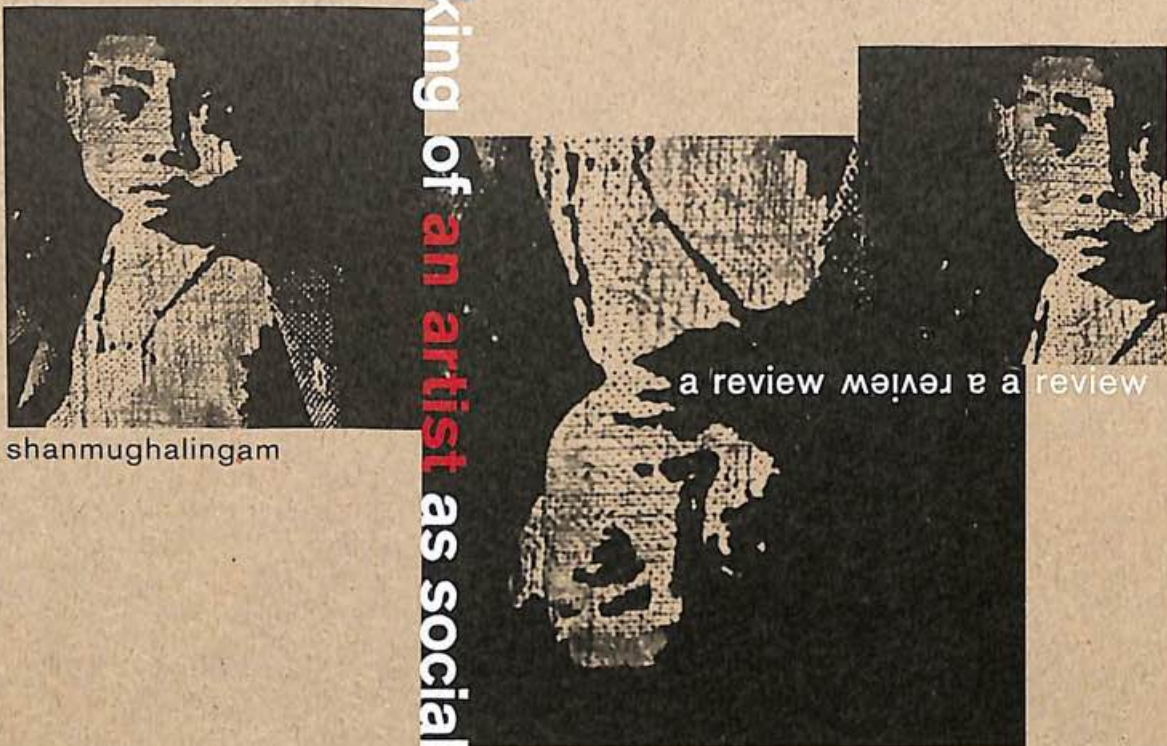


the making of **an artist** as social commentator



a review a review a review

nirmala dutt shanmughalingam

VALENTINE  
**WILLIE**  
fine ART

Dedicated to my mother, Mdm. Suagvanti Dutt

## Let the bamboo grow in your heart

A conversation with Nirmala



photo credit: Chu Li

**Wong Hoy Cheong:** One of the many things I've always wanted to ask you is how you feel about people's reaction to your work as being overly political – that it is propaganda and not art. You know, the late modernist pyramid where abstract and pure art sits on the pinnacle and political and plebeian art sits at the base. I am particularly interested in this because my art has been said to be political, hence exploitative and opportunistic.

**Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam:** I can sympathise with that. I feel the same kind of frustration. When my paintings on Thatcher and Reagan were removed from the "Side by Side" exhibition, some people said it was a publicity stunt, a storm in a teacup. I find these remarks ignorant and obscene. You see, the "Friends in Need" painting was about the bombing of Libya by the USA aided by Britain. I made this work as a painful reaction provoked in me by the sight of a dead child being lifted out of the rubble. It was an image of cruelty against an innocent.

It came out of an anger, a deeply felt emotion. Propaganda was the last thing on your mind, I suppose.

Yes, and this dichotomy of political art and propaganda versus pure art is ridiculous. Aren't the sculptures in great Indian temples propaganda art? They were propagating a way of life and thinking. To stir the minds of the worshippers. Yet they are as pure an art form as any other 'pure' art. The same can be said of Buddhist art. And of course we all know of the European tradition of propaganda painting and frescos in cathedrals-didactic and awe-inspiring, glorifying not God, but kings, the aristocracy and popes!

You know I was so excited when I discovered that some Ch'ing Dynasty painters – The Four Eminent Monk Painters – were

rebels. Especially Chu Ta and Shih T'ao. They wrote about the connection of life to art. But under those oppressive times, they had to hide their criticism under nuances and symbolism. And the painter Cheng Hsieh, one of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow, was a social critic.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting that you refer to artists from the East.

I'm excited because often we associate social criticism with the West. And here, we have Chinese artists in the 17th century who strongly believe in social commentary – People say that Chinese art is all the same, Baharata Natyam is all the same. But there is a tradition of social criticism in the East. Wayang Kulit is another example.

So you don't mind be called a political artist?

Not really. I don't mind if people call me a political artist.

What about a feminist artist?

I haven't worked that out yet. I consider women and men as equals so I don't think of gender. But in reality, there is so much injustice done to women. In a way, this is my concern since 95% of my works deal with the sufferings of women and children. And I feel the frustrations of being a woman.

In a recent book published on Southeast Asian art, look at how my biodata is written: "While accompanying her husband on his overseas duties and studies, in the circumstances of being a mother and housewife, she managed to undergo art training at a number of institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States." Why is it written in such a patronising manner? Why is

# “I am an artist first and foremost – not necessarily just a woman artist or feminist artist or political artist.”

my life discriminated against? Why is my biodata the only one that refers to my personal life? What about the male artists who also “managed to undergo art training” as householders, husbands and fathers? And the manner in which it is written is awkward: “a mother and housewife”? Sounds like I’m a mother and married to a house! (Laughs.)

I am an artist first and foremost – not necessarily just a woman artist or feminist artist or political artist. I knew I wanted to be an artist at the age of ten. And I exhibited at the Hague Museum in 1957, years before I supposedly followed a man around picking up the crumbs.

Labels like ‘political artist’ or ‘feminist artist’ or ‘aboriginal artist’ often ghetto-ise an already marginalised community. Like the way your biodata was written, it became easier to marginalise you further by making you into a woman artist who managed to study art as mother and wife. It’s like you have no will and agency without some form of magnanimity from the patriarchal society.

Yes. I dislike labels. Once labelled, people feel they can deal with you. It is easier to control and oppress you when you are put into a category. But I have not resolved how to deal with this as I really care a lot about issues that affect women and children. I’m against all forms of injustice and oppression, more so if they’re against women or children.

You know, I spent almost a year working with women and feminist groups and I came away thoroughly disillusioned and angry. But I left with my views clearly and directly expressed because I don’t believe in backbiting. I find that feminists tend to have more than one agenda. There is also so much political infighting and hierarchy. I feel as though I’m being recruited into a camp ...

... which is another form of categorisation.

Yes. The truth is that at this stage in my life, I have only enough energy left to do art. In a way, this is all I have and possess. I have to find my own ways of being strong, for myself and for my work to survive. But I still support the work of women’s groups. I’m still their friend and they have my unconditional vote on any issue concerning injustice against women. I’m generally an apolitical person.

Why do you say that? Your works are so politically charged.

I can’t fit into political circles, of women or men. I’m ignorant of politics and I want to be ignorant so I can speak more honestly. Like “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, all those who were aware of political cause and effect said the right things, the politically correct things. It took a little boy, ignorant of any political correctness or outcome to speak the truth. I feel I need to keep clean of such wheeling and dealing.

I’d like to return to an issue I mentioned earlier. There are some people who claim that political art is exploitative. While the artists receive glory and money from selling their works, the oppressed continue to suffer. This has been said of my work – especially of my portraits of migrants – and I’m sure it has been said of you too. But this is a very real issue for people whose work is based on oppressed communities.

I think our conscience must play a part. When I did my work about the squatters of Kampung Polo, I felt I had to compensate and give something in return to the community. I used to take food to them. I got quite close to one of the women and used to take her and her children to hospital when they were sick. Or I gave them some money to buy books for school. My conscience required that. And I know you also did all you could. Besides, my contacts with these people covered a much longer span of time. So I took much more than you did.

But some friends told me that the attempt to bring an awareness to the public and perhaps make them think about the issue was good and important in itself.

It seems to me that most of your work grows out of a deep-seated empathy for an oppressed and disenfranchised community, rather than being motivated by a political ideology.

