

Nirmala Dutt: The London Years



10.10.2015 - 15.11.2015

The London Years

Two etchings of the same elderly man hunched over a desk in different degrees of shading intensity are early studies from 1975 that signposts the body of work that Nirmala was to realise during her London years in the 1990s. They are tributes to Rembrandt, the Dutch virtuoso known for his mastery of *chiaroscuro*, which is the pictorial play of light and shadow that brings into sharp relief the great drama of human emotions. By placing the two etching prints together, Nirmala underscores process and tonal registers as central to the minute psychological profile that etching, as a printmaking technology, brings our attention to. This search for a humanist tenor in visual form, one that demonstrated a direction of sympathy, was what compelled Nirmala in her London years.



Study of Elderly Man After Rembrandt
1975, etching, 22.5 x 26.5 cm each

From 1992 - 1995, Nirmala enrolled for post-graduate studies at the University of London. She was interested in psychology and its relationship to art practice, specifically on the intersection between ethics and creative impulse. Working under Brian Falconbridge, then head of the Visual Art Department at Goldsmith's College, her proposed area of research is on the topic of 'Art Against War and the Creative Process'. This required Nirmala to study both psychology and art history within a primary

workshop-based learning environment that allowed her to explore printmaking's creative function as a form of politics.

The London Years is a series works that came out of this search for a renewed way of understanding art's psychological function. The print medium's reproducibility is also an aspect that plays out the resonances of historical awareness on the present day. This allowed Nirmala to consider how the past percolates into her present reality, by speaking of two moments in time as coeval. This is so that knowledge of the artistic past provides useful precursors and ways of seeing to comment on the present day.

London in the 1990s is a place of increasing wealth discrepancies. This was a time when Thatcherite politics of the 1980s had done away with the successes of earlier radical politics that fought for a much more egalitarian society in class-ridden UK. Instead, since the large-scale economic reform under the Prime Ministership of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, London was gradually transformed into a financial hub. As the 1990s rolled along, the city became a new post-empire of neo-liberal capital. All this came at a cost; especially in regards to the hard-won welfare policies that were now pulled apart, as different sectors of the government were privatised.

Like her art historical heroes, Nirmala trained her eyes on the ordinary, patiently recording the living conditions of those who did not benefit directly from London's new political and economic reality. *Somalia*, for example draws on both her past fascination with the media's coverage on the ravages of war and the impact of this on a changing cityscape, where refugees begin to gain visibility as a significant demographic within London's urban landscape.

On the other end of the spectrum are her close study of nature, *Plant Forms* and *Back Roads* with their soft and expressive observation of atmosphere and tonal registers evoke a different emotional tenor. These are works



Somalia

1993, etching with aquatint, 45 x 30 cm

that feel both distant and personal, demonstrating an interest to come to grips with contemporary London society, through a melancholic lens. The works range from abstract compositions of the cityscapes and seasonal changes, to views looking out a window. They offer brief respite from the bitterness of the human condition, but nevertheless, are always haunted by the other works produced during her time abroad.

Included in this exhibition are also sustained studies on grittier subjects such as etchings of the homeless in London. They appear in her



Untitled (Plant Forms)

1993 - 1995, lithograph, 66 x 48 cm



Back Roads

1993, etching, 35 x 30 cm

rendition as the huddled masses - unnamed and anonymous - left out of London's race towards newfound wealth. London's *Homeless II* is particularly striking. The etching is a composite of the familiar homeless population that had appear in her previous etchings focusing on individual character studies. The composition here is arranged as a comic panel with a scroll-like frieze that shows the poor of the city lining against a wall, as if to suggest they were being left out in the cold to fend for themselves in a London winter. What Nirmala achieves in her exploration of the disenfranchised is in some sense an indictment. They are unaccountable and distant, yet at the same time, demonstrably present in their intensities as an acknowledged social class.

The suffering of the urban poor was not the only subject that unsettled Nirmala. The war in Bosnia provided another impetus. Included in this clusters are many of her studies, etchings and paintings, such as works that delve on the experience of the war. These are primarily articulated as tributes to the Spanish master, Francisco Goya. In her desire to work on a smaller scale by turning to the fastidious medium of etching, Nirmala attempted to draw lessons from a different period in art history alongside its psychic reservoir.

