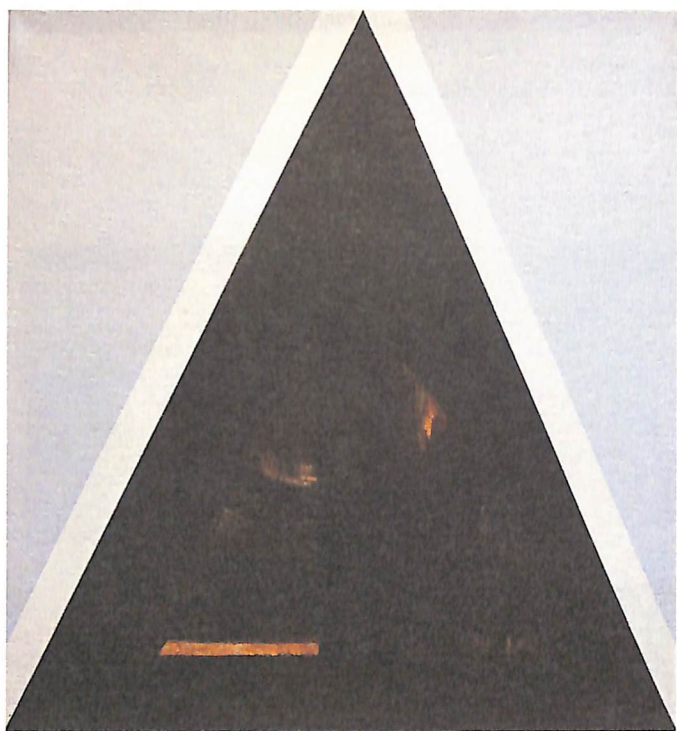


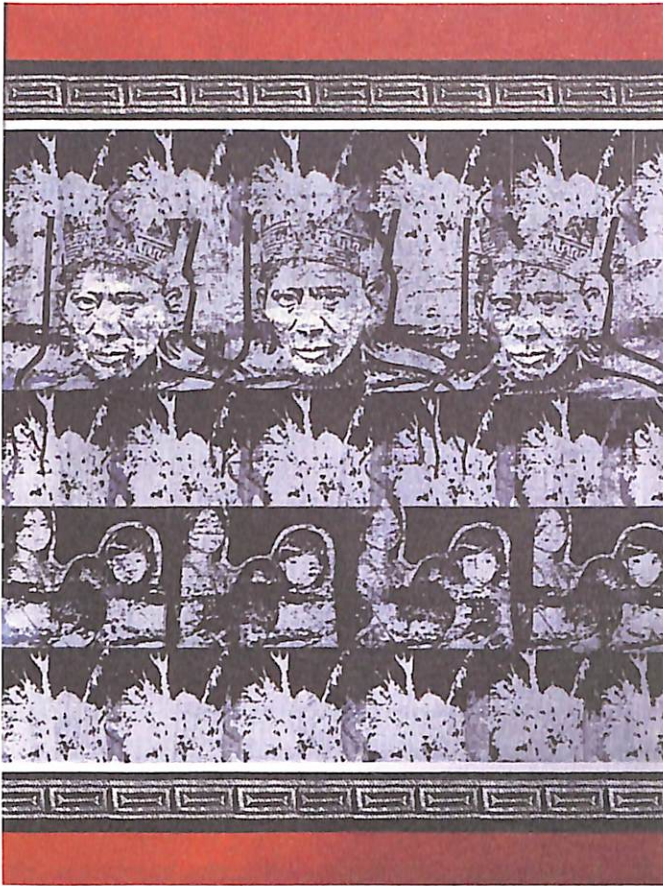
Nirmala Dutt: Great Leap Forward



7 - 27 January 2017

GREAT LEAP FORWARD

By Simon Soon



Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak, 1989
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 × 92 cm



Bakun II, 1999
Acrylic on canvas, 91.5 × 101.5 cm

In recent months, concerns over the rights of indigenous communities have surfaced. The most recent incident concerns the Temiar people in the state of Kelantan, who have set up blockades to prevent loggers from entering the Balah forest reserve. The state government controversially intervened to dismantle the blockades; in effect throwing their support behind the loggers in an ongoing land-rights dispute.

Conflicts of this nature are not new. In fact, they are closely connected to a programme of modernisation that contemporary artists in Malaysia have grappled with since the 1970s. Though Nirmala Dutt very early on established herself as a pioneering contemporary artist with a voice of conscience, her practice in the 1990s crystallises her early conviction about the role that art could play as a tool for social commentary.