It has been said: “let the bamboo grow in your heart before you paint it.” But the bamboo growing in the heart is painful. It pushes and changes direction. It torments. But finally, when it is fully-grown, you are ready to act.

When I am confronted with issues, I feel anger and compassion. It is the first moment of realisation which hurts me the most but it is also the moment which is decisive and strongest.

This was how I started to do the photographic documentation of the squatters in Kampung Polo. I read about Kampung Polo’s squatter problems again and again in the newspapers. I was very disturbed by the situation and then one day, I felt I had to do something and I went there to document their living conditions. But I had to sit through the pain of the incubation period.

I find what you are saying very interesting because I too need a period for an emotion or idea to incubate before I can start creating. What do you do during this period of incubation?

I might read a book and try not to think of it. Or I might do some research or collect things I might use later. The subconscious cannot be dictated to but rather, it dictates. And it cannot be forced into action or else your work will emerge a shallow mess.

But when the incubation period is over and I feel ready, the creative process comes naturally. Then it is between the canvas



## “I don’t mind if people call me a political artist.”

and me. The pain and torment disappear. I am unaware of the images of pain and oppression.

It becomes paint and colour and shapes. It becomes an aesthetic process ...

... a formal and material process. I have to put away what originally moved me and gave me so much pain. In a way I become anaesthetised to my pain. The painful content of the painting starts working, as you said, like paint, colour and shapes ...

If we get enveloped by the original emotions, then we become immobilised, unable to act.

Yes, we’ll say leave the painting. Some years back I was exploring the works of Otto Dix, Goya and Jacques Callot. All three did a series of etchings on war. You know, Dix fought in World War I. For many years after the war, he had nightmares of the times he spent in the trenches during the war. But when people said he did the war-etchings as a means to purge those nightmares, Dix replied that it was not catharsis. He did art because of his desire to create, because he was an artist.

I agree with Dix. In the final analysis, it is my desire to create that is the motivating force, the reason I paint.

1. Cheng Hsieh (1693-1765) – outstanding painter of the group known as the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow:

“Cheng Hsieh ... one of the last examples of an accomplished scholar ... expressing in his letters and poems social and political ideas based on a generous but exacting humanism ... deliberately passing judgement against the rich in spite of unjust laws and courageously looking after the interests of the victimised common people ...

His work reminds us that at every stage in the history of Chinese painting, a current of thought manifests that refuses to consider art as a flight from reality or as the product of purely aesthetic concerns and that prefers to see the artist’s act of creation as a concrete form of human accomplishment.”

(François Cheng, *Empty and Full – The Language of Chinese Painting*, 1991)



## The process of creativity

The making of an artist as social commentator

It is with pleasure and love, and with much learning, that I write for this artist, like I have written for many friends who are artists. On the eve of Christmas I finished writing. In a sense as I was interviewing her and studying her works, and the purpose behind the creation of her work, I began to realise that the art of Nirmala, or Nim as we fondly call her, are windows of conscience. As you look through her paintings, you are actually looking inwards, and if you look longer, you may begin to detect the Christ-spirit in her work.

I am writing all this down so that I may in future remember, and on Christmas day I sign this piece of writing with much pride that I have got to know a most remarkable woman and her works.

For Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, good art comes from sources that move her most deeply. In a sense she does not choose her sources. They happen to her:

**... and I have to seize the moment, carpe diem, to create my art ...'**

All through her art career her sources as they appear in her work, concern social issues. The roots go far back to her schooldays at the Methodist Girls' School, Penang, where she was at one time, responsible for founding and being the president of the school's Neighbourhood Service Club; going in the evenings after school to the free ward at the Penang General Hospital to help feed ailing and neglected children.

**... neglected because there were not enough nurses, just two, in the huge ward. I saw no parents around. They were probably too poor and burdened themselves. I can still picture the scene and be as moved by what I saw then ...**

Since then, there have been many social issues that have caught her mind and imagination: pollution of the environment, squatter villages and the children who lived there, ravages of war in Vietnam, Libya, Beirut, Bosnia, refugee children of Asia, boat people, the plight of the Penans, apartheid, injustice of consumerism. All these have entered her works of almost 30 years working full-time as an artist.

But in all these years, Nirmala as artist, had never consciously planned to express her art in a socio-political voice, nor aspire to become the conscience of her times. However it was inevitable that when an artist involves herself

so extraordinarily in matters that touch her heart and stir her mind, and expresses her care and concern for the victim and the defenceless so eloquently in her work, it would be only a matter of time before her work becomes a formidable challenge against injustice and inhumanity. As an artist she takes a firm stand and upholds truth and integrity with great faith. And without the slightest intention of doing so, Nirmala has extended the parameter and given new meaning to the role of an artist in Malaysia.

It was in 1994, during her post-graduate research in London, in examining the processes underlying creativity, that she read with much interest the World War I experiences in the trenches of German artist, Otto Dix, who had suffered nightmares for years. But in the final analysis, it was really the desire to create and not the need for catharsis, that had made him use his experiences for a series of war etchings and paintings.

"Not that painting would have been a release ... It is not true that you do that for the peace of your soul. You don't think of that at all ... the reason for doing it is the desire to create ... I've got to do it! I've seen that. I can still remember it. I've got to paint it." Otto Dix wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Besides Otto Dix, Nirmala also read and saw the series of war etchings by Jacques Callot and Goya. These three artists have given confirmation to her own process of creativity, for all three were moved by this inevitable desire to create, even if their experiences happened to be of the tragic and dark side of life.

**... but had they been deeply moved by colour, light, structure or space, they would have used these as sources for their art. My sources happen to be social issues because they move me most strongly and help me to work with honesty ...**

For Nirmala good art comes from feeling strongly about and having genuine concern and empathy with the issue at hand. Like most serious artists Nirmala is first and foremost an artist. An exceptionally sensitive artist whose psyche is in total attunement with the temper of her time and the struggle of a people. An atypical, complex, yet childlike artist who has enormous faith in humanity and holds a simple conviction that:

**... There was God; there was art. There were 'good works' ...**

The evolution of Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam as an artist traces the changing socio-political landscapes of an evolving nation. She unconsciously steps into the role of an artist as a conscience of society, and in doing so, has contributed significantly to the development of contemporary Malaysian art.

"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." Kamarul Ariffin wrote in the Foreword of the art catalogue of Nirmala's first solo exhibition in 1981.<sup>3</sup>

Many people were genuinely moved by her works and admired her great courage in creating her art. But for many years her works were not popular. Hers were not paintings to decorate their living rooms. Besides her artist friends, the strongest support comes from writers and poets.

... we all know how much time they [writers and poets] spend on the dark

## "My sources happen to be social issues because they move me most

side. But covers enclose their works, covers which readers can choose to keep closed. Therefore they are less prone to give offence. Not so we artists. We have to bare our souls publicly, and the viewer is confronted with the content and its sources ...

"The pain is ours," wrote poet Kemala on viewing her solo exhibition. "I do think that you are pioneering the new era for Malaysian artists to become more realistic towards humanity."

Indeed the process of art for Nirmala has been forged out of formidable courage to remain true and pure as artist. Nevertheless a process that has been forged out of pain and anguish over injustice and inhumanity. At great cost to herself, art has garnered for her not only praise and accolades from patrons, colleagues and admirers but also condemnation and censorship from detractors and bureaucracy. At worse she has even received the threat of a law suit for trying to bring to public attention an unjust situation.

The works of Nirmala have evolved through many series and phases. The sum total of which (1960s-90s) have all attained an impact that is not easy to ignore. But unlike her colleagues she has never really had a conventional beginning. Nevertheless, even in the early days, Art has always been a forte for Nirmala. A directing spirit. A clear sense of direction in her life.

... my father who descended from generations of brahmins, was only interested in performing his dharma by marrying his daughters to brahmins. Education was for boys. My art teacher and water-colourist uncle thought otherwise. (Father's brother ... both had suffered aborted education, being in Raffles College, Singapore, when World War II started.) I grew up encouraged by my uncle and Mr and Mrs Tay Hooi Keat. The former promised to send me to Paris; the latter encouraged me to study art and return to take her place as art teacher in MGS, Penang. After Form V, I moved to Kuala Lumpur and thwarted my father's plans for me by studying up to Form VI on my own. After that I had to find a job quickly in order

to survive. I stayed at the YWCA and applied for jobs ... going through a PSD interview to secure the job in the Tourism Department, Ministry of Commerce and Industry. I worked in the publications section where my boss thought my artistic abilities could be best used. I got the job mainly because I did a poster (on commission for RM250) for this department. My boss, the late Osman Siru, knowing where my interest lay, allowed me to use a spare room in the department as a studio to paint in the weekends ...

