





Cover: Vietnam II, 1980
Vietnam II, 1980
Acrylic 48" x 48"
Koleksi : Redza Piyadasa

Nirmala Shanmughalingam
Keadaan Manusia
The Condition of Being

Solo Show 15 Jan 1981

Opened by
Tan Sri Kamal
Ariffin
Majida

Anjuran Bersama
Muzium Seni Negara dan
Majalah Dewan Budaya
Sponsored jointly by the National
Museum of Art & Dewan Budaya

Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka
Kuala Lumpur
9 - 16 Januari 1981

Pendahuluan

Pelukis tulen bukan sahaja perlu bersifat peka terhadap alam persekitaran yang terhampir dengannya tetapi juga terhadap kehidupan di sekeliling alam persekitaran itu. Nirmala adalah manusia pelukis yang bersifat seperti ini.

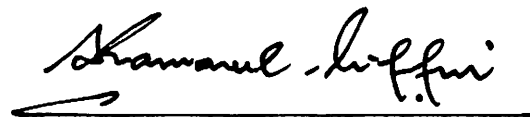
Sejak pertengahan tahun enam puluhan lagi Nirmala sering turut menyertai pameran tahunan yang di adakan oleh Muzium Seni Negara. Penyertaan beliau dalam pameran tahunan ini mencapai kemuncaknya pada tahun 1973 bila beliau berjaya memenangi Hadiah Utama dalam pameran kebangsaan yang bertemakan **Manusia dan Dunianya** anjuran Muzium Seni Negara. Karyanya ini merupakan detik yang bersejarah dalam perkembangan dunia seni lukis Nirmala. Karya beliau yang dahulunya beraliran Ekspresionisma Abstrak serta seni untuk seni itu, kini berubah kepada aliran seni untuk masyarakat.

Tahap kedua kerjayanya dalam bidang seni diteruskannya lagi melalui kegiatan beliau merakamkan gambaran kemusnahan alam sekitar di Wilayah Persekutuan dan Selangor melalui bidang senifoto pula. Dalam tahap ini beliau mengabadikan alam persekitaran kanak-kanak yang tinggal di kawasan setinggan – kanak-kanak yang dahulunya kita anggap sebagai tidak berbeza dengan beribu-ribu kanak-kanak yang lain. Pada tahun 1979 beberapa gambarfoto rakaman beliau telah di jadikan bahan utama dalam pameran yang dianjurkan oleh pelbagai pertubuhan – dari pertubuhan UNESCO dan Kementerian Kesihatan sampailah kepada Fakulti Perubatan Universiti Malaya.

Permulaan tahun lapan puluhan merupakan detik yang amat bererti kepada Nirmala. Dalam tahap ketiga ini beliau berjaya menggabungkan teknik-teknik seni lukis beliau pada masa lalu untuk menyampaikan apa yang hendak diperkatakan oleh beliau. Kebolehan beliau menseimbangkan imej yang berulangan dari media massa – yakni ungkapan Kurun ke20 – dengan teknik sapuan secara ekspresionis, telah menghasilkan karya seni lukis yang amat berkesan. Tema utama Nirmala dalam tahap ini adalah mengenai

manusia – apa yang dilakukan oleh manusia terhadap manusia. Manusia berperang untuk menghapuskan sesama manusia dan bukan nya berperang untuk menghapuskan kemiskinan. Kemusnahan wanita dan kanak-kanak, manusia dan alam, baik di Afrika, Asia Tenggara mahupun di kawasan mundur di negara kita bukan lagi merupakan statistik yang kaku.

Pelukis Malaysia dalam tahun-tahun lapan puluhan kini semakin memandang berat terhadap masyarakatnya. Peranan pelukis sebagai penghubung hati nurani masyarakat menawarkan kemungkinan yang menggalakkan kepada seni lukis Malaysia dalam dekad lapan puluhan. Nirmala telah memberikan sumbangan yang menarik dan bererti kepada seni lukis Malaysia.



(Kamarul Ariffin)
Pengerusi, Lembaga Amanah,
Muzium Seni Negara,
Kuala Lumpur.

Foreword

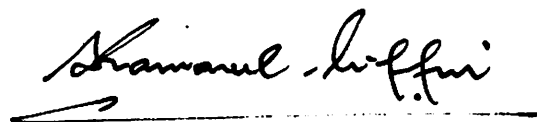
It is expected of a true artist to be sensitive not only to his or her immediate environment but also to the life surrounding it. Nirmala is such a person.

She has been a regular participant to the annual exhibitions of the National Museum of Art since the mid-sixties. These entries culminated in her winning the Major Award at the **Man and His World** national exhibition in the National Museum of Art in 1973. This work represented a major landmark in Nirmala's artistic development. Her work moved from Abstract Expressionism and purely aesthetic concerns to involvement in social themes.

The second phase in her artistic career continued with her photographic documentation of the ravaging of the environment in the Federal Territory and Selangor. In the same phase she captured the environment of children living in squatter areas. These children had previously been a mere statistic in many of our minds. In 1979 some of her photographic documentation were featured in events sponsored by organisations ranging from UNESCO and the Ministry of Health to the Medical Faculty, University of Malaya.

The beginning of the Eighties has been particularly significant for Nirmala. In this third phase she has arrived at a successful synthesis of her earlier techniques for conveying what she has to say. The juxtaposition of repetitive images from the mass media, idiom of the 20th Century, with expressionistic brushwork is particularly effective. Nirmala's major theme in this phase is the condition of being – what man does to his fellow beings through wars of destruction instead of wars on poverty. The ravages on woman and child, man and landscape whether in Africa, in South East Asia or in our slums are no longer digits in the distance.

The Malaysian artist of the eighties is now even more relevant to society. The role of the artist as the conscience of society offers exciting possibilities as Malaysian art enters the decade of the Eighties. Nirmala has made a significant and interesting contribution to Malaysian art.



(Kamarul Ariffin)
Chairman, Board of Trustees,
National Museum of Art,
Malaysia

Dari Usman Awang

From Usman Awang

HADIAH*

...Ah, kenapa kaubawakan senapang,
Kereta meriam dan kapal terbang perang –
Meski sekadar barang mainan—
Sebagai tanda-mata hari-lahir gemilang?

Betapakah kerelaan dari kebenaran
Antara kehormatan dan keyakinan teguh,
Sebab kau mengajar anak-anak membunuh?

Manakah milik dunia yang baik,
Ah, berikan padanya, ia bisa senyum jua
Meski sekadar sekerat pensil kayu cuma.

Anakku dan anak-anak kita semua
Jangan dilukai hati mereka dengan senjata,
Biar di wajah dan hatinya cinta berbunga,
Dunia yang damai, hidup yang sejahtera!

*** "... seorang penulis tidak melihat batas sempadan benua. Tidak terikat pada warna kulit dan keturunan bangsa kerana tangis seorang anak di Sungai Kelang adalah juga tangis seorang anak di Sungai Mekong. Air mata seorang ibu di Kuala Trengganu adalah juga air mata seorang ibu di belantara Afrika.

"... Dunia yang kita anggap moden dan maju sekarang ini saya kira masih biadab lagi sebab manusia belum puas membunuh satu sama lain, menindas satu sama lain dan menipu satu sama lain."

"... Tapi sebagai manusia kita ikut merasakan kemanusiaan yang ada pada semua manusia. Dari sinilah permulaan, satu permulaan untuk hidup bersama rukun dan damai tanpa perang, tanpa permusuhan, tanpa penjajahan."

GIFT**

*Oh why do you bring him guns,
Artillery tanks and war planes –
Though only playthings –
As souvenirs of this bright day?*

*How can you reconcile the truths
Of honour and the staunchest faith
With teaching children how to murder?*

*Whatever good thing the world possesses,
O, give it to him, he can still smile
With only a broken piece of wood, a pencil.*

*My child and all our children,
Let not their hearts be injured with weapons!
Let love bloom on their faces and in their hearts
For a peaceful world, a prosperous life!*

*** "... a writer (or artist) does not recognise continental boundaries. He is not constrained by the colour of the skin or nationality because the tears of a child in the Klang River are also the tears of a child in the Mekong River. The tears of a mother in Kuala Trengganu are also the tears of a mother in deepest Africa."

"... the world today which we consider more modern and advanced I believe, is still vulgar, because man has not satisfied his lust to kill one another, to exploit one another, to cheat one another."

"But ... we should continue to feel the humanity which exists within all people. This is the beginning, a start for a peaceful life together, without war, enmity, colonialism".

*Usman Awang, *Galombang*, K.L.: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1979 (ms. 84).