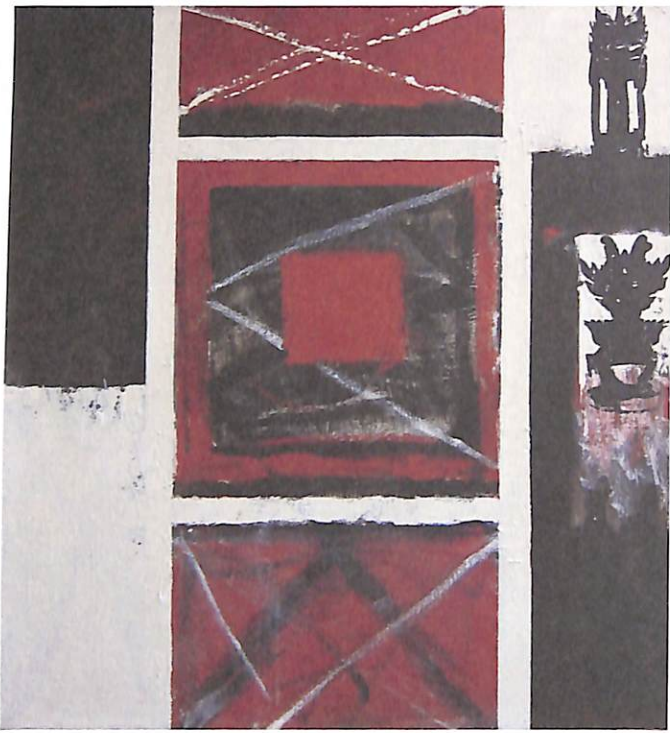
The exhibition GREAT LEAP FORWARD looks specifically at a period of immense socio-political change. The title of this exhibition follows from an important series of works developed by Nirmala throughout the 1990s. The phrase makes reference to the disastrous economic campaign initiated by Mao Zedong from 1958 – 1961. The campaign was aimed at transforming China from an agrarian economy to a socialist state through rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. Instead, it caused one of the worst famines in Chinese history.

The contradictions encapsulated by the phrase help Nirmala to critique the ideological vision that drives Malaysia's economic progress. In this series, she cast a critical eye on the cost of progress under then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who sought to turn Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020. Her works from this period often incorporate indigenous motifs and newspaper clippings, which bring our attention to those who are left behind in Malaysia's relentless pursuit for economic modernisation. These issues range from the construction of the Bakun hydroelectric dam and the displacement of the native population to the environmental cost resulting from illegal logging.

The triangular form recurs constantly in her work. It anchors her pictorial collages, which are made up of segments that are both painted and pieced together with news articles. Upon closer examination, they indict those in power for the tragedies wrought upon those who are voiceless. In the two diagonal lines that converge in the upper point of the canvas, the shape of the triangle also conveys a sense of speed and dynamism, symbolising the civilisational ethos of the day—modernisation at any cost.

The triangle could, for example, metaphorically refer to *Mount Meru* of Hindu cosmology or the *Pohon Beringin* of wayang kulit. In this instance, the pictorial schema is almost like a cipher for an axis that structures the unfolding events. It's as if Nirmala is suggesting that contemporary social issues could be understood through the struggle between good and evil that underlies a wayang kulit performance. Except, of course, it is never guaranteed in the story of modernity, that good will always win.

Nirmala Dutt (1941 – 2016) passed away peacefully on 5th December 2016. She was looking forward very much to the opening of this exhibition. We wish to pay tribute to her courage and artistic vision. May it inspire future artists to follow in her footsteps, to always seek out new aesthetic horizons and to always lend one's voice to the voiceless.



Untitled, 1999
Acrylic on canvas, 102 x 92 cm



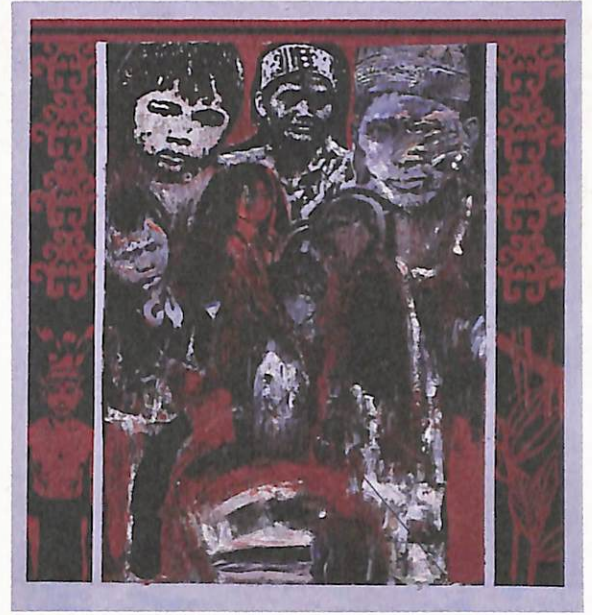
Mah Meri Landscape IV, 1999
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 x 92 cm