Nirmala married a young MCS cadet officer in the Treasury, Ministry of Finance. In 1966 both husband and wife travelled to Washington DC where they both attended courses. He at the World Bank, while Nirmala enrolled full-time at the Corcoran School of Art until the time came when she had to leave when her husband's course ended in 1967. But in 1970-71 they were once again in the US, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nirmala enrolled herself in a one-year credit course in Art History at the Fogg Art Museum, pursuing a



Harvard Extension Course. She also attended night-school at the Boston College of Art for Life Drawing classes.

The years 1975-78 were spent in Oxford, UK, where "the whole family went to school"—the children, the husband and wife. Nirmala finally had a stretch of 3 years to devote to study. She longed to study in London's vibrant arts environment. Unfortunately, the logistics of daily commuting to London as well as caring for the family made that option unfeasible. She therefore enrolled in a degree course in Art History & Psychology, with options in Fine Art, Graphic Art & Photography at the Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University). In 1978 she graduated with a B.Sc. (Hons). The Oxford Polytechnic was affiliated to Oxford University, and Nirmala had access to all the ancient libraries of Oxford as well as to the Ashmolean Museum of Art. She made full use of this privilege and enjoyed the facilities enormously.

The US experience of 1970s exposed her to the vibrant spirit of a pop art genre and the impact of abstract expressionism. The American avant garde in not only art, but also music, theatre, film and literature, had obviously made an impact on the Malaysian artist, if not directly, at least in a more subtle symbolic use of allusions, paradox and satire, to enhance her voice as artist and to make an impact in her visual art aesthetics.



# strongly and help me to work with honesty ...”

... what I was exposed to in the US, was the use of acrylic paints! Before that I had been working with oils and pastels. At Corcoran we worked with collage quite a bit. Artists came from New York and did live demonstrations of the technique ...

Motherwell and Rauschenberg have been labels often attached to her work. No doubt labels make for convenient study, putting an artist, especially one who defies the conventional path, into a pigeon-hole. It is after all a very common and natural tendency in our search to understand and interpret what constitutes the making of an artist. Her favourite painter, she claims, is in fact Vincent Van Gogh, and has been since her schooldays. Her MGS Form V Art Prize voucher was spent on acquiring a copy of her first art history book on Van Gogh:

... autographed by Mr and Mrs Tay Hooi Keat, it is my most treasured book, after my old copy of the Bible.

It is now old, moth-eaten and filled with notes scribbled in margins but very precious. I walked into the Teng's Shop in a little lane off Penang Road with my voucher, fell in love with Van Gogh's "Potato Eaters", "Sorrow", "The Weaver", "The Sweeper", and walked out with the book ...

Nirmala cites, among her other favourites, the Zen painter Sengai and India's Jamini Roy; Ch'ing dynasty artists—the Four eminent Monk Painters, especially Shih Tao and Chu Ta, the latter the greatest rebel of the Four. Among the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow (successors of the famous Four) Nirmala admires most Cheng Hsieh, an artist of "an exemplary freedom of spirit ... and a temperament naturally given to defiance of all convention." Professor Francois Cheng further reiterated that the work of Cheng Hsieh reminds us that at every stage in the history of Chinese painting, a current of thought manifests that refuses to consider art as a flight

from reality or as the product of purely aesthetic concerns but as a concrete form of human accomplishment.\*

While often wistfully admiring the artists who are immersed in art for art's sake, Nirmala is inevitably an artist for whom life and art become inextricably woven as one whole. Naturally she feels a bond and an affinity with the ethos of the 'rebel' painters mentioned above, but she also feels she has so far only skimmed the surface and would like to study deeper into this area of Chinese art.

... at the time of my '80s paintings I was reading Kawabata and came across "The Master of Go." The black and white configurations on the board fascinated me as did the discipline of the grid. I find myself greatly drawn to Chinese and Japanese brushwork ...

... from questions I get asked, I have learnt that few people know how I work. That I start my paintings with brushwork in black, white and burnt umber, covering the whole canvas in a rough composition in one session. What moves me on then is the passion for the brushwork and the white untouched areas. I could leave it that way, but I am also driven by subject matter from given 'issues'. Hence I then introduce these, and from then on it is a back and forth struggle of image/brushwork/image, to attain coherence, composition and structure.

... once Cheong Laitong was looking at my painting which was composed of black and white brushwork. It had no silkscreened images. I went up to him. He turned and asked: "Did you study Chinese brush painting?" It was wonderful to hear those words. I stored them away and bring them out whenever someone starts on Rauschenberg. I like Rauschenberg and his work ... from my short acquaintance I felt him to be a warm and generous person. I remember once Latiff Mohidin said to me, "... and who influenced Rauschenberg?" I came across and read Dawn Adam's book on photomontage and was not really surprised to find an answer to Latiff's question.

In her school days she had already actively participated in art activities, like being selected to paint the school mural, life-size Christmas nativity scenes, for Wellesley Church; to paint posters and sets for school plays. Mrs Tay Hooi Keat, her art teacher, selected her painting for the International Exhibition of Child Art, Hague, Holland, 1957. While working in the Tourism Department, Kuala Lumpur, she attended art classes with Hoessein Enas (Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung). One of her early portraits was accepted for the open exhibition of the National Art Gallery 1964, which marked an important entry in a major exhibition for the young artist.

... I was offered a solo show by Frank Sullivan in 1971. There is no record because there was no show. However, I remember Sullivan's offer in graphic detail. He had been submitting my work to the National Gallery's annual shows (1964-69), and he had sold my work and bought my work. I recall one "May 13th 1969", which has since disappeared without trace. My paintings and some pastel drawings also hung in his Loke Yew Mansion gallery.

... He visited me at home to make an offer and discuss a solo exhibition. I had sufficient work. However I was strongly advised against having a show at Sullivan's Gallery. So strong was the opposition, well meant I believe, that I succumbed and said 'No'. ... Frank Sullivan was hurt and let me know it! There is regret. My paintings got scattered without record. I had hurt Frank Sullivan, a human being whatever his nature, who took an interest in my work for many years, and helped many Malaysian artists ... sorrow remains when I recall this incident ...

When Nirmala returned from Washington in 1967 she painted *Teratai* (Water Lilies), three small pieces of work framed as a composite of one, in strong gestural abstract expressionistic style in monochromatic tones. Her trademark of bold spontaneity, evoking an instinctive psyche of the unconscious was already apparent in this work. This period saw her *Landscape Series* of the early '70s, works of abstract expressionism in acrylic and collage, in cool tones of land-

## “art is a process to bleed her heart onto canvas”

scape. When she returned from the US (1971), Nirmala found herself working in total isolation.

... I needed contact with fellow artists, contact with the outside world ... Dawn Zain introduced me to the late Ismail Zain who helped to break the isolation and to provide in his characteristic urbane, refined, intellectual and thoughtful manner, a mature perspective on the local art scene. I would work on my own for a month or so. Then we would meet for tea, with my husband present, which would turn the whole evening into a pleasant social occasion ...

*Untitled 1971*, was her early attempt to explore the use of picture collage of children, bold brushwork and lettering. Her very first attempt of making allusions to the unconscious in a stream of consciousness style. As it was in her landscape paintings, what was important for Nirmala, even then, was her concern in balancing the empty spaces with the painted surfaces to strike a structured unity and harmony in her work.

A significant piece is her *View From Federal Hill, 1972*. Executed in a painterly style, this abstract acrylic work proved to be the turning point for the artist. It is a strong work. One can see that the feelings are sensitive and studied, the composition is bold and subtle, the balance and harmony is impeccable, but this style no longer proved viable for an artist whose passion in art would go far beyond her canvas. Even in those early days the telltale signs of a new direction were already present in her paintings.

It was as if she had reached a critical threshold. Nirmala's passion for her art is total. Nirmala's passion for life is extra-sensory. Her heightened sensitivity towards a healthy life is irrepressible. Blessed with Mother Earth's instinct; raw intelligence and a sharp wit, she cannot help but surrender to the more positive yin energy which awakened in her an awareness of her dysfunctional environment. Her instinct had shown her the way to answer that deep call within her heart. She took that quantum leap. She changed. But not in her art direction, which evolved into a more serious and deeper involvement with what was happening around her country, and later what was happening around the world.

In 1973 the National Art Gallery organised a competition entitled *Man & His World*. Nirmala submitted her famous work *Statement I, 1973* which won the Major Award. She shared the award with Sulaiman Esa, who submitted his *Self-Portrait, 1973*. Both pieces were conceptual art works. In retrospect Nirmala's *Statement I, 1973*, has become a significant milestone in the history of contemporary Malaysian Art.