**Sajak-sajak Melayu Baru/Modern Malay Verse, 1946 – 1961, K.L.: Fajar Bakti, 1971 (p. 27).

***Wawancara dengan Usman Awang, *Nadi Insan*, Julai 1979, (pp. 4 – 9).

Nirmala Shanmughalingam

diperkenalkan oleh Redza Piyadasa

Nirmala Shanmughalingam dilahirkan di Pulau Pinang pada tahun 1941. Beliau menamatkan sekolah menengahnya di Sekolah Perempuan Methodist Pulau Pinang pada tahun 1960 dan melanjutkan Tingkatan Enamnya di Sekolah Lelaki Methodist Kuala Lumpur. Bila tamat persekolahannya pada tahun 1962, beliau membuat keputusan menjadi pegawai pelancang. Pada tahun 1965 Nirmala mengahwini seorang pegawai Perbendaharaan dan pada tahun berikutnya mengikuti suaminya ke Amerika Syarikat selama enam bulan. Semasa di Washington, beliau menjadi pelajar sambilan di Corcoran School of Art di Washington D.C. Beliau kembali ke Malaysia pada tahun 1967. Beliau ke Amerika Syarikat sekali lagi pada tahun 1971. Walaupun kini mempunyai dua orang anak, beliau berupaya mengikuti pengajian di Fogg Museum yang terletak di Cambridge, Massachusetts. Pada awalnya pengajian senilukis formal diperolehinya separuh masa. Hanya pada penghujung tahun 1975 beliau dapat mengikuti sepenuh masa. Puan Nirmala telah mengikuti kursus sepenuh masa di Politeknik Oxford, termasuk dalam sebaran am, senilukis grafik dan psikologi. Beliau lulus pada tahun 1978 dengan ijazah Sarjana Muda Sains dengan kepujian. Sekembalinya ke Malaysia pada tahun yang sama, beliau bekerja selama dua tahun dengan Perbadanan Kemajuan Pelancungan sebagai Pegawai Pelancungan. Sekarang beliau ialah pelukis sepenuh masa.

Bagi Nirmala, penemuan seni adalah pahit dan perjalanannya mengambil masa. Terhimpit antara tanggungjawab sebagai isteri dan juga ibu kepada dua orang anak, beliau perlu menemui masa-masa terluang yang jarang-jarang didapati untuk memenuhi kehendak seninya. Syukur baginya, kerana anak-anaknya kini sudah dewasa dan beliau akhirnya berupaya wujud sebagai seorang pelukis yang serius. Persefahaman dan galakan dari suaminya sudah tentu membantu dalam menemui kekuatannya yang khusus dan juga keyakinannya.

Kedua-dua perjalanannya ke Amerika Syarikat adalah penting kerana dari situ beliau terdedah kepada keghairahan suasana *avant garde* Amerika. Beliau menyatakan bahawa dirinya dipengaruhi oleh *Abstract Expressionism* dan juga kecenderungan-kecenderungan senilukis pop.

Dua orang pelukis Amerika, Robert Motherwell dan Robert Rauschenberg sangat diminatinya. Karya-karya awal yang dihasilkan di Amerika Syarikat membayangkan minat dalam sapuan yang berani dan teknik kolaj. Minatnya dalam imej-imej gubahan terutamanya amat jelas.

Sekembalinya ke Malaysia pada tahun 1972, beliau membuat keputusan melukis aspek-aspek lanskap Malaysia. Beliau bertujuan untuk memperbaiki kemahirannya dan usaha-usaha awal dalam mentafsirkan pemandangan tempatan digerakkan oleh aspirasi-aspirasi yang romantik. Karya-karya yang dihasilkan pada masa ini mendedahkan minatnya dalam pengaruh-pengaruh *Abstract Expressionism*. Adalah jelas beliau seorang pelukis yang sensitif. *The View from Federal Hill, 1972* (ilustrasi 5, koleksi Dr. dan Puan E.K. Ng, Kuala Lumpur) adalah sebuah karya yang mantap, lebih dikenali kerana sifat-sifat akademiknya yang kejam. Beliau amat bergantung kepada olahan *gestural* dan warna coklat kemerahmerahan. Ini mewujudkan suasana kabur dan berkabut. Selepas melukis karya ini Nirmala menjalani perubahan hebat dalam sikapnya terhadap seni lukis, menyebabkan beliau menyoal kembali nilai-nilainya sebagai pelukis.

Nirmala menjelaskan kepada penulis ini, bahawa dalam usahanya melihat lanskap Malaysia yang sebenarnya, beliau mendapati bahawa pengekal alam semulajadi kurang diberikan perhatian. Dalam banyak tempat, beliau mendapati trektor dan mesin gergasi mencacatkan lanskap. Kehijauan digantikan oleh tanah merah. Ini juga menimbulkan masalah ekologi. Sampah sarap dan kotoran industri mencemarkan sungai-sungai dan dalam banyak tempat udara dipenuhi debu. Dan tidak siapa pun mempedulikan! Dalam benak pemikirannya, keseimbangan antara manusia dan alam adalah penting. Sesuatu perlu dilakukan untuk mengingatkan rakyat Malaysia tentang krisis ekologi yang disaksikannya. Pada ketika inilah beliau meninggalkan senilukis. Teknik lukisan tradisional didapatinya tidak dapat memenuhi tujuan-tujuannya.

Keputusan Nirmala untuk memasuki bidang fotografi adalah satu kesan lanjutan. Dalam satu hal, fotografi lebih sesuai untuk perhatian sosialnya. Beliau menghabiskan seluruh tahun 1973 menjelajah Selangor

merakamkan dalam fotografi segala imej kehancuran alam sekitar yang ditemuinya acap kali. Semua gambar tersebut dilengkapi dengan maklumat statistik tentang kesan-kesannya terhadap hidup manusia. Pada ketika inilah beliau mula menghasilkan olahan fotografi dengan menonjolkan masalah-masalah pencemaran.

Statement II 1974 (ilustrasi 7, koleksi pelukis), mengandungi 12 foto yang merakamkan kehancuran alam sekitar dan pencemaran udara di sekitar Kuala Lumpur. Gambar-gambar tersebut berbicara sendiri. (Agak menarik untuk dicatatkan bahawa beberapa tahun kemudiannya masalah alam sekitar "Batu Caves" dan krisis "Endau – Rompin" menjadi tajuk-tajuk kontroversial yang didebatkan dengan ghairahnya dalam akhbar-akhbar tempatan).

Pada tahun 1973 juga Nirmala mengemukakan satu karya konseptual yang kompleks untuk pertandingan **Man and his World** anjuran Muzium Seni Negara. Ianya memaparkan dokumentasi fotografi tentang satu tempat di Kuala Lumpur yang dikajinya untuk beberapa bulan. Juga dikemukakan rajah, carta dan lain-lain maklumat berkaitan tempat tersebut, dahulu dan sekarang. Lebih penting, beliau membawa bersamanya ke galeri contoh-contoh tersebut untuk dimasukkan sebagai sebahagian dari 'pernyataannya'! Karya yang mendedahkan keterlibatan pelukis sepenuhnya kepada karyanya itu telah dianugerahkan Hadiah Utama. Bagi Nirmala, penerimaan anugerah tersebut meyakinkan beliau bahawa senilukisnya harus mencerminkan isu-isu sosial.

Dari rakaman alam yang tercemar, Nirmala beralih kepada dokumentasi sistematik tentang kehidupan kanak-kanak yang menduduki kawasan-kawasan setinggan yang lebih miskin di Kuala Lumpur. Sekali lagi penglibatannya dengan fotografi amat penting. Ianya juga dilengkapi dengan carta-carta maklumat yang mendedahkan pendapatan bulanan ibu bapa kanak-kanak tersebut dan masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh kumpulan sosial ini. Karya-karya ini sebagai sebahagian dari satu siri belum lagi dipamerkan kepada umum. Pada penghujung tahun 1975 Nirmala mengikuti suaminya ke Oxford selama tiga tahun.