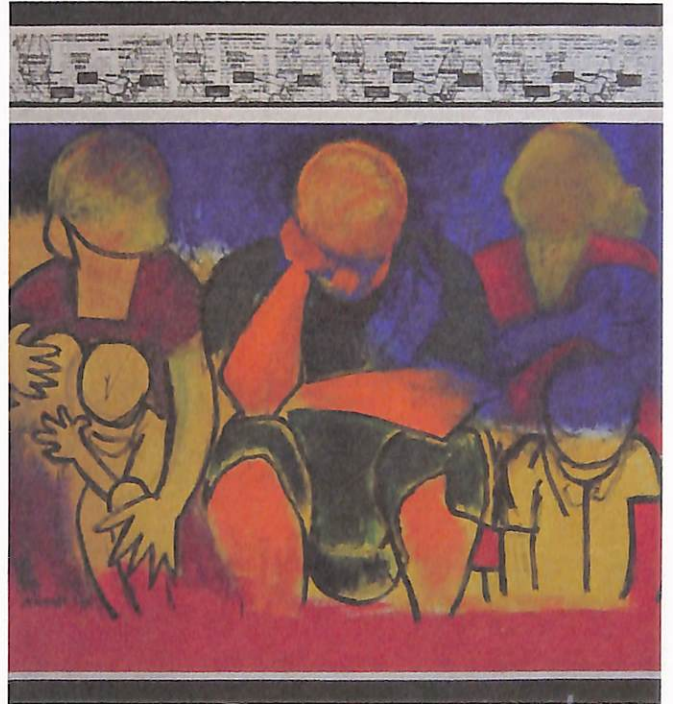
Kampong Polo II, 1984
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 x 206 cm



WIP, c.1998 – 1999
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 × 91.5 cm



Penan Landscape, 1989
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 91.5 × 81 cm

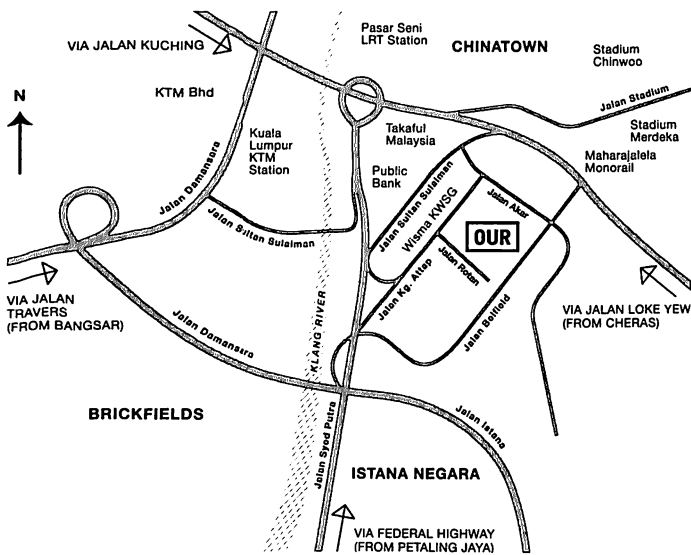


Bakun I, 1999
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 102 × 91.5 cm

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nirmala Dutt (1941 – 2016) may be called the conscience of our times. She was a pioneering figure in Malaysian contemporary art in more ways than one. Not only was she one of the few prominent woman artists to have emerged in the 1970s, her exploration of new aesthetic forms also broke new grounds. Her practice spanned documentary photography, painting, silkscreen, collage, and public art. She began her training under Mohd. Hoessein Enas, a key figurative painter, and went on to art schools in the United States and the U.K. She returned to Malaysia in 1978, and had since become a prominent figure in Malaysian art.

Nirmala's biggest goal in art was to direct our attention towards the plight of the downtrodden. In turn, she called upon the artist to play the role of a social commentator. From her early photographic account of environmental destruction and poor living conditions in the slum environment of Kuala Lumpur to epic scale silkscreen paintings that formed an indictment against world disasters and war atrocities, Nirmala remained perhaps our most socially committed artist. While her work was always deeply emotional and often painful, she demonstrated great artistic curiosity through her research into our region's aesthetic philosophies and forms, in order to experiment with new pictorial expressions that were crucial for her push towards relevance, clarity and impact.



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Founded as an art consultancy and project platform in 2013, OUR ArtProjects now operates a gallery space located in a row of restored c.1950s interconnected shophouses, in Kampung Attap, Kuala Lumpur. The building once housed the Selangor Zhongshan Association, and is now becoming an exciting arts hub. Playing to the strength of our existing networks and experiences, OUR ArtProjects focus on identifying important practices in Malaysian art as well as producing compelling and engaging exhibitions. We also introduce significant art practices that have emerged in neighbouring countries. The sum of its parts, like 'OUR' namesake, seeks to advance vital, meaningful yet inclusive dialogue among artists, enthusiasts, collectors, curators, and institutions in Malaysia and around the world.