"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," wrote Redza Piyadasa in the catalogue of Nirmala's first solo exhibition at the Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1981.<sup>9</sup>

In retrospect we can claim that her award-winning piece of 1973 was the first 'installation art' in Malaysia, and the first documentation presented as concep-

tual statement on pollution and environmental destruction. The national slogan that year towering over Malaysians whichever way they looked was *Bina Malaysia!* This work is a spiritual/emotional response:

... I share many an individual's aversion to slogans and jingles. That was in a sense the genesis of my *Pollution Piece (Statement I)*, that irritant (*Bina Malaysia!*) which was manifesting itself in uncontrolled development and at the cost of destruction of the environment and the eco-system. There was no government body to monitor the situation caused by indiscriminate development—no ministry of environment, not even a department of environment ...

A mixed-media work of 20 black and white photo-prints on environmental pollution, indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste and the destruction of a stream adjacent to old *Jalan Damansara*. She took more than six months to record and create the piece. It was the most comprehensive attempt by an artist to express urgent warning signals against ecological destruction by presenting as evidence relevant charts, diagrams, photographs and even bringing in rubbish, industrial waste and garbage from the actual site to install in the gallery space. Her work caused a stir among the art community. Nevertheless with this work Nirmala had set the precedent for the role of artist as social commentator in Malaysia.

*Statement I* questioned the viewer: Can we halt this 'development' through destruction and appeal to the voice of the people to effect change in society, to develop the land with some regard for the landscape i.e. to change in harmony with nature. Its aim was to make fellow Malaysians aware of the indiscriminate destruction in the name of 'progress'. To try and stop this before it worsened and reached the extremes found in the US and Japan. To stir the present apathy and raise awareness among her people of our intrinsic Asian sense of beauty and traditional love of harmony and gentleness.

The piece was well ahead of its times. The panel of judges who awarded her work must have realised this, and gave credit and recognition to the energy and originality, the excellence in the total process of creativity rather than the finished product itself. For indeed in the late '70s detractors of pollution and ecological destruction, the environmental conservationists (the early champions of



**“The matter that moves  
her most concerns  
injustice and inhumanity.”**

greenpeace and anti-global warming groups of the '90s), began to champion causes for Batu Caves, Endau Rompin, Bakun Project etc. Nirmala joined her fellow artists to paint for such causes. The Ministry of Environment was only formed in the late '70s.

The following year, 1974, Malaysia witnessed another milestone exhibition at the Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka that had stirred the art scene in the history of contemporary Malaysian art. Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa presented *Towards A Mystical Reality*, a conceptual art event, which garnered for them controversial reactions in the art circles. Nirmala as artist, however, discovered kindred spirit in these new scene artists, and she was no longer working in isolation in her genre of art. This was the period she was searching for meaning, and her contemporaries of the new scene provided the symbiotic feedback and comradeship.

Nirmala's change from traditional painting techniques to using photography as a medium was a natural process of evolution. In the '70s she explored photo documentation of the environment. A significant work was *Pollution Piece 1974*, a series of 12 black and white photographs depicting environmental pollution surrounding Batu Caves and Jinjang. What we can perhaps recognise as an awakening to her destiny of playing the role as social commentator.

It was therefore inevitable that Nirmala's role as artist began to broaden in extent and deepen in scope and intensity in her involvement with issues

around her. From expressing her creative psyche in landscape painting to documenting the destruction of the environment, she focussed her creative eye on the children of such landscape, the squatter-children of Damansara. The victims of development and progress. *Statement II, 1975* and *Statement III - A Comparison 1975-1979*, are significant examples of her work on squatter children.

The challenge for Nirmala is to capture the growing imbalance and inequality of life around her which affects her deeply. In this case, as in all her other series, the matter that moves her most concerns injustice and inhumanity. It concerns a moral question of ethics. A lack of care and concern for one another. An indiscriminate waste of precious life. In a nutshell: the sacrifice and violation of sacred life.

1975-78 Nirmala was in England, furthering her course in Art History & Psychology. The first work that she did upon returning from the UK in 1978 was *Statement III-A Comparison 1975-79*. This work became a controversy. It was rejected by the National Art Gallery for being too socialist. It was the time of the ISA warrants. Nevertheless it was an interesting documentation of her Batu 4, Damansara Road squatter children. It took 4 years to complete. In 1978 when she returned to Malaysia, she photographed the same squatter children she had photographed in 1975. *Statement III* is an extension of *Statement II*. It was an indictment on unequal 'development'. That the children of the 1975 slum have grown physically but their social conditions remained unchanged; meanwhile the environment surrounding them had blossomed into upper middle class affluence. It was intended to be a conscience stirring piece on our vision of development and 'progress'.

The late Professor Dudley Seers (IDS), Sussex University, on seeing this work commented: "A statement about development problems truer than statistics ..."



**“We have lived with this nightmare for far too long. At least I hope as artists, we didn't stand by and walk away ...”**

The art of Nirmala seems to be too discomforting and embarrassing for certain authorities to accept. Her works don't wear well as national banner in the '70s and '80s. But the writers and artists however did not hesitate to support her. To protect her sponsors, she volunteered to remove this controversial piece from her solo exhibition, but it was the poet Baha Zain whose interest and courage finally decided that the work should stay and be exhibited together with the others at the Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka in 1981.

As a result this work has become a landmark in her artistic development. The importance of *Statement III* in Malaysian art history is that, it is not only a documentation of an artist's social comment and changing art technique, but it also reveals the changing role of an artist in her/his willingness to listen to the voice of conscience and with sincerity and integrity willingly record the history of the country through visual art.

Nirmala was steadily gaining confidence as an artist in executing works on social issues, and in doing so, unintentionally becoming the voice of her people. The works during the late '70s and early '80s were all based on issues which were actually happening and concerned Malaysians directly. They were not safe issues. Nevertheless she painted them. She painted the refugee children of the Boat People. Chin San Sooi's play based on Boat People was banned in that same year. She painted a series on Anak Asia—Children of Asia. She visited the refugee camps in Sungei Besi. When the Memali incident occurred Nirmala painted it into record.

*Diptych, 1979*, mixed media, is another example of exploring technique and consolidating style. This piece is a composite of two canvases, the surfaces of which have been aligned with photo-images of Vietnam war refugees, an exodus of war children and women. Mass-media pictures are xeroxed and patterned to the extreme edges and juxtaposed with dry brushwork to evoke the pathos and dislocation of war violence. The feeling the work exudes is almost that of a biblical epic.

It was at the turn of the '80s that Nirmala became caught up with the plight of war refugees. The *Vietnam War Series* saw a breakthrough in the silkscreen technique for the artist. The combination of using meaningful text to enhance her message, sweeps of broad brushwork juxtaposed upon deliberate repetitions of photographic images on war children and mothers on silkscreen are balanced against aesthetic empty spaces, which make up the eloquently painted work of Vietnam I. And Lubang Maut on war in Indo-China, has marked upon it headlines and phrases from a Malay newspaper about the actual incident, an atrocity committed by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. *Africa II* on war in Ethiopia, is achieved by the deliberate overlapping of planes to break her usual distinctive grid system.

... I had to resort to photo silkscreen because I wanted my brushwork to show through, not because Rauschenburg uses them. If I collaged an image my brushwork would be lost underneath. Hence the use of silkscreen was mainly a technical solution to a problem ...

*Vietnam II, 1980*, is the epitome of her famous silkscreen series. One of the masterpieces in which she created a photo-montage of war children and women by the use of photo silkscreen, juxtaposed against broad raw brushwork to distort and tear away the rectangularity of the photo-prints. The striking image of an anguished mother of war is the central focus. Directly above her head is a silkscreened article of the Nuremberg trials of World War II. A part of the article spills over onto the mother's forehead. And the artist raises an ethical and moral question: ... **how is it that the Americans who condemned Nazi war criminals could subsequently drop napalm bombs on Vietnamese villages?**

Nirmala as artist has taken another leap forward. She has extended her involvement with national issues to a universal perspective on war issues. For indeed art is never confined to any national, racial nor religious boundary. It is not so much political, bureaucratic, economic nor religious ideology that Nirmala is concerned about, but rather with the ignorance and the inability of man to learn from the mistakes of karma.

We see this most clearly in the *Beirut Series 1983-85*, twelve paintings of conscience, intended to unshackle our indifference and complaisance and awaken us into facing truth. *The Beirut Series* marks a significant phase for Nirmala, and has gained for her international recognition as a serious artist in her contribution to contemporary Malaysian art. Here she has mastered to the full the silkscreen technique. The same serious tone. The same sombre mood.