Dari segi estetik, hasil karya selepas kepulangannya

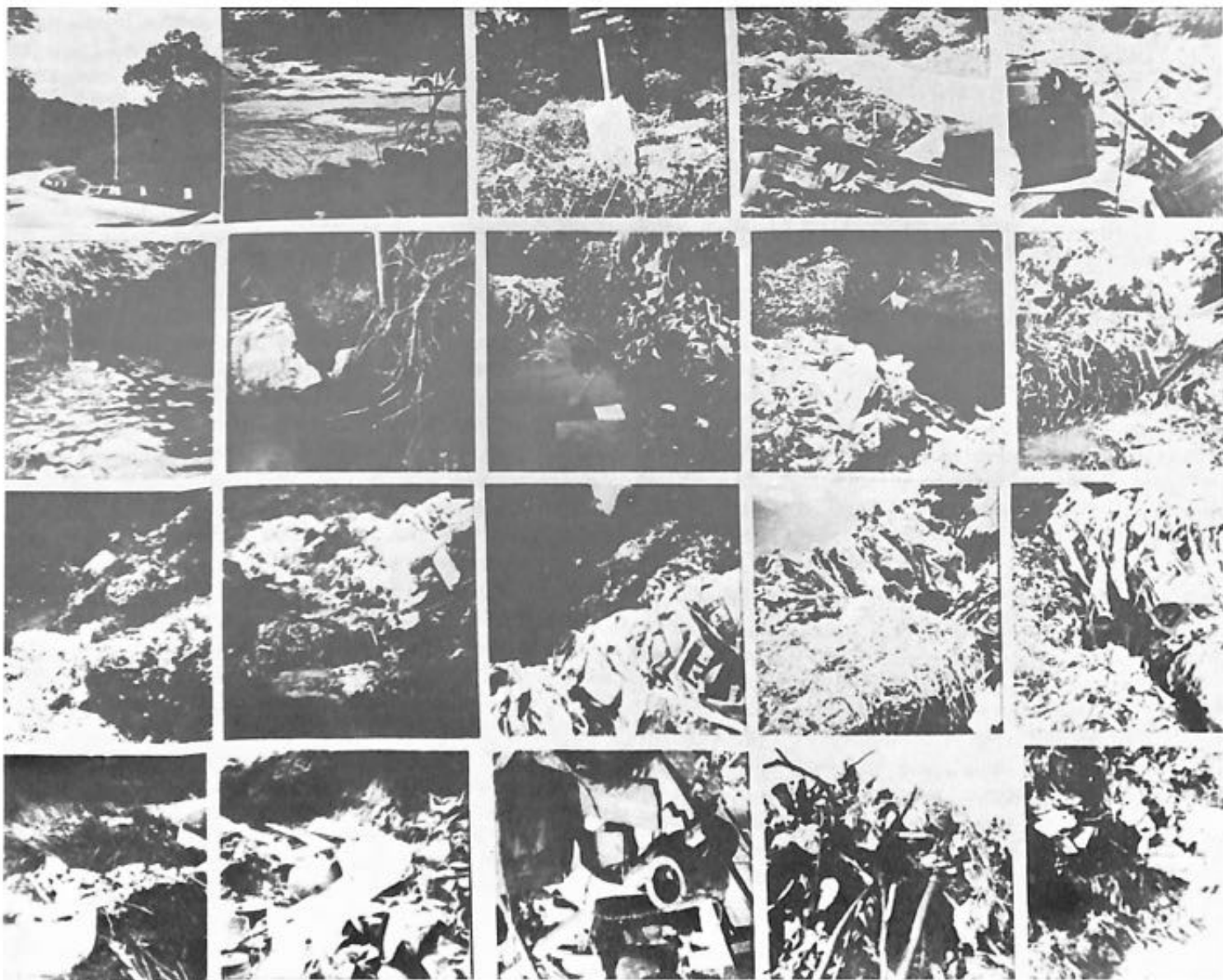
pada tahun 1978 sebenarnya lebih menarik. Dalam karya-karya ini, beliau berupaya mengadunkan minat awalnya dalam lukisan dan minatnya dalam imej fotografi. Seperti dalam kebanyakan karya seriusnya, terdapat keutamaan diberikan kepada kesan-kesan komposit. Sapuan yang kasar dan garang dijalinkan dengan imej foto – saring sutera (**photo-silk screen**) dengan bertenaga dan mengganggu. Lebih penting lagi, beliau telah menekankan sifat ikonik imej-imej kontemporari ini ketika memilih imej-imej dari akhbar dan media massa. Buah fikiran dalam karya-karya terbaru ini menumpu kepada pandangan universal dan mengenai kesan-kesan peperangan. Tajuk-tajuk asal dari akhbar juga dimasukkan dalam karya-karya tersebut untuk mencabar penonton memasuki 'situasi'nya. Pada pandangan saya, imej-imej terbaru pada kanvas ini merupakan sebahagian dari yang paling mengganggu yang berhasil dalam karya-karya senilukis Malaysia setakat ini. Apa yang menyebabkan ianya amat mengganggu ialah pelukis menekankan kesengsaraan kaum wanita dan kanak-kanak yang kerap menjadi mangsa peperangan dan revolusi.

Afrika II, 1980 (ilustrasi 13, koleksi pelukis) diilhamkan dari peperangan di Ethiopia dan berkisar kepada soal penderitaan manusia. Teknik foto-saring sutera membenarkan pelukis mengulangi imej-imej yang sama beberapa kali dengan kesan yang dramatik. Satu sistem grid yang ketat memantapkan kedudukan imej-imej. Sapuan-sapuan garang memuncakkan tingkat emosional. Imej perempuan tua Ethiopia yang menggerunkan adalah satu metafora yang boleh ditafsirkan dalam banyak cara.

Vietnam Piece, 1980 (sila lihat kulit depan, koleksi Redza Piyadasa) adalah satu pernyataan seni mengenai kekejaman perang Indochina. Sekali lagi, ini adalah karya komposit. Imej-imej tertentu dari Vietnam yang membawa kepentingan ikonik dalam media massa telah dicetak beberapa kali melalui proses saring sutera. Warna hitam/putih sengaja digunakan. Ia menambahkan lagi hakikat yang menyeramkan tentang keadaan sengsara seperti itu. Imej besar yang utama dalam olahan ini ialah tentang seorang ibu bangsa Vietnam. Pada dahinya ialah stensilan bahan akhbar tentang pembicaraan perang

yang terkenal di Nuremberg, Jerman pada akhir Perang Dunia Kedua. Pelukis mengemukakan satu persoalan moral dan etikal yang penting: Kenapa Amerika yang mengutuk penjenayah perang Nazi ketika pembicaraan di Nuremberg, kemudiannya meledakkan bom napalm ke atas kampung-kampung orang Vietnam? Dalam karya-karya keterlibatan sosial yang bertenaga seperti karya ini Nirmala Shanmughalingam telah mula membuka dirinya sebagai salah seorang dari pelukis Malaysia yang lebih menarik pada ketika ini.

Terjemahan A. Latif Ali



1. Pernyataan I, 1973 (perincian)
Statement I, 1973 (detail)
Koleksi : Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia.

The Art Of Nirmala Shanmughalingam

by Redza Piyadasa

Nirmala Shanmughalingam's development into a mature artist has been both slow and painfully difficult and the present solo exhibition is her first such show after nearly two decades of artistic strivings. That her own journey to this point in time has often been marred by many moments of utter frustration, doubt and fits of depression only indicates that for some artists, at least, the business of producing artistic creations can become a challenging and demanding proposition. In Nirmala's case, her sensitive nature and her immense idealism have made her search for self-expression even more complicated. Part of the complication must indeed be blamed on her crusading zeal for difficult causes which most Malaysian artists tend to overlook. What began initially as a young schoolgirl's first discoveries of the delight of making pictures with colours has today evolved into an obsessive and difficult search for artistic self-realization. What impresses me about this artist, at least, is her total commitment to her search and the consequences of this search, happily, have resulted in some truly honest art works. I have deliberately used the word "honest" rather than "beautiful" because in Nirmala's case, concepts such as "beauty" and "taste" seem not all that important as the projection of actuality itself. Many of Nirmala's works may even be described as "provocative", and "disturbing" and even "unorthodox" and, herein, I believe, lies her unique strength and her integrity as an artist.

The Early Years

The Kuala Lumpur artscene during the early Sixties was epitomised by the energies of several informal art groups, the most important of these were the Wednesday Art Group and The Angkatan Pelukis Semananjung. Young artists without any formal education in art attended classes conducted by the more experienced artists belonging to these two groups. Nirmala attended portrait painting classes with the A.P.S. artists at their Princes Road premises. A portrait painted by the young woman was accepted for the National Art Gallery's annual open exhibition in 1964. This quiet achievement marked Nirmala's first appearance in a major exhibition.

Washington D.C. October 1966 – March 1967

In October 1966, Nirmala enrolled herself as a non-graduating student at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington. Nirmala's initiation to the more complex problematics of abstract art occurred around this time. The impact of Abstract Expressionism on her was strong. The highly subjective idiom founded upon gestural considerations seems to have allowed her a means of expressing herself more freely and she discovered new artistic possibilities. Her special fa-

avourite amongst the American Abstract Expressionists was the painter Robert Motherwell. Nirmala's special interest in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, the Pop artist, was also to result in her interest in the collage technique. Many of the works produced by Nirmala during these six months are notable for their dependence on the underlying assumptions of American contemporary painting. Two works from the period are worth mentioning. *Water Lilies*, (Illustration 2) is clearly indebted to Abstract Expressionism in its emphasis on thick impastos achieved via the gestural treatment. Essentially monochromatic, the work exudes a certain exuberance and vitality. *Glimpses of Civilization*, indicates a parallel tendency in Nirmala's development. The work reflects an attempt to employ the collage technique and alphabetical shapes within the composition. Also detectable is a dependence on hard-edge considerations. Compared to the previous work, this work is more severely structured.