Instead of earlier interest in gestural abstraction and photo collage, Nirmala have wound back the clock, to consider the works of early

modern masters such as Rembrandt and Goya. As if to eschew the heroic gesture and grand thematic of large-scale paintings that



The Disasters of War, After Goya
1994, charcoal on canvas, 152.5 x 122 cm

depiction of time eternal and the march of history. In turn, her art asks the bigger question about the artist's place in the scheme of things and the power of art to come to terms with the contradictions of contemporary life. In this sense, Nirmala offers a contemporary response to French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire's call for modern art to demonstrate a special purchase on the present, to address both the 'eternal and immutable' as well as the 'ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent'.

Text by Simon Soon



Sketch for Goya Study XI
1994, indian ink (reed pen) on rice paper,
83 x 63 cm

aim at capturing historical process in broad strokes, she turns to etching to underscore the sensitivity demanded by a process characterised by intimacy and repetition. Even as she attempts a few larger acrylic on canvas works such as *The Disasters of War, After Goya*, her gestural strokes that depict the piling of bodies are now pared down to simple swift lines, revealing instead the limits of representation to depict the unspeakable horror that war engenders.

In striving for both clarity and impact, Nirmala has time and again return to art history to recover historical time and lessons, in order to activate this past as a lesson for social awareness. Between her depictions of near transcendental landscape as well as the poor and ravaged, Nirmala's *The London Years* marks a new direction in her relentless quest for experimentation. This is in the sense that this body of work speak collectively as a study of contrast. Her depictions of landscapes and figures are contrapuntal

Artist bio

Nirmala Dutt (b. 1941, Malaysia) has been painting since the early 1960's and has participated in numerous group exhibitions both in Malaysia and internationally. She began her training under Mohamed Hoessein Enas and went on to art schools in the United States and the U.K., returning to Malaysia in 1978. She has since become a prominent figure in Malaysian art. A pioneer in many senses, being the first artist to exhibit an installation piece at the National Art Gallery in 1973, and one of the first artists to make use of documentary photography in her work, and to engage with "public art" through the distribution of work by mail, she has since become a prominent figure in Malaysian art. Certainly one of the region's most important women artists, she has remained committed to using art to awaken social conscience. "She has devoted herself during the last few years to expressing the human predicament in adverse conditions" (Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia, 1988).



Untitled (After Goya)

1994, acrylic on canvas, 101.5 x 91.5 cm



Untitled (London series)

1995, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91.6 cm

Her paintings of the 80s and 90s have been provoked by international atrocities of the century - the Vietnam War, environmental pollution, the Beirut conflict, the deforestation of Malaysia's jungles, the tragic war in Bosnia, often integrating newspaper images and text. More recently she has grappled with issues of rape and child abuse in Malaysia, in an installation-based exhibition *Virgin Spring Today & Siti*, and in 2005, she produced a powerful and unsettling body of paintings, *Tsunami 2004-2005*. Photo-silk screened newspaper images and bold gashes of paint are worked into a tight compositional grid, fusing reportage with aesthetic principle and creating an art, which strikes through the eye to reach the social conscience.

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Fergana Art hopes to produce quality exhibitions with strong curatorial underpinnings and also develop archiving projects which values documentation, research and scholarship. To facilitate this, two research-based fellowships are offered each year for visual artists and curators/archivists.

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Cover image: *London's Homeless II*
(1993-1995, etching, 63 x 45 cm)

OUR ArtProjects

OUR ArtProjects is an art consultancy and project platform established in 2013. Playing to the strength of our existing networks and experiences, OUR ArtProjects focus on identifying and representing important practices in Malaysian art, with an emphasis on emerging and mid-career talents. We also hope to introduce significant art practices that have emerged in neighbouring countries.

Our typical exhibition programme features artistic practices that navigate through socio-cultural issues, conceptual experimentation, political commentary, aesthetics and processes, as well as art history by way of its curatorial agenda and ambition. This also follows from our interest in activating new ways of contextualising the art practices of Malaysia and Southeast Asia – to infuse them with compelling and engaging narratives.

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