The same biblical epic proportion pervades the paintings of Beirut as in those of Vietnam, Africa, Cambodia, consistently and effectively repeating a single scream of shock and outrage at the utter hopelessness, horror and futility of war.

Frozen onto canvas, are the piercing cries of the Palestinian children and mothers to make us realise the stark truth that the young have become fodder for the war machine. The Beirut images serialized the 1982 massacre of Chatila and Sabra to remind us of the wasteful carnage of war. The repetition of a mother image, a symbol of the regenerative force of life being broken, the repetition of a child in shell-shock builds to a crescendo the tension and dissonance. The blinding rage and violent struggle gets the pain across. In *Beirut IV* you can almost hear the shattering in Nirmala's mirror of nightmare. Although the metaphor expresses tension and chaos, the total aesthetic effect is one of harmony superbly executed... **we have lived with this nightmare for far too long. At least I hope as artists, we didn't stand by and walk away ...**

John Berger on Hiroshima cautioned: "... One of evil's principal modes of being is looking beyond with indifference that which is before our eyes ..." As an artist Nirmala is not able to look beyond with indifference, sometimes at great cost to herself, for the purpose of her work is to mirror for us the deep scars etched upon our hearts, to remind us not to walk away in vain. The overriding truth actually gets to the heart of the matter and forces us to take a look at ourselves. To question ourselves and our actions. If we review the events of the world before and after the Beirut massacre, we realise there is much truth in what Nirmala is expressing in her work.

If on Vietnam she expresses: ... **We share the monsoon and the trade winds with them; we share the roots of an ancient culture, and yet we continue to regard them as the other ...** Her paintings on Beirut leave behind this shattering question: ... **Will mankind ever learn?**<sup>9</sup>

Disturbed by the great sacrifice of lives that was so unnecessary, Nirmala continued painting the war theme. The paradigm shifted. From focussing on the wrenching pathos of war victim, the artist began to change the central motive and focus of war. In 1984/85 Nirmala carried out research on the Kelantanese wayang kulit and the wayang purwa of Java.

For her the whole repertoire of social comment built into the structure of wayang kulit offers unimaginably rich potential in visual art. For an artist of organic intellect and sense of humour, the inspiration culled from her study in wayang kulit took just overnight to flower!

The two famous pieces based on wayang figures, *Friends In Need* and *Save The Seed That Will Save The Black People*, were submitted for "Side By Side: An Exhibition of Contemporary British-Malaysian Art" at the National Art Gallery. Her works caused a flurry of offence in the Gallery and were removed on the opening day of the exhibition because VIPs from Britain and Malaysia would be attending. But the act of removing her paintings caused furor among the art community who wrote in support of Nim's paintings in the local newspapers throughout the following week:

"... I felt that the removal of her paintings had political overtones ... not only is this an insult to an artist but this is also an insult to our Prime Minister ... I do not know who is responsible ... if the decisions were made by the Malaysian side then those particular Malaysians are still colonialists at heart ... Even after 30 years of independence, there still seems to be residue of the 'Yes, Sir' school of thought ..." Usman Awang (writer, playwright, poet).<sup>7</sup>

"... I've talked to various Americans and British on the incident and they also felt that art for a cause is very badly needed in this world ... There was mis-communication somewhere. Sometimes, the Malaysian over-emphasis on courtesy curbs our own people unnecessarily." Adibah Amin (editor, journalist, writer).<sup>8</sup>

"... the controversy not only brought media attention but it has managed to highlight the issues. In this respect Nirmala has won ... the issues she raised are really Malaysia's point of view. It is well known that Malaysia is a leading opponent of apartheid in South Africa ... everybody knows how our PM felt about the American attack on Libya." Dawn Zain (art patron, a one-time art critic with NST and manager of Gallery 11).<sup>9</sup>

The next day the two works were quickly re-hung on the walls of the National Art Gallery. In a letter of support to Nirmala, Syed Ahmad Jamal, the then director of the National Art Gallery, wrote "... I was only doing it according to what I thought was right ... that art is about truth, about reality, about things beyond mere looks ... I shall always stand for the cause of art and my fellow artists ... The incident has jolted the art scene. What has happened has suddenly changed our awareness of the role of art, artists and society ... What you have done, what has happened, is very important for Malaysian art ... In this case I played the minor role, you played the major ... Thank you ..." <sup>10</sup>

The incident stirred Mary Rose Beaumont, the British contemporary art critic in charge of selecting British works in the exhibition: "... I feel the whole business is absurd. I saw nothing wrong with either of her artworks. In Britain, we have a tradition of satire and Mrs Thatcher has been the subject of caricature and satire ... not every Briton agrees with Mrs Thatcher's policies. I am quite certain it would not have offended ..." <sup>11</sup>

**“For it was obvious to them now that true justice comes only from God.”**

The following month she wrote again about Nirmala's works in the Art Monthly, London, November, 1986: “... Political art is alive and well in Kuala Lumpur, so healthy indeed that two works were removed before the opening of the exhibition as ‘likely to cause offence’. Both were caricatures of Mrs Thatcher in the guise of an Indonesian shadow puppet. The first, entitled *Friends In Need*, showed her bare breasted, with President Reagan, and between them a newspaper photograph of a dead baby, killed in the Libyan bombing. The other picture was a condemnation of our policy in South Africa. They were perhaps an unfortunate choice for a friendly get-together between Britain and Malaysia, and might have endangered trade deals between the two countries, but the crucial point at issue was that of censorship ... Nirmala Shanmughalingam is a deeply compassionate artist, committed to exposing political cruelty and the plight of the defenceless, be it in Vietnam, Beirut or the homeless squatters of KL. Her art is too uncomfortable to be popular, and hers is a lone voice crying in the wilderness.”<sup>12</sup>



time I had working in Jakarta. I also stored away my audio tapes and my set of beloved puppets, and went back to painting ... being of Hindu parentage and knowing the original language, I happen to know the epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Hence there is in me, a deep link and love for this art form, an attachment which is strongly aesthetic, not religious.

The paintings which resulted during this period were *Friends In Need* and *Save The Seed That Will Save The Black People*. These two controversial Thatcher paintings are brilliant paradox and political satire. *Friends In Need*, 1986 is an

anti-war statement on the US bombing of Libya. The onus rests in toto with Britain as well. Ronald Reagan is personified by the wayang kulit character, the raksasa cakil or buta cakil, the arch villain, and Margaret Thatcher that of an evil wild raksasi. *Save The Seed That Will Save The Black People* is an anti-apartheid work which can only be fully appreciated in relation to its symbolism. Not only does the artist use wayang kulit figures and colour symbolism, but she also uses literary allusion in reference to Kathe Kollowitz' work entitled "Seed Corn Shall Not Be Ground". Paradoxically the mother figure (Thatcher) protectively encloses militant white South Africans within her wayang kulit fold, a raksasi womb! A further allusion is made in the title itself, which is actually a line borrowed from Goethe. These two paintings are art satire, not caricatures, and their pictorial impact expresses so much more than words.

Nevertheless a deep resonance of a pioneering woman answering to that nascent call of destiny. Even from the very beginning she was steering herself unconsciously/consciously to that one true direction in Art. She surrendered herself to the calling of her psyche, her cultural heritage, in order to project a more universal dilemma of the human condition. The process of art is a process of attunement, to flow with the temper of the times and its people. For Nirmala art is a process to bleed her heart onto canvas and uplift her mind to the wings of her spirit. She could not understand how her art could cause embarrassment at official levels. She had carried out the proper research into the tools of her art:

... besides working on art-based social issues, I read and researched for myself the arts and crafts of the ASEAN region. One of the most fascinating is the Wayang Kulit of Malaysia and Indonesia. I spent some time in Jakarta and Bali researching shadow puppet theatre. I collaborated with a Dalang, Pak Herman Pratikto in Jakarta (1986), in producing an anti-war piece. I wrote the script to be incorporated into a gara-gara scene.<sup>13</sup> He sang it exquisitely, setting it beautifully into context. His task was aided in no small measure by Adibah Amin's wonderful translation from my original English version into Bahasa Malaysia. We made an audio-tape. Pak Dalang Herman Pratikto gave me photographs of himself conducting a full Wayang Kulit performance and a book written by him called 'Wayang-Apa dan Siapa Toko-Tokonya'. I also brought back a set of wayang characters: Semar,<sup>14</sup> Petruk, Gareng & Bagong – the Punakawan<sup>15</sup> who took part in my version of the gara-gara scene.