These two early works are interesting in that they reveal a preoccupation with composite effects. In each instance, three separate visual entities have been linked together compositionally via framing to result in a composite whole. Nirmala's recurring interest in composite presentations is already very evident here. This tendency will reassert itself in her works again and again.

The Years 1970 – 75

Nirmala Shanmughalingam was to return to the United States again in 1970 and remain there for another year. Enrolling herself as a part-time student in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she took courses in the history of art at the Fogg Museum of Art in the Harvard campus, and painting and drawing classes at the Boston College of Art.

The next few years in Kuala Lumpur would prove consequential to Nirmala's development. A work begun just after her return from Cambridge but never completed merits our attention. *Untitled, 1971* (Illustration 3) reveals an attempt to construct a pictorial entity but is notable for the haphazard manipulation of diverse stylistic considerations. The juxtaposition of gestural brushstrokes and the collage technique together with some flat organic shapes subsisting within relational grids appears incongruous and even confused. The overall mood of the work is even discomforting and reveals emotional tensions within the artist's psychic make-up. A closer scrutiny of the work is interesting. A number of images of young children have been taken out of magazines and pasted on to the surface. Of particular interest is the enigmatic phrase "of Madness". Nirmala has recalled that the work was inspired by interest in the ideas of R. D. Laing. What does the painting signify?



Clearly, the work reveals aspects of the sub-conscious of the artist and indicates tensions within the artist about the world-at-large. The kind of unsettling quality which first appears in this clearly unresolved work may be better understood today so many years later when viewed in the light of Nirmala's most recently produced works. The kind of emotional intensity that first manifests itself in this particular work produced in 1971 indicates an aspect of Nirmala's personality itself suggesting both a nervousness and inner violence.

The years 1971 to 1973 introduce yet another phase of her development. As she was feeling insecure about her technical abilities, she was introduced by Dawn Zain to painting lessons from the Slade-trained painter Ismail Zain whose own approach to painting has been marked by an essentially cerebral and formalistic outlook. Nirmala decided to interpret aspects of the Malaysian landscape and the works produced under Ismail Zain's guidance are imbued with a certain elegance emphasizing structural preoccupations. The works produced under Ismail Zain are respectable academic exercises, self-conscious and displaying a marked restraint. That Nirmala is able to project a sensitive handling of colour becomes obvious.

2. *Teratai*, 1967
Water Lilies, 1967
Acrylic, 29" x 14½"



3. Tanpa Judul, 1971
Untitled, 1971
Acrylic & collage, 48" x 48"

Landscape, 1972 (Illustration 4) is one of the early works produced under the guidance of Ismail Zain. Compared to the previously discussed work, this particular work may be described as even pretty. The composition of the work is dominated by green tonalities and organic shapes. The investigation of surface problems is evident. Parts of the surface have been deliberately left white reiterating the neutrality of the surface. Yet another work produced during this period is "**Nightfall, K.L.**", 1972 which reveals the artist's interest in composition and the manipulation of gestural effects. An underlying predilection for the dramatic manifests itself albeit somewhat subdued by the cool colours which dominate. Again, this is a sensitive work revealing that Nirmala *can* produce technically accomplished works if and when she chooses to do so.

View from Federal Hill, 1972 (Illustration 5) was the last work produced with Ismail Zain. Again, it is an accomplished work and merits respect as an interesting academic exercise. The landscape has been abstracted and the selected view of a slice of the Kuala Lumpur landscape seems absorbed by an atmospheric haze. Looking back at the period, Nirmala acknowledges that the period spent under Ismail Zain's guidance was very profitable for she gained technical and structural skills. However, she found herself becoming involved more with the proprieties of "good" painting than with emotional self-realization. Indeed, Nirmala has described her own inner dilemma to this writer thus:

After completing several of these works, I began to feel that producing all these pictures left a void within me. I was not finding adequate emotional or spiritual meaning in the activity. I decided to stop painting altogether."

The consequence of Nirmala's involvement with the Malaysian landscape was to prove significant however. For one thing, she had acquired a new interest in the local environment. Increasingly, as she focussed her attention on the environment she begun to realise that things were amiss all around her. Her realization that the local environment was in danger seems to have arisen from her growing awareness that environmental pollution and decay were becoming more and more noticeable in the Kuala Lumpur area. The march toward material progress and urbanisation was producing some unpleasant side-effects. Scrutinising the landscape more closely, she began to find the results even unsettling. Monstrous machines were indiscriminately being used to tear up the landscape and expose the rawness of the earth. The indiscriminate dumping of refuse and industrial waste was making the land ugly. Rivers were beginning to reflect the effects of industrial pollutants and the fumes from motor vehicles and factory chimneys were resulting in atmospheric pollution. For Nirmala, in 1973, the situation merited serious attention.

Malaysians, she believed, should not repeat the mistakes of the West! Nirmala's discovery of a worthy cause seems to have brought out her crusading instincts for the first time and I am also inclined to posit, her idealism and her inherent predilection for social commitment. A psychologist may be better able to suggest reasons for a comfortable middle-class woman's needing to champion difficult causes but the discovery of a social role in Nirmala's case, projected onto the "art context", was to result in some unusual art works being conceived and proposed within the Malaysian artscene. My concern here deals with Nirmala the artist essentially rather than Nirmala the crusader even if the one seems to be dependent on the other. I wish to draw attention to pertinent questions that may indeed be asked about the role of art in propagating change. What indeed are the extremities of a social commitment when applied to artists in a case like this one? How much of such commitment is simply romance and how much is for real? Nirmala's works interest me because they raise such pertinent questions in my mind. The uniqueness of Nirmala's contribution to Malaysian artistic endeavours should become obvious, in any case. But let us return to Nirmala's immediate dilemma. The discovery of a pertinent theme for her artistic endeavours in 1973 seems to have given her immense drive but the problem of presentation still remained. How to go about the task? Her meeting with a number of conceptually-inclined artists within the local artscene at about that time was to allow her a means of trying out new things. Nirmala recalls that the kind of artistic ideas being introduced then by Sulaiman Esa and this writer allowed for a more flexible approach to creativity itself. Art could incorporate elements of actual reality itself! Her meetings with some of us around that time, she recalls, proved liberating. Her decision to go around making photographs of the environmental condition was the beginning, really. A next step was the collecting of relevant factual data pertaining to specific sites. Newspaper articles and academic papers were systematically collected and Nirmala began to produce strange questionnaires which she posted to immediate friends. Some of us found her obsession with the environment even amusing at that early stage. But something began to emerge artistically that was distinctly Nirmala's. This artist was serious!



4. Lanskap, 1972
 Landscape, 1972
 Acrylic & collage, 24" x 30"
 Koleksi : Dr. & Mrs. E.K. Ng

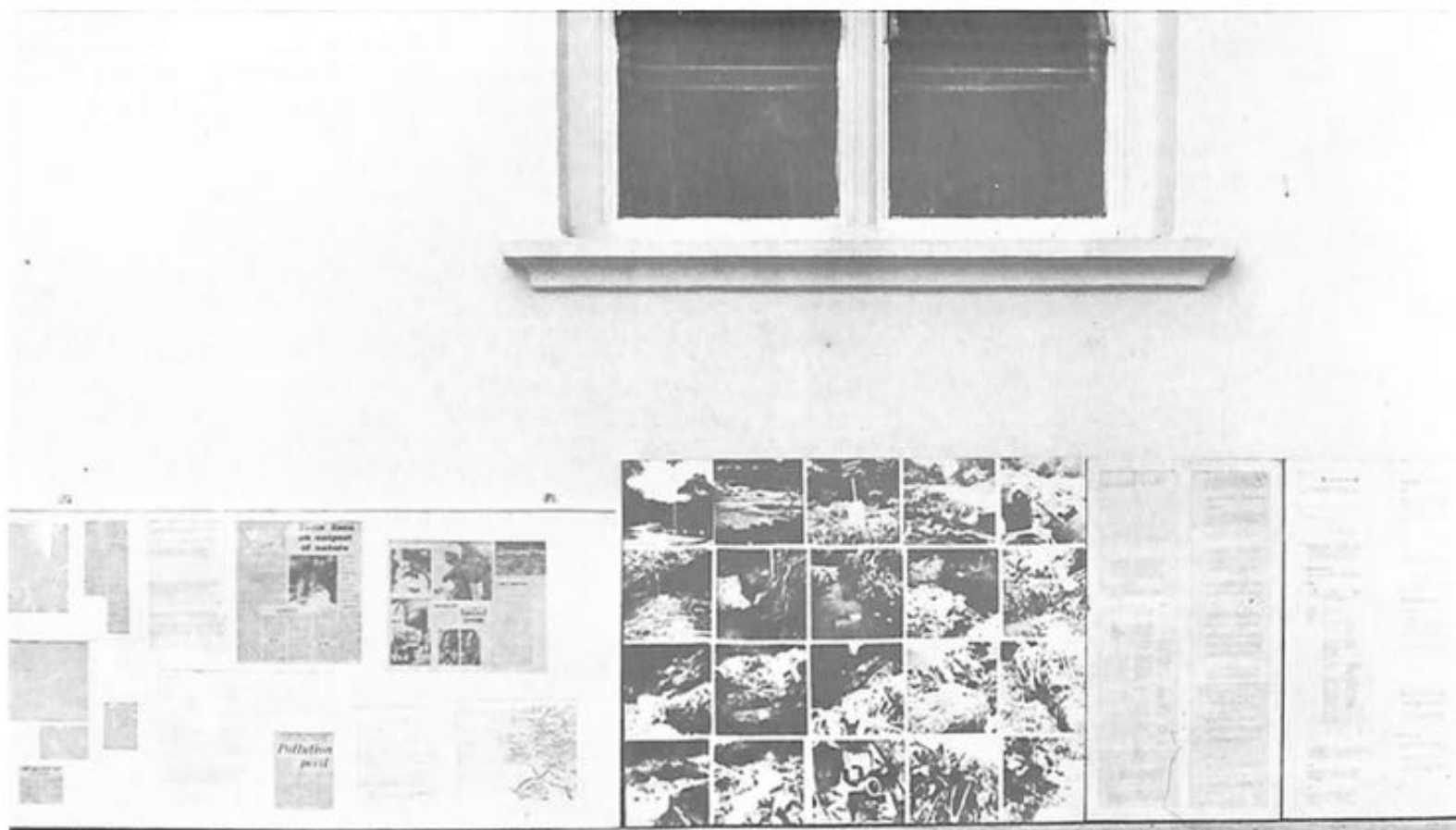
on board
 hand board
 Nanda
 2014
 Collection of
 Raja Nazrin's
 agent Beverly Yang



5. Pemandangan Dari Bukit Federal, 1972
 View from Federal Hill, 1972
 Acrylic, 36" x 48"
 Koleksi : Dr. & Mrs. E.K. Ng

on hand board - Nanda

6. **Pernyataan I, 1973**
Statement I, 1973
 Mixed Media
 Koleksi : Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia



Statement I, 1973 (Illustration 1 & 6) was an ambitious work subsequently entered for the *Man and His World* competition which was organized by the National Art Gallery in 1973. Nirmala spent six months on the project and finally mustered enough courage to submit her unusual *art work*. All the material that she had collected about that particular site (around the Damansara area) was presented like so many bits of evidence in a court of law! Further, samples of actual rubbish and industrial waste taken from the area were brought to the gallery and exhibited as part of her statement. The panel of judges were a liberal group that year and they *were* impressed enough to award Nirmala one of the two Major Awards! In retrospect, both Major Award winners that year had submitted

Conceptual art works (Sulaiman Esa's unorthodox "**Self-Portrait**", 1973 was the other award-winning work). I remember very clearly how upset a well-known local art-educationist who is also an Abstract Expressionist was at the things that were happening at the National Art Gallery! Nirmala's award-winning work must be recognised for the liberating influence that it helped bring about in the Malaysian art scene at a time when *good taste* in art was often equated with Abstract Expressionist paintings and painterly skills. A revolution within the art scene was already taking place at that time and Nirmala's actual contribution has seldom been acknowledged or fully realized.

Pollution Piece, 1974 (Illustration 7) is reflective of the types



7. **Pencemaran Alam (perincian)**
Pollution Piece, 1974 (detail)
 Photographic documentation, 30" x 47"

of works which initially emerged. Twelve photographs depict the environmental condition around the Batu Caves and Jinjang areas. The photographs have been arranged as a composite and function as a visual chart. The approach is impersonal (i.e. no more gestural effects) and reveals a complete stylistic break with her artistic past. More similar works emerged.

Nirmala's decision to highlight the growing seriousness of the environmental problem in Malaysia during the early 70s even if projected within the "art context", was well ahead of time. Towards the end of the 1970s, conservation groups and anti-pollution groups would call attention to these problems in the local newspapers with environmental issues such as Batu Caves, the indiscriminate destruction of forests at Endau-Rompin, atmospheric pollution and the destruction of river systems by discharges from oil-palm factories. The subsequent formation of the Ministry of Environment by the government indicates a belated realization of the seriousness of environmental decay but it must be said that much still needs to be done. The environmental crisis has not gone away as the debate on Batu Caves still continues to hold our attention in our newspapers.

From photographing and documenting environmental decay, Nirmala was to shift her attention to the lives of the people who lived in or around such environments. Her decision to focus attention upon the human condition within such areas was, in fact logical, for she explains in one of her "statements" produced around that time:

These are the people who are the first to suffer the effects of pollution because they live in and around the affected areas. They are often the first to feel any misfortune, hardship or suffering – be it flood, fire, inflation, recession, civil disturbance, dengue or cholera epidemic.

Nirmala's dependence on the photographic process (i.e. the camera) as a means of documenting the lives of children living in the squatter areas around Kuala Lumpur is again partly explained in her "Statement II" (1975):

The camera recorded only a small fraction of what was seen and experienced by actually being in these areas. No single medium can actually communicate a whole experience.

Some of the "statements" are notable for their vivid descriptions of the places themselves as might be gauged in the following passage also taken out of "Statement II":

.....the earth here is a rotten crust offering hardly a firm foothold here and there. Flies, mosquitoes and other minute species that thrive on the slime, hover around you. Oblivious to all this, the children pick among the littered decaying earth



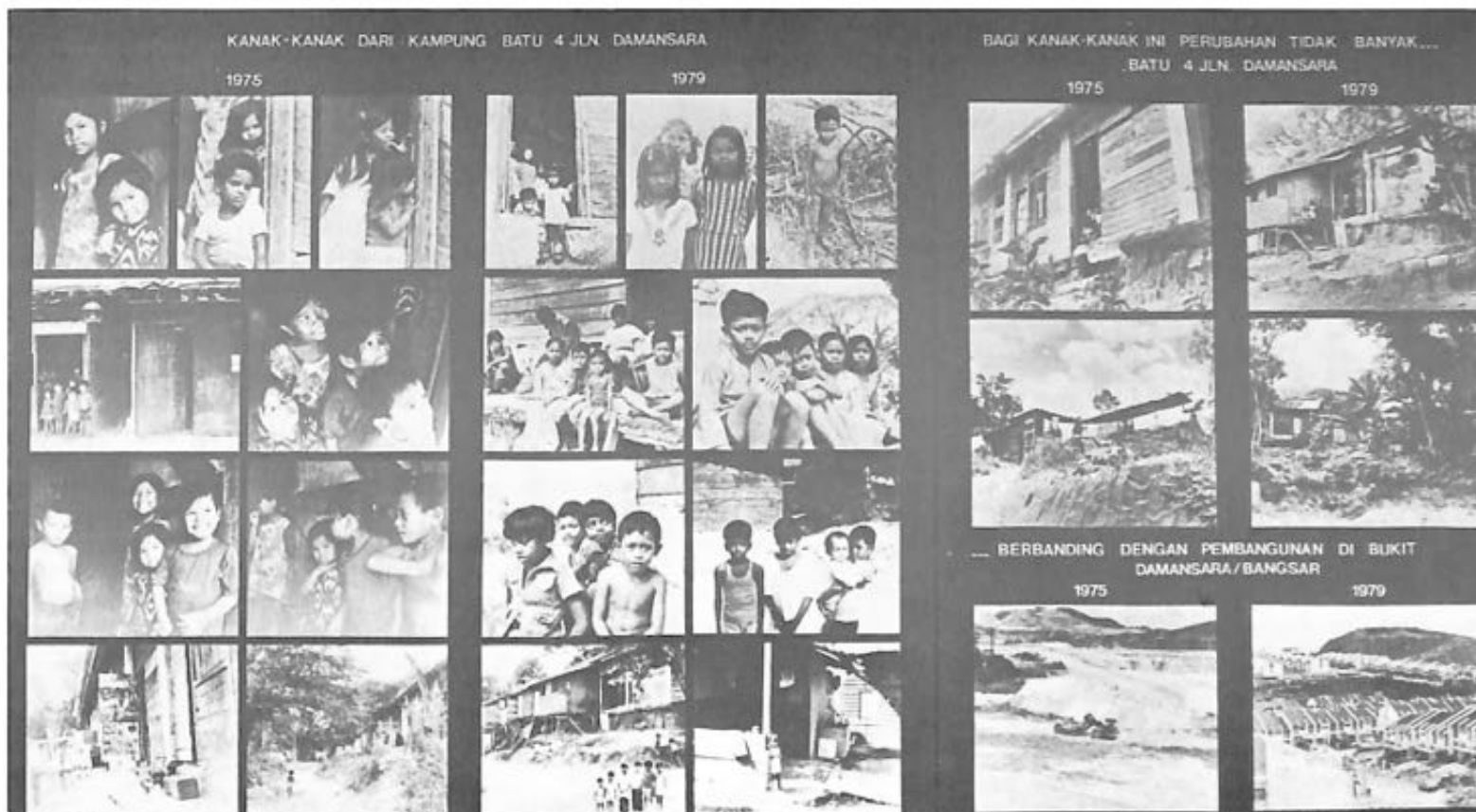
8. Pernyataan II, 1975
 Statement II, 1975
 Photographic documentation

for a wizened-looking shrub with edible brownish leaves – their contribution to the family meal.