After several abortive attempts at performing and recording the *Children of War (Anak Perang)* in KL, I have stored away in memory the delightful

*Khoo Kong Si, Penang 1987*, depicts a single window motif from the Chinese clan house of the same name. It is one of the paintings in the series of the late '80s that Nirmala was working on that marked her return to the full use of colour, after many years of using only black and white or monochromatic tones as symbolic overtones in her work. This piece is not a "chocolate-box pretty" picture Mrs Tay Hooi Keat, her art teacher, cautioned against. Ever since her schooldays Nirmala has always been wary about decorative works:

... the conception of this work is in part nostalgic. Mrs Tay Hooi Keat used to send us off to the very ornate Khoo Kong Si to practise drawing and sketching. Hence this work is a homage to childhood teachers and mentors, and in part, joy in my own return to the full use of colour after many years (1979-85) of abstention ...

Every artist, at sometime in her career, is to paint a mother and child or a mother theme. Nirmala's IBU 1988, is a comment on the Memali incident. The colour used in this painting has symbolic connotations as Kedah, the northern state, has its own unique interpretation and description of colour. The photographs silkscreened onto this work were selected from those of her squatter children series of the '70s. This painting was last seen hanging at the exhibition in MATIC, 1988. It has since vanished.

The early 1990s mark her return to environmental concerns: on legal and illegal logging. This series of work became inspired partly by the situation in South America, the Chico Mendez death, and mainly by indiscriminate logging in certain areas in Malaysia. The works are a gentle reminder of our own Asian values and attitude toward Nature. She entitled this series *Membalak Jangan Seberangan, Nanti Ditimpa Balak* (Do not log carelessly, lest misfortune befall you). A title taken from the Malay proverbs.

In some of the paintings from this series, it is interesting to note how she arrived at using the red dye, drawing upon her research into the ikat and pua textiles:

... I found myself side-tracking into experiments with the rust red dye used in ikat and pua textile. These experiments yielded little beyond delightful distraction for myself. What I obtained were various shades of

and their consequences, and before their fury is spent they will have further similar consequences ..."<sup>16</sup>

In *Bosnia*, Nirmala has broken with her usual style. Gone are her early trademarks of media text, photo-silkscreen and collage work. But the broad sweeps of brushwork, the bold lines of figure drawings of wounded children and women are heroic in impact. The broad brushwork and aesthetically balanced empty space remains as powerful. These are pure acrylic paintings in black and white or monochromatic tones of burnt sienna, the blood stained earth of a sinful act. The pathos of sacrifice has achieved an epic presence.

In *Bosnia I* we detect a creative presence, an inextricable Christ-spirit, but if we look hard enough, perhaps we do feel Christ-spirit in all her paintings. That grand submission of soul in an act of creation, that surrender to the call of duty, that natural resilience of everlasting life and love. That spirit of giving all. We

## “... the process of creativity for Nirmala comes from that deep source in her heart and soul ...”

rather pale rust red and a beautiful residue: the roots of the mengkudu or engkudu plant (*moringa citrifolia*) after the bark was stripped off to obtain the dyestuff. In the jargon of the trade this is an extremely fugitive dye. I found it most maddeningly elusive. The expert dyers of Sarawak and Indonesia would say that my difficulties were due to the fact that I did not invoke the right gods or make the proper offerings to the spirits involved. This is true I did not ...

However I did everything else I could, from pestering FRIM for information, roots and leaves of the Jirak (*symplocos*) a catalyst, to twice visiting the Museum Textile of Jakarta, looking into their books and copying out their 'recipe'. Needless to say the recipes are varied and many in number and often kept secret. I admire greatly the pua and ikat weaver's craft and value my incursion into this area.

In 1992-95 she enrolled for post-graduate studies at London University, and was offered a print workshop to work in. Her proposed area of research is on Art Against War and The Creative Process – an investigation of the psychological processes involved in creativity in the visual arts with reference to art against war. While in London she saw the French documentary film *Bosnia* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) which had tremendous impact on her. The result was her *Bosnia Series* of more than a dozen paintings. On *Bosnia* she has returned to the traditional painterly style. Her motif remains the same children and women, abortive victims of war, devastated, raped and ravaged asunder. Again like Vietnam, Cambodia, Libya, Beirut, it is as if Nirmala is warning about what ought to be sacrosanct has been made into a sacrifice of precious life! And no one knows better than this artist on the pain of violence and sacrifice. It was as if she is asking: ... **How much longer must we sacrifice our women and children ... how much longer?**

“... They know exactly how much gunpowder it takes to kill one human being; but they don't know how to be happy for one hour,” intoned Hermann Hesse in a statement on war. He further reiterated, “... the present state of mankind springs from two mental disorders: the megalomania of technology and the megalomania of nationalism ... They have been responsible for two world wars

can see this total process of art in the works of Nirmala. And it is never more true than in *Bosnia I*, that we also detect strong affinity to the spirit of the Chinese masters' brush paintings. For indeed what moves her most strongly makes for powerful work.

In 1997 Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam has again evolved another layering of creativity. This time in the form of, what her British friend calls, “a moral and ethical allegory.” The genius of Nirmala once again reasserts itself in the first piece of public art in the country. *The Story of Ogre Citrus*, an allusion, no doubt creative, against injustice. A graphic poster of a juicy lemon, upon whose furrowed skin has been inscribed the tale in four segments, an allegorical piece of commercial con-game. When all else has failed, Nirmala took to art one more time, to warn the consumer not to be so easily seduced by cutthroat industrialists. The piece of allegory is being circulated to every friend, every citizen and the public ...

And from her poster we quote:

... the press too remained silent. The people's plea to be heard had gone unheeded and unheard ... *Ogre Citrus*' power seemed limitless ... [and] he spat at the people. So the people gathered together and prayed and decided to write down their story which perhaps people would read and understand, and consequently avoid buying *Ogre Citrus*' rotten magic lemons and be saved from suffering and loss. They told the Angels to please go back and tell God everything and ask that justice be done ... For it was obvious to them now that true justice comes only from God ...<sup>17</sup>

... the process of creativity for Nirmala comes from that deep source in her heart and soul ...

Chu Li, 25 December 1997

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## Tributes

### **The Late Datuk Tay Hooi Keat, and Datin Tay Hooi Keat**

With the late Datuk Tay Hooi Keat, I recall with gratitude the warm contact and generous encouragement he gave me when he came to select works for the Federal Inspectorate (Malaya) Exhibitions. The last thing I remember him saying to me at his Retrospective was "... we put your painting on the cover of our magazine". I wish I knew which magazine, which painting he chose. And in my school art prize book he inscribed "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder". I am the happy owner of one of his works.

With Datin Tay Hooi Keat it was different. There was regular contact for many years (secondary school – Datin Tay was the art teacher of Methodist Girls' School, Penang). There was a special bond. I can never thank her enough and remain forever in her debt for her constant encouragement and all that she taught me. In those days it was not common to have a real artist as your art teacher. She kept on her desk a half-finished sculpture of the head of a woman and I would see her work on it whenever she had a moment. She would tell me, "Go and study art and come back and teach here – I am going to retire soon," causing me to gape in silent awe. And of course she said those never to be forgotten words "Beware of chocolate box prettiness" which influence my work to this day.

"Art," the late Datuk Tay said, "is one way one can show ... appreciation for the world created by God." The Tays continue to influence and inspire me. I too try to work towards a life "revolving around art and prayer" and God, for whatever period of time is left to me.

### **My Uncle, The Late R.D. Sharma, Teacher, Watercolourist**

My uncle was my friend. He visited regularly to see and comment on what I had been 'producing', lavished encouragement and promised to send me to Paris to study art; this latter plan was not to be, life being what it is. However, there were treats like regular trips to Batu Feringgi – treasured memories of sitting on the beach where there was a giant outcrop of interesting rocks (a view now to be enjoyed from Rasa Sayang Hotel!) So we would be sitting together – my uncle doing watercolours of the rocks and I beside him attempting an earnest but poor imitation!

### **Dato' Dr. Usman Awang, Poet Laureate**

I really got to know Abang Usman Awang better at the Poetry Reading evenings of Grup Teater Elit organised by Dinsman, Sutung and Jaafar H.S., whom I also pay tribute to here (those 'angry young men' whose sentiments I shared).

It was in 1978-79, I had just completed my photographic essay *Statement III (1975-78)*. I was yearning to paint again. And Abang Usman's poems were sending out messages against war, against poverty and injustice, racial polarisation. His "... Anakku Sayang" spoke to me about my squatter children and in 1979 I used some lines from the poem to underscore my first silkscreened images of squatter children – entitled *Anakku Sayang ... (1979)* and dedicated it to Abang Usman. This very direct inspiration was almost a small collaboration in a way. Abang Usman was very kind and supportive. He used a Vietnam painting of mine for the cover of a book of poetry when he won the S.E.A. Writers' Award. He continued to inspire me throughout the years that followed and still does – the poet and the writer of the incomparable words "... 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."