Nirmala is also inclined to romanticize the “naivette” and “innocence” of the people of the slums. I quote from “Statement II” again. She describes a small community of squatter dwellers around Kuala Lumpur:

A people living simply, in relatively happy ignorance, accepting conditions as they are, not aware of being victims of other men’s greed or profiteering, not blaming anyone: easy to please or amuse, trusting where little trust may be deserved.

9. **Pernyataan III – Satu Perbandingan, 1975–79**
Statement III – A Comparison, 1975–79
 Photographic documentation, 48" x 88"



The kind of empathy that Nirmala feels for these people and especially the children is clearly reflected in the photographic documentations. There is a directness here and the camera records a world that has always been existing side by side with the bright lights of Kuala Lumpur. "Statement II, 1975 (Illustration 8) reflects the same format adopted for the earlier environmental works. Eighteen photographic records of several vicinities are presented. One might be inclined to suggest here that Nirmala's eye for children of the slums seems to reflect a Neo-Realist perspective and I am especially reminded of the early films of Vittorio de Sica! This is a disturbing picture of humanity and Nirmala's aim is to provoke the viewer into discomfort.

Statement III, 1975-79, (Illustration 9) is an interesting work that was completed after a period of four years. It was begun in

1975. On the left hand, are a number of photographs of children from a particular squatter area near Batu 4, Damansara. These pictures were taken in 1975. In the middle are pictures of many of the same children taken four years later. Most of them have grown but their living environment has not changed.

It is worth noting at this stage that Nirmala's committed stance to social problems underlies a unique and original contribution in the pursuit of thematic considerations. Her contribution to the further evolution of a modern Malaysian art tradition should become very clear. But her works also present some very interesting philosophical questions, the most important of which is: Where exactly is the dividing line between art and life?

In late 1975, Nirmala enrolled as a full-time student at the Oxford Polytechnic and graduated in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree with Honours.



10. Lukisan Kembangdua, 1979
Diptych, 1979
Mixed Media, 63" x 51"

The period following Nirmala's return to Malaysia in 1978 witnessed a further development in her artistic career. These last two years have witnessed a consolidating of artistic preoccupations culled from her past. A marked involvement with the problematics of painting, initially abandoned in 1973, manifests itself again. Pre-occupations with gestural considerations derived earlier from her exposure to Abstract Expressionism and her earlier interest in collage techniques are fused. Her concern for photographic images also finds an important place in the new scheme of things. But her decision to return to the canvas marks a definite shift from the conceptually-oriented works dealing with the Malaysian environment and the condition of the squatter children around Kuala Lumpur. The present works reveal interest in themes which may be described as being less specifically parochial.

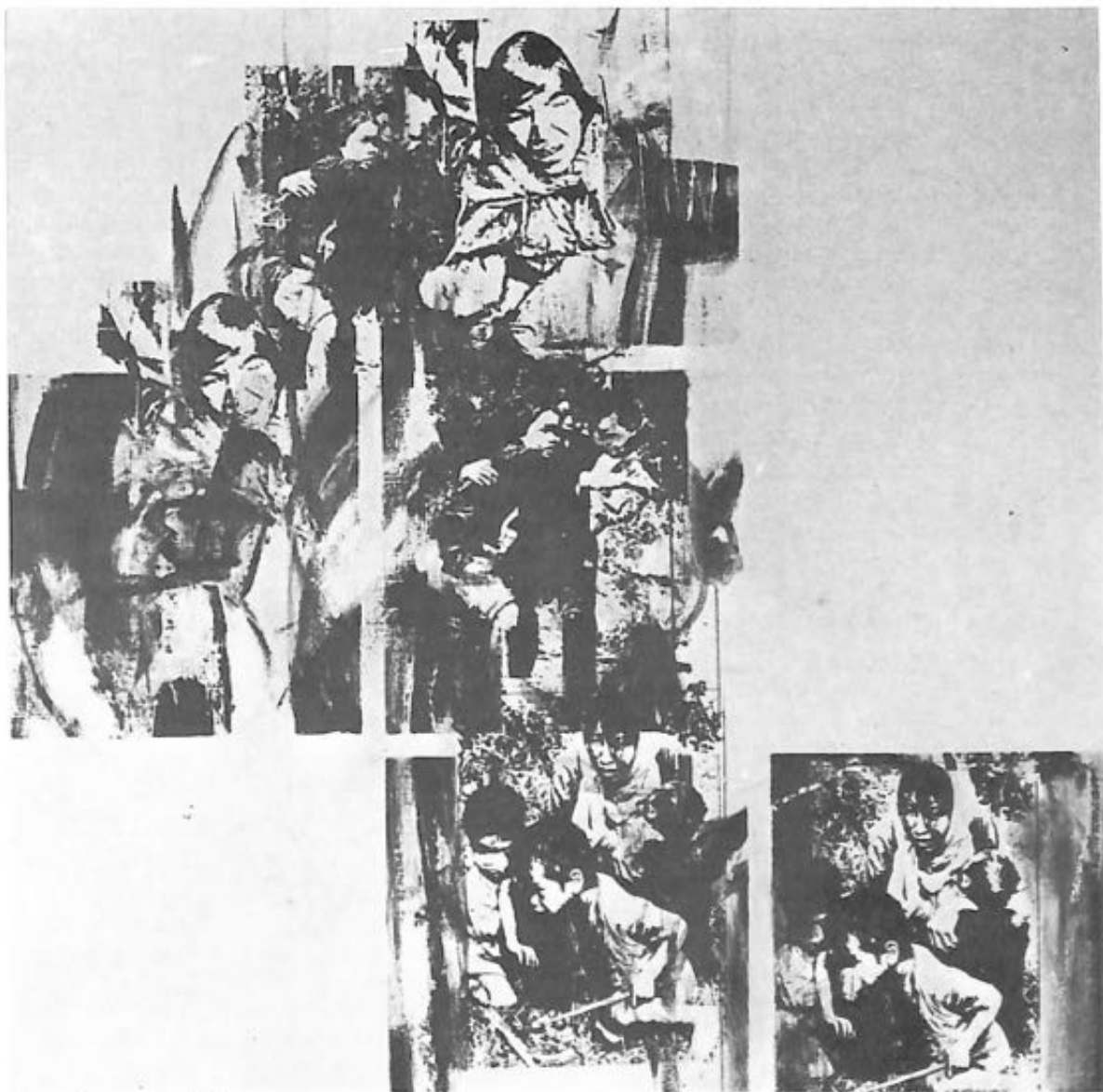
A realization of the potency of images bombarded by the international news-media seems to have resulted in her decision to explore the use of such images which often acquire an iconic significance in our consciousness. The fact that many of these mass-media images appear all over the world at the same time may be explained by some of Marshall McLuhan's theories about media and the emer-

gence of the Global Village. Again, the manner in which so many contemporary images of violence are constantly bombarded upon us by newspapers, news magazines and television only indicates how immune so many of us have become to these often horrifying realities. We seem to acquire a tendency to accept these images and also the residual effects of wars, revolutions, famines, earthquakes, assassinations quite indifferently! These things are happening somewhere else and so why bother? We have slowly become numbed by the constant bombardment of such images.

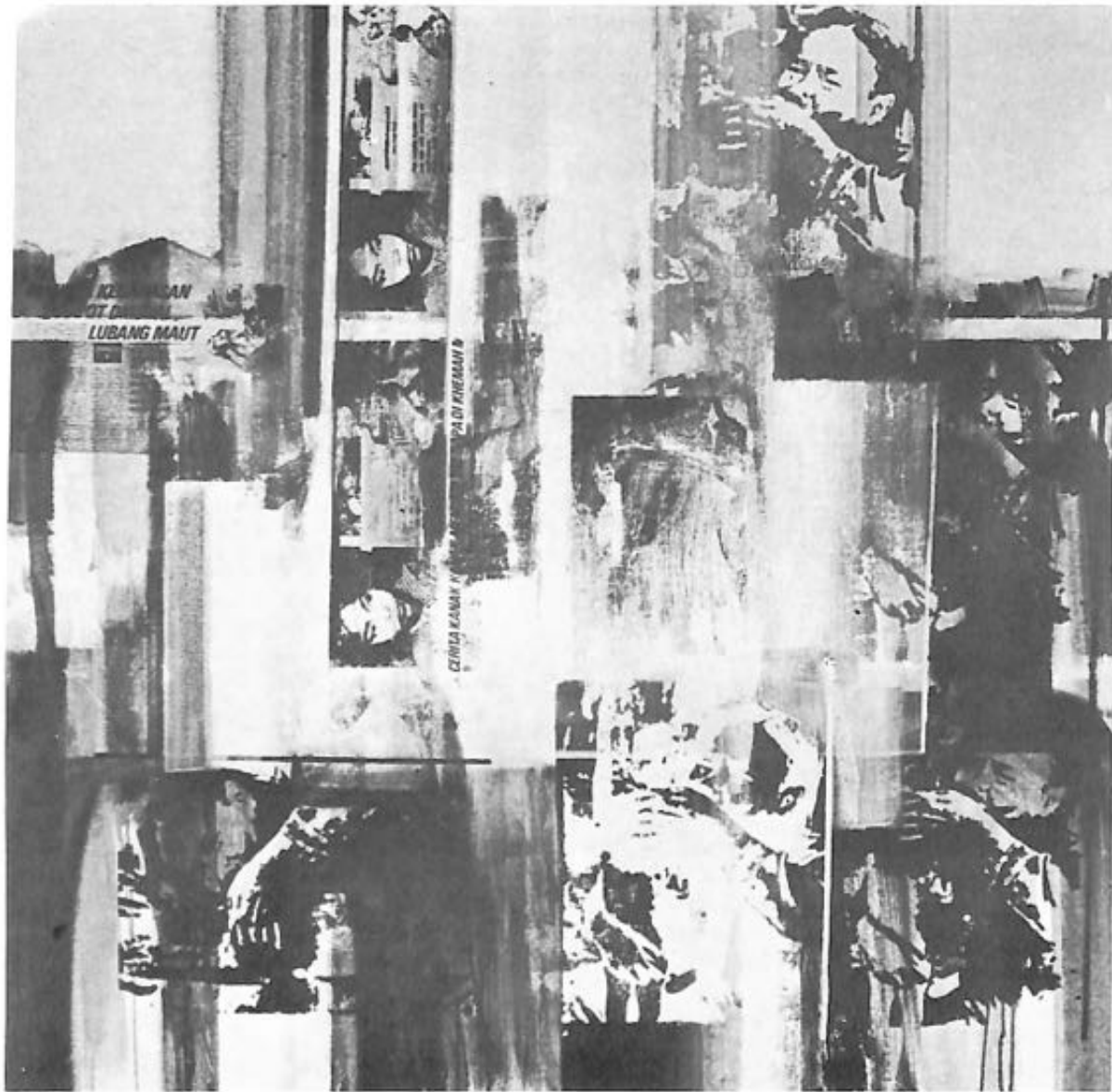
Nirmala's interest in these mass-media images of war and the consequences of such upheavals has involved her in a systematic collecting of relevant photographs released from the various news agencies. Her interest these two years has been with images specific to the Asian and African realities. Her concern has been with the condition of women and children who are often the victims of man's aggression to man. The resultant works that have been produced recently may be viewed as her own indictment of war itself. It has already been mentioned that her current themes (less concerned with Malaysian issues) seem to deal with more generalized and universal situations. Consequently, one may even suggest these works are "safer" because they are dealing with issues which are less specific to the local scene as witnessed in her works produced between 1973-75. Painterly preoccupations seem to occupy a large part of her energies today and it seems to me as if the artist has rediscovered the emotional satisfactions to be derived from the actual physical act of painting itself, after a lapse of several years. The preoccupation with her chosen images may be viewed as being partly motivated by image-making concerns albeit images of a somewhat disconcerting nature.

Diptych, 1979, (Illustration 10) is an example of the early experiments begun after her return to Malaysia. The surfaces of the two canvases have been divided into a number of self-contained rectangles with their own particular selection of images. In this case, the images are taken from the history of the American involvement with Vietnam. News pictures have been xeroxed and pasted onto the canvas. The use of gestural brushstrokes derived from Abstract Expressionism are juxtaposed with the mass-media images evoking the violence and dislocation of such calamities. Parts of the canvas surface has been left untouched and the dependence on a black and white colour scheme reiterates the painful reality of the projected theme. The work is clearly a composite.

Vietnam I, 1980 (Illustration 11) continues Nirmala's interest in the Vietnam war. The images used are dramatic and evoke the anguish of the women and children. The use of the silk-screen technique was to result in a significant breakthrough. The images



11. Vietnam I, 1980
Vietnam I, 1980
Acrylic, 48" x 48"



12. Lubang Maut, 1980
Pit of Death, 1980
Acrylic, 48" x 48"

16 Collection - Usmi Perang

become more clearly delineated and are larger. More important, the silk-screen process allows the artist to repeat her images thereby dramatising them further. One of the principles underlying the use of images within the mass-media is, in fact, the repetitive use of these images thereby reiterating their effectiveness. The use of violent brushstrokes again bolsters the sense of violence and anguish.

Lubang Maut, 1980 (Illustration 12) continues Nirmala's interest in the war in Indo-China. A tight grid structure belies the spontaneous quality of the work. Again, the juxtaposition of brushstrokes and images from the mass-media. The surface of the canvas is neutralised. There is the deliberate repetition of particular images and the inclusion of stencilled headlines and portions of an actual article from a Malay newspaper about the particular event (an atrocity committed by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia) specifies the particular subject being dealt with.

Vietnam II, 1980 (front cover) is perhaps one of the most accomplished works to have come from the present series. In it Nirmala's debt to Robert Rauschenberg is evident and this is noticeable in the way the photographic image (silk-screened) has been allowed to react with the materiality of the paint applied onto the canvas in broad and powerful gestural strokes. The central image in the work is that of an anguished Vietnamese mother and immediately above her head is stencilled an article about the Nuremberg trials which were held in Germany immediately after the end of the Second World War. A part of the article is stencilled on the woman's forehead. The artist asks a moral and ethical question: How is it that the Americans who condemned Nazi war criminals could subsequently drop napalm bombs on Vietnamese villages? It is not so much a political ideology that is being emphasized here as the inability of man to learn from his mistakes of the past!

Africa II, 1980 (Illustration 13) reflects the same stylistic characteristics already noted in the other works. The use of a vertical/horizontal structural grid with parts of the canvas left white reiterates preoccupations with the surface. Ambiguity of the surface is achieved by the deliberate overlapping of planes. In this case, the painting has been inspired by the war in Ethiopia and illustrates the plight of war refugees. The clever use of the silk-screen process is evident in the way the artist has repeated the haunting and brooding image of the old Ethiopian woman which dominates the work. Reminding one of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, this particular image lends to the work a disturbing presence. The work asserts itself on the viewer.

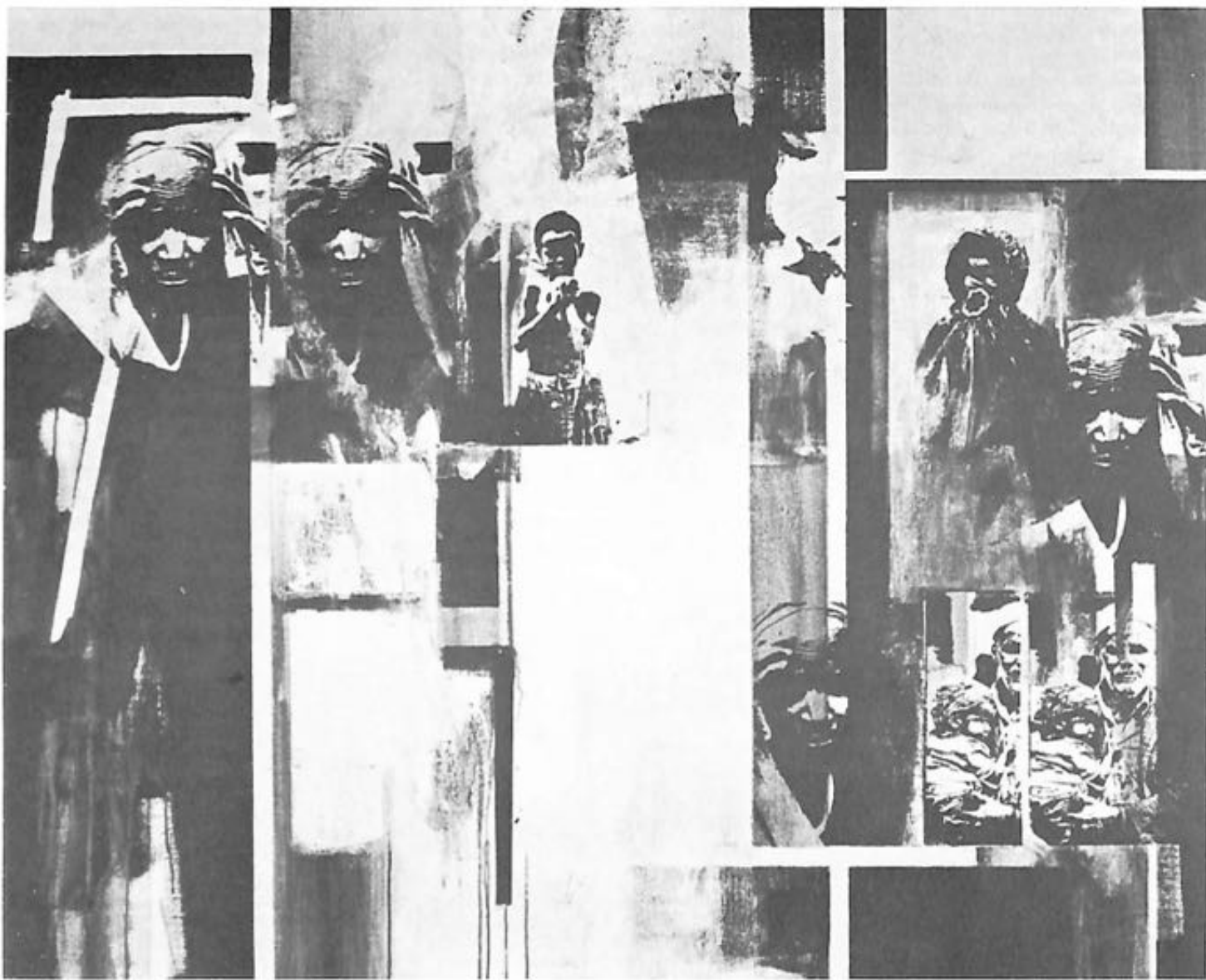
The significance of Nirmala's contribution to modern art endeavours in this country must lie in her willingness to involve herself with themes and issues that are, as a rule, avoided by most