### **Redza Piyadasa, Artist, Sculptor, Art Historian**

I would like to thank Piyadasa again here for his sincere interest in my work and his long and constant support. He has gone out of his way to help, from curating my first solo show and writing the catalogue, to getting positives done in Penang for me because costs in Kuala Lumpur were then prohibitive. Most important of all was his unfailing support during the 'bad times' when my photo-documented *Statements* were being rejected by the National Art Gallery for being 'socialist' because they portrayed sympathy for the oppressed and poor. Piya called me one night from Penang and said "Hang in there, Nim!" – words I have not forgotten and will not ever forget.

### **The late Hj. Ismail Zain, Painter, Educationist, Video Artist, ...**

An artist of many talents and one in whom I found fascinating intellectual company. [See Chu Li's article.]

### **Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, Painter, Sculptor, Educationist**

I shall always be grateful to Datuk Syed for the strong stand he took when my work was taken down from the National Art Gallery's "Side By Side" show. [See Chu Li's article.]

### **Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Painter, Poet, Writer**

Always my strong supportive friend. Sharifah hung my first solo show at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka beautifully. Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal also helped by providing the boards, freshly painted! Sharifah has always been patient and kind, a fine artist and a woman of substance.

### **Joseph Tan, Painter, Educationist**

Joseph has been a strong supportive friend of long standing, inspiring intellectually and through his exquisite work. He introduced me to the MARA Institute, gave me a daily lift to work, and kindly shared his office space when I did a one semester stint of part-time teaching.

### **Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin, Lawyer, Banker, Poet, Film-Maker**

Kind and supportive poet friend, art-lover, art promoter and one of the earliest collectors. His poem "Wiryamu" (Africa) was inspiration for one of my Africa paintings.

### **Latiff Mohidin, Painter, Sculptor, Poet, Writer**

Always available for his particular poetic brand of intellectual discourse on art which I always find fascinating – inspiring by comradeship, discourse, and his work.

### **Baha Zain, Poet, Publisher, Writer**

Gentle poet friend, who unstintingly sponsored my solo show at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. [See Chu Li's article.]

### **Adibah Amin, Writer, Poet, Journalist, Educationist, Actress ...**

And last but certainly not least, my dearest friend and soul-mate Adibah who has stood by me and my work through thick and thin and who I know will always continue to do so.

Kind supportive friends would fill a book. Therefore may I apologise for omissions and extend to all who have stood by me my most heartfelt thanks.

Nim

## Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam

**Born** 1941 in Penang, Malaysia

**Education**

1962 Attended art classes held by Hoessein Enas in Kuala Lumpur  
 1966-67 Studied at Corcoran School of Art, Washington D.C.  
 1970-71 Studied Art History at Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University  
 Studied drawing at Boston College of Art & Cambridge Education Centre, Mass.  
 1975-78 Oxford Polytechnic (Oxford Brooks University), Oxford, England  
 1992-95 Post Graduate Studies, London University:  
 - UCL - post-graduate printmaking  
 - Goldsmiths College - MPhil research

**Solo Exhibition**

1981 The Condition of Being, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur

**Exhibition and Art Event**

1957 International Exhibition of Child Art, The Hague, Holland  
 1964-69 Annual Exhibitions, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 1968 Salon Malaysia, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 1972 Malaysian Landscape, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 1973 Man & His World exhibition, National Art Gallery  
 1974 National Photography Exhibition, National Museum, Kuala Lumpur  
 1979 Exhibition of Squatter Children and Pollution Series, International Year of the Child Conference, The National Council of Women Organisations (NCWO)  
 Exhibition of Squatter Children Series, Man and the Biosphere Programme, Child and Environment Regional Seminar by MAB, Ministry of Health, Socio-Economic Research Unit (SERU), Prime Minister's Department, and UNESCO  
 Malam Nada Warna (Evening of Colour - Tones), Grup Teater Elit, Puan Sri Frances Ariffin, National Museum of Art And Selangor Philharmonic Society Exhibition  
 Year of the Child Exhibition, Mobile Exhibition by Ministry of Health, Malaysia  
 Slide presentation and seminar of Squatter Series by Medical Faculty University of Malaya  
 1981, 83, 85 ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Painting and Photography  
 1981 Perdana (Premier) Exhibition, Malaysian Artists' Association, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur  
 1982 5th Triennale India, New Delhi  
 25 Years of Malaysian Art, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Geraktara, Penang Museum and Art Gallery  
 Sericpta Putri Malaysia, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur  
 1983 National Invitation Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Titan I (Bridge I), Malaysian Artists' Association, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore  
 1984 American Experiences - Malaysian Images, American Embassy, Kuala Lumpur  
 Saujana Fine Art Exhibition, City Hall, Kuala Lumpur  
 1985 Endau Rompin Pasar Seni - Exhibition and Auction to raise funds for the Malaysian Heritage and Scientific Expedition, Endau Rompin  
 1986 Side by Side: Contemporary British and Malaysian Art, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 1987 Malaysian Art 1957-87, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur Pameran Minggu Palestin (Palestine Week Exhibition), Johore Bahru, Malaysia

1988 Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia, Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California  
 First ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Photography, Paintings and Children's Art, Bandar Seri Bagawan, Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Singapore  
 Hiroshima Day Exhibition, City Hall, Kuala Lumpur  
 Pameran Perdana 3, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Pameran Pelukis Sezaman Malaysia, Menara Maybank, Kuala Lumpur  
 Wanita Malaysia - Sejarah Cabaram, Keberanian dan Kesungguhan (Malaysian Women - A History of Challenge, Courage and Dedication), Arkib Negara  
 1989 Exhibition of Paintings by Malaysian Artists' Association, National Art Gallery, Bangkok  
 Question of Palestine, City Hall, Kuala Lumpur  
 3rd Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan  
 Metromania, Perth, Australia  
 Contemporary Art from Islamic Countries, Barbican Centre, London  
 1990 Open Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Women and Creativity, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur  
 Malaysian Artists' Association (PPM) Exhibition, Johor Bahru and Kuching  
 5th Asian International Exhibition - Malaysia, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 APS 90, Kuala Lumpur  
 1991 The Question of Identity - The Malaysian-ness of Malaysian Art, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Exhibition of Paintings by Indonesian and Malaysian Women Artists, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur  
 Art and the Social Context, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Show by Malaysian Nature Society's Greening Fund  
 Malam Puisi Alam (Poetry on the Environment), Kuala Lumpur  
 Modern Masters, GaleriWan, Kuala Lumpur  
 Art Document I, Artquarium, Kuala Lumpur  
 1992 Risalah Dari Malaysia (Message from Malaysia), The Royal Society of Fine Arts, Amman, Jordan and National Art Gallery, Dayabumi Complex, Kuala Lumpur  
 Women and Creativity, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 1995 2nd Generation Artists, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur  
 1996 Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast-Asian Art, Opening Exhibition of Singapore Art Museum  
 Figurative Approaches in Modern Malaysian Art, Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur  
 1997 Public Art: The Story of Ogre Citrus: Distributed by mail.  
 ASEAN Masterworks Exhibition; 2nd Informal Summit at the Mines Resort and the National Art Gallery.