Malaysian artists. Her arrival to her present position has been slow but it has been a meaningful journey. Her honesty and her seriousness of purpose are indeed impressive. More important, her approach toward creativity has resulted in some pertinent questions being raised about the artist and the role of art in societies such as ours. Is art's function simply the production of visually pleasing artifacts that will numb the senses into a quiet retreat from the real world we inhabit or is art's role to provoke and stimulate awareness of one's own existence within a larger scheme of things that demands positive responses from us? Nirmala's singular achievement, I am inclined to feel, lies in her socially-committed outlook. Her observations of the world she inhabits may not necessarily appear flattering and reassuring but these visions are nevertheless necessary if we are not to be lulled into deception and indifference.

In terms of the Malaysian cultural scene itself, Nirmala offers some meaningful pointers about the need to adopt an exploratory and realistic approach toward creativity. Nirmala has offered us an alternative path toward creativity that is forward-looking but also difficult. In any case, questions about "form" and "context" in the visual arts need to be seriously questioned today and I hope her present exhibition will provoke debate amongst artists about this particular issue. Nirmala Shanmughalingam will have more than succeeded if her works make us reassess the social role of art.

About the writer:

Redza Piyadasa is a well-known Malaysian artist and art-critic. He was born in Kuantan in 1939 and presently lectures in Art at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. He was educated at the Malayan Teachers' College at Brinsford Lodge, England, the Hornsey College of Art in London, England and the University of Hawaii at Honolulu. His writings on modern Malaysian art have been published extensively in local newspapers and literary and cultural journals and his works have been exhibited both locally and internationally. He is the subject of a monograph written by the art-historian T. K. Sabapathy which was published in 1978. He was appointed for a second term, in 1979, as a member of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum of Art, Malaysia.)



13. Afrika II, 1980
Africa II, 1980
Acrylic, 54" x 66"

Collection: Iyah & John
Wollesby

RIWAYAT HIDUP PELUKIS

- 1941 – Dilahirkan di Pulau Pinang.
- 1962 – Mengikuti kelas seni lukis yang dianjurkan oleh Hussein Enas di Kuala Lumpur.
- 1966 – 67 – Melanjutkan pelajaran dalam bidang seni lukis di Corcoran School of Art, Washington, DC.
- 1970 – 71 – Meluaskan pelajaran di bidang seni lukis di Fogg Museum of Art – Harvard University.
 - Mempelajari *life drawing* di Boston College of Art dan Cambridge Adult Education Centre, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1975 – 78 – Memperolehi ijazah Sarjana Muda Sains (kepujian) dari Oxford Polytechnic, Oxford.

PAMERAN YANG TELAH DIADAKAN

- 1957 – Pameran Antarabangsa Kanak-Kanak, Hague, Belanda.
- 1964 seterusnya – Mengadakan pameran dari semasa ke semasa di Pameran Tahunan di Muzium Seni Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1967 – Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1968 – Salon Malaysia, Muzium Seni Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1972 – Pameran Pemandangan Darat Malaysia di Muzium Seni Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1973 – Pameran 'Manusia dan Dunianya' di Muzium Seni Negara, Kuala Lumpur – memenangi Hadiah Utama.
- 1974 – Pameran Senifoto Kebangsaan – pameran khas "Statement II – A Visual Essay" dipamerkan di Muzium Seni Negara, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1979 (Mac 2 – 4) – Gambar kanak-kanak setinggan dan pencemaran dalam dan sekitar Kuala Lumpur yang dipamerkan semasa Persidangan Tahun Kanak-Kanak Antarabangsa yang dianjurkan oleh National Council of Women Organisations, Malaysia (NCWO).
- 1979 (Nov. 22 – 24) – Mempamerkan senifoto pada seminar kanak-kanak dan suasana alam sekeliling yang dianjurkan oleh MAB (Man & the Biosphere Programme) Kementerian Kesihatan, Yunit Penyelidikan Sosio Ekonomi – Jabatan Perdana Menteri dan UNESCO.
- 1979 – Mempamerkan senifoto di Malam Nada Warna yang dianjurkan oleh Grup Teater Elit, Puan Frances Ariffin, Muzium Seni Negara, dan Selangor Philharmonic Society.
- 1979 – Senifoto digunakan oleh Kementerian Kesihatan untuk pameran Hari Kanak-Kanak yang mengadakan pertunjukan di seluruh Semenanjung Malaysia.
- 1979 – Senifoto digunakan oleh Fakulti Perubatan, Universiti Malaya.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST

- 1941 – Born in Penang
- 1962 – Attended art classes held by Hussein Enas in Kuala Lumpur.
- 1966 – 67 – Studied at Corcoran School of Art, Washington, DC
- 1970 – 71 – Studied at Fogg Museum of Art – Harvard University Extension Course.
 - Studied life drawing at Boston College of Art and Cambridge Adult Education Centre, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1972 – Worked with Ismail Zain, and briefly with Joseph Tan.
- 1975 – 78 – Obtained BSc.(Hons) from Oxford Polytechnic, Oxford.

EXHIBITIONS

- 1957 – International Exhibition of Child Art, Hague, Holland.
- 1964 onwards – Exhibited regularly at Annual Exhibitions of the then National Gallery of Art, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1967 – Corcoran School of Art, Washington DC.
- 1968 – Salon Malaysia, National Gallery of Art, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1972 – Kuala Lumpur City Status Day Exhibition, Samat Art Gallery, Wisma Loke, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1972 – Malaysian Landscape Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1973 – Man and His World Exhibition, National Gallery of Art, Kuala Lumpur – Won Major Award.
- 1974 – Pameran Seni Foto Kebangsaan – Special exhibit, "Statement II – A Visual Essay" exhibited at National Museum, Kuala Lumpur.
- 1979 (Mar 2 – 4) – Photographs of squatter children and pollution in and around Kuala Lumpur exhibited at International Year of the Child Conference organised by The National Council of Women Organisations, Malaysia. (NCWO).
- 1979 (Nov 22 – 24) – Exhibited photographs at Child and the Environment Regional Seminar by MAB (Man & the Biosphere Programme), Ministry of Health, Socio-Economic Research Unit (SERU), Prime Minister's Department, and UNESCO.
- 1979 – Malam Nada Warna organised by Grup Teater Elit, Puan Frances Ariffin, National Museum of Art and Selangor Philharmonic Society.
- 1979 – Photographs used by Ministry of Health for Year of the Child Exhibition which toured several States in Peninsular Malaysia.
- 1979 – Photographs used by Medical Faculty, University of Malaya.

Penghargaan/Acknowledgements

Y.B. Senator Kamarul Ariffin
Pengerusi, Lembaga Amanah
Muzium Seni Negara, Malaysia.

Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia

Ketua Pengarah
Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka

Pusat Kebudayaan
Universiti Malaya.

Encik Usman Awang

Encik Redza Piyadasa

Encik Ismail Hashim

Cik Wairah Marzuki

Encik Abdul Malek Madin

Puan Judith Khalil Ibrahim

Grup Teater Elit

Persatuan Pelukis Malaysia.

Mereka-mereka yang telah sudi meminjamkan karya dari koleksi per-
sendirian dan Anda

*Those who have kindly loaned works from their Collection
and Yourself*



Dicetak oleh Percetakan Dewan **Bahasa** Dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.