**Awards**

1973 Major Award, Man & His World exhibition, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 1993 Chevening Award Scholar, London

**Institutional Collection**

National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur  
 Singapore Art Museum  
 Royal Jordanian National Gallery  
 University Science Malaysia, Penang  
 Bank Negara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur  
 Salomon Brothers, Hong Kong



**Glimpses of Civilisation**

1967  
Acrylic and collage  
19 x 24.5 cm (x 3)

**Waterlilies**

1967  
Acrylic on canvas  
24 x 24.5 cm (x 3)





anak-anakku sayang, jangan sedihlah karena  
 tidak ada karyanya tidak ada gajarnya, anak-anakku  
 jangan sedih karena tidak ada karyanya, jangan  
 sedih karena tidak ada karyanya? atau apakah  
 anak-anakku sayang, jangan sedihlah karena  
 tidak ada karyanya, jangan sedihlah karena  
 tidak ada karyanya, jangan sedihlah karena  
 tidak ada karyanya... anak-anakku  
 sayang, jangan sedihlah karena tidak ada karyanya

**Kenyataan II (detail)**  
 1975  
 Photographic Essay  
 127 x 105 cm

**Anakku Sayang  
 (Kepada Usman Awang)**  
 1979  
 Photographic essay  
 76 x 61 cm



**Anak Asia I**  
 1980  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 153 x 153 cm  
 Collection of Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin



**Africa II**  
1980  
Acrylic on canvas  
137 x 168 cm  
Collection of Ijah and John Willoughby



**Vietnam**

1981

Acrylic on canvas

102 x 201 cm

National Art Gallery Collection

**Beirut V**

1983

Acrylic on canvas

122 x 206 cm

Collection of

Mr. Valentine Willie



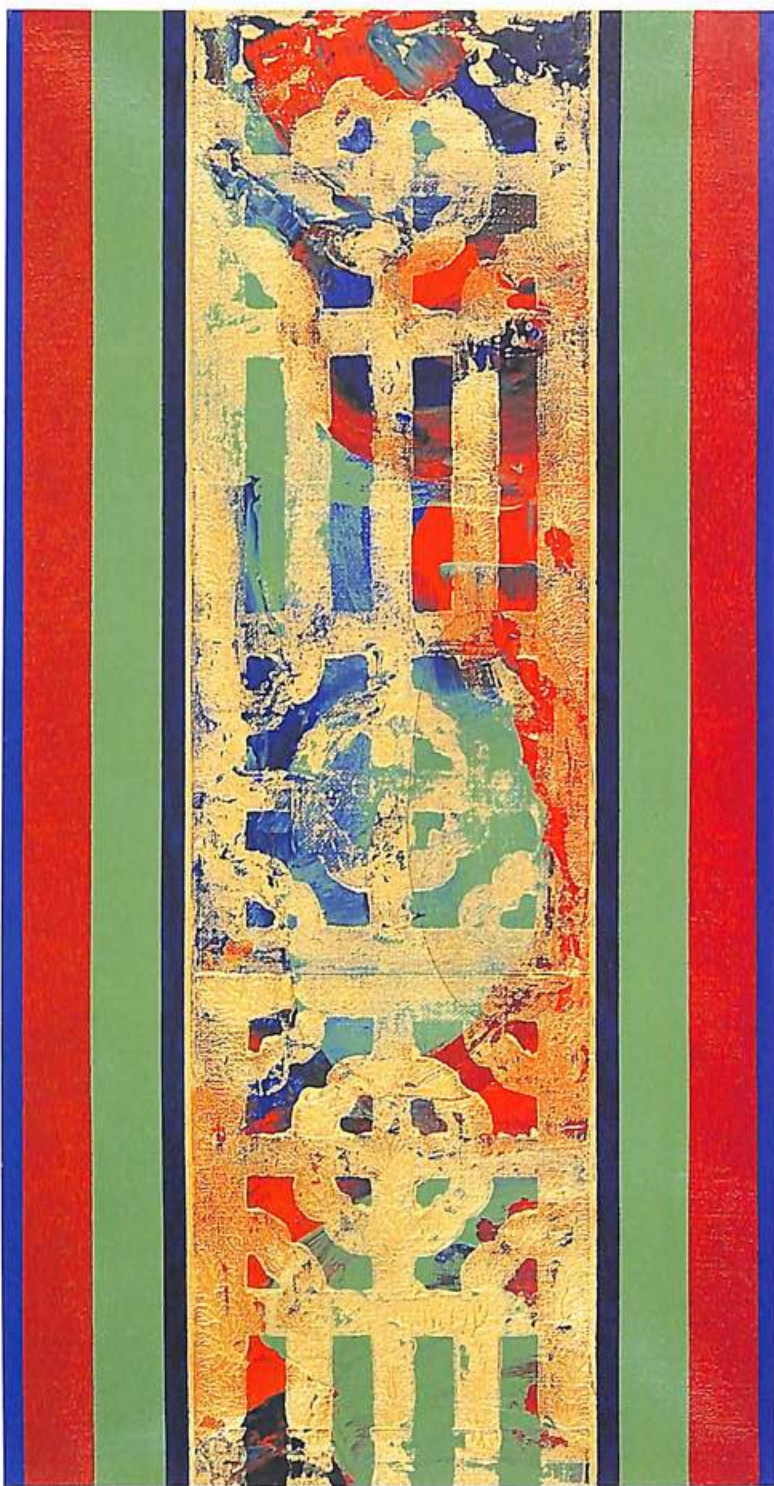




**Kampong Polo II**  
1984  
Acrylic on canvas  
122 x 206 cm

**Friends in Need**  
1986  
Acrylic and collage on canvas  
123 x 123 cm





**Khoo Kong Si Temple, Penang**  
1989  
Acrylic on canvas  
78 x 40 cm  
Collection of Encik Nizam Razak



**Membalak Jangan Sebarangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak II**

1990

Acrylic, ink and mengkudu dye on canvas

122 x 102 cm

Collection of Encik Nizam Razak



**Bosnia 1**  
1996  
Acrylic on canvas  
102 x 90.5 cm



**Great Leap Forward I**  
1998  
Acrylic on canvas  
102 x 98 cm

Public Art: The Story of OGRE Citrus  
1997  
59.5 x 42 cm

## Public Art

# The Story of OGRE Citrus

Once upon a time there was a great big ogre called OGRE Citrus who owned a great big international chain of stores called Citrus, named after himself of course. And befitting its name Citrus Stores sold lemons among other citrus fruit. But, there was something very strange about OGRE Citrus' Stores, not surprisingly he being an ogre. Citrus Stores appeared to have a Wizard in residence who could make rotting lemons look like fresh juicy ones, which the poor unsuspecting people bought. You see, OGRE Citrus had set up shop for rotting lemons in neighbourhoods of lower income earning people, many of whom sold lemonade for their livelihood.

For the very rich people the Wizard was not allowed to interfere and the fruit produced for them was of good quality, but far more costly of course. However, the magic the Citrus Stores Wizard worked had a short time span. And lo and behold, people who had taken home these bright shining lemons found that, that same night, at the stroke of midnight, like in the Cinderella story, the lemons resumed their true, rotten, shrivelled shapes! Naturally the people who owned them were shocked and unhappy and felt cheated.

Who should they go to for help?

First of all they thought of their King of course. But how could humble people like them reach him? And should they trouble him with their relatively small problems when he had the whole country to take care of?

If they went to the Courts of Law, where would they find the money to fight OGRE Citrus? They had already sunk what was a small fortune to them in buying the rotten lemons. In any case, they could never match the kind of legal clout OGRE Citrus could summon up.  
So they were silent. And suffered in silence.

2

The Angels looked down and wept for them and told their story to God, who said: "Go find some of my people who care and help them."

The Angels descended to Earth and began their search. And happily they found many who cared, from the "highest" to the "lowest", from the richest to the poorest, were people who cared. Now your storyteller needs a rest before continuing the story and to gather strength to describe the very difficult task ahead.

Although there were many who cared, and many who had suffered injustice from OGRE Citrus' Stores, the Angels had a hard time persuading them to come forward to fight OGRE Citrus. The Angels recognised that they had legitimate reasons for staying away from the OGRE. They had suffered enough and could not take on additional burdens and what looked like a losing battle: for, who ever had challenged OGRE and won? (In ancient legends - yes). But then were ordinary folk not the stuff of legends?

They said to the Angels: "Let us try to reason with OGRE Citrus first." The Angels said: "Go ahead." So the people after many attempts reached OGRE Citrus and stated their case and said to him that this matter involved not only them but the whole public. It was a matter of principle, they said and demanded justice.

They got roundly abused, insulted, called names, told to get their heads examined and lied to. The people said they would go to the press and were told: go jump to the press.

3

By this time the people found something that shocked them even more. OGRE Citrus' Stores had, with the resident Wizard's help, created another variety of rotting lemons, again for the lower income group and more people had suffered, but had said nothing except complain among themselves.

Then, another horror loomed on the horizon - OGRE Citrus was now all set to work on yet another new variety of lemon.

So the people wrote to the press and waited. The press too remained silent.

The people's plea to be heard had gone unheard and unheard.

All this was hidden from the King because no one had been successful in telling him of the trickery of OGRE Citrus.

OGRE Citrus' power seemed limitless and with it came his great pride and arrogance. In his pride and contempt he metaphorically spat at the people.

So, the people gathered together and prayed and decided to write down their story which perhaps people would read and understand, and consequently avoid buying OGRE Citrus' rotten magic lemons and be saved from suffering and loss.

They told the Angels to please go back and tell God everything and ask that justice be done.

For it was obvious to them now that true justice comes only from God.

Nimra Shah  
1997



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*Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art*

This exhibition will be opened by  
YBhg Encik Nizam Razak on 8th March 1998, and  
will end on 31st March 1998