



Nirmala Dutt
Shanmughalingam



Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingham (born Penang, 1941) 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. In 1993, she was given a Chevening Award Scholarship. She has since become a prominent figure in Malaysian art. She has been an unsung pioneer in more ways than one, not simply as an early woman artist, but in her approach, making installations using photography, found materials and text from the early 70s, apart from painting. From her first works on environmental destruction and poor living conditions in slums in our own backyard through epic paintings on world disasters and war atrocities, Nirmala has remained perhaps our most socially-committed artist. Her work has been exhibited broadly in Malaysia, as well as in the region and beyond. Most recently, she took part in the touring exhibition *Breaking the Veil: Women Artists from the Islamic World*, shown in Jordan and major European venues. In 2003, she held a studio-based installation show, *Virgin Spring Today* and created a Public Art piece, *Siti II* in response to the wave of child abuse cases in the local newspapers. *Tsunami 2004-2005* is her first major painting exhibition since 1999, and was first shown in Kuala Lumpur in 2005.

'Tsunami 2004-2005 XXIV'
2005
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 102 cm

'Tsunami 2004-2005 XXIII'
2005
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 102 cm

'Tsunami 2004-2005 XXVI'
2005
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 102 cm

Front
'Tsunami 2004-2005 V P'
2005
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 102 cm

Re-visiting A 'Lone Voice Crying in the Wilderness'

Hasnul J Saidon

1.

Reducing an artist like Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam into a short essay is a risky undertaking and can perhaps be read as a preposterous effort. She is an icon and an inventive pioneer of social conscience in the visual arts, as far as Malaysia is concerned. Her empathetic somber visual temperament, bold style and conceptual approach that she was known for during 70s and 80s were ahead of time. Long before the visual arts became engulfed into the whole spectrum of cultural studies and taken as a trendy index of socio-political activism in late 90s, she has been amongst few brave local visual artists who stood out through the period of predominantly 'moderated abstract expressionism' and 'arabesqued nationalism' in the 80s.

Her artworks were appropriately explicated as "a lone voice in the wilderness" of local visual arts scene, representing a deeply-felt voice (during the 70s and 80s) of human conscience against war, political cruelty, economic injustice, plight of the defenseless and voiceless especially women and children. Her iconic stature can be taken as a prelude to the 90s. In a way, she is a trailblazer, an original pioneer that has paved a way for more socially-engaged and vocal artworks to take center stage in the local, regional and international visual arts scene.

Ironically, as the Malaysian visual arts scene became growingly preoccupied by changing realities brought about by globalization, capitalist free market liberalism, information revolution and digital technology in the past 15 years, Nirmala's 'lone voice' seemed to be gradually drowned by angst-ridden and dissonant post-modern raves, shouts, and screams of the predominantly loud and politically-incorrect 90s visual arts scene. Her stance of poise was somehow overshadowed by overlapping 'international' discourses of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, deconstruction, feminism and gender theories. The 'wilderness' has turned into an 'open fire' fueled by issues related to ethnic diasporas, imperatives of multiculturalism and pluralism, crisis of representation, cultural alienation, cultural authority and contestation, critique of history, media imperialism, hegemony and control, critique of popular culture and rampant consumerism, critique of globalization, crisis of urbanization, and critical exposition of new media and its influences. No more lone voice, but more likely a chaotic and random syncopated chorus where nobody is actually crying.

It is in the midst of such chorus in the wilderness that I really miss Nirmala's.

2.

Few months ago I began researching a fortuitous collection of artworks by Malaysian pioneers and icons of modern art that belongs to USM's Museum & Art Gallery, soon to be re-named as Tuanku Fauziah Museum this coming November. The research is a part of plan to publish a book on the Museum's fine collection, which will be complimented by a renovation of its fine art section and the eventually re-branding of the Museum. The whole gamut entails a new curatorial approach towards the collection.

I placed several major works done during the 80's in one section of the fine art gallery, almost at the tail end of the chronological 'passage of time'. Personally, it is my most favorite section since it is connected to the 'formation' period of my own journey in the visual arts. The section is represented by several major icons that are close to my heart such as Redza Piyadasa, Allahyarham Ismail Zain, and the late Joseph Tan. I had the privilege to study under Ismail Zain and Joseph Tan when I was at UiTM. I learnt more about Piyadasa from Ismail Zain (than from books) when I was his student until I worked with Piyadasa for "Rupa Malaysia" in 1999. I had since allowed myself to be his cerebral punching bag for several times. I placed Nirmala's "Lubang Maut" in the same section with these icons. Unlike Ismail Zain, Joseph Tan and Piyadasa, I never had a chance to know Nirmala personally. I could only gaze at her from a distance (literally and metaphorically). Fortunately, her artworks have never been far from my gaze and personal reading. In fact, her artworks have been amongst the most lingering emotional and mental features of my early exposures to modern art in Malaysia. Her's are my index and anchor for a true "voice crying in the wilderness". They touched my heart, perhaps more than my intellect. They were born out of love for humankind. They sprang from Nirmala's kalbu. Kalbu with a clear conscience is free from any haze or doubt. It even penetrates the supposedly superior mind or sophisticated intellect.

Nirmala's recent tsunami paintings and her persistence remind me of an essay that I wrote in an exhibit, on entitled "Takung". They remind me of the undying spirit of unconditional love that connects all beings.

3.

"In the global wake and aftermath of Tsunami, the words ripples, waves and vibration have somehow unfortunately taken new meanings, sadly insinuating catastrophes, death and a sense of bleakness. On the other hand, and from a physical or scientific point of view, these words are closer to us than the common meanings we normally tag on them.

The whole universe is a grand symphony in which intricate webs of energy strings vibrate infinitely as overlapping waves of various frequencies in which we are a part of. Interactions between these frequencies are what we perceive as colors and forms - ourselves and our physical reality. We are intertwined in these intricate patterns of energy. We are not absolutely independent, nor an independent observer looking at the world 'outside there.' Only the most ignorant and arrogant amongst us will make such a claim.

We are essentially the vibrations, the ripples, the waves, in synch (or out of synch, depending on our free choice) with the larger whole. Each of us has our very own tides and tsunami so to speak. We are both the container and the contained; the observer and the observed, the lover and beloved.

An American-Indian Chief once uttered that, "we are but one thread within the web of life. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect." Insights of similar nature have been expounded by many spiritual traditions and further amplified by scientific studies, especially quantum physics.

"We are not human beings, having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings, having a human experience." (Teilhard de Chardin)

Humanity at large should embark upon alms' race or embrace, rather than arm's race.

In the spirit of Nirmala's paintings on Beirut in which she left a shattering question, "will mankind ever learn?" I quote :

"God sleeps in the rock dreams in the plant stirs in the animal and awakens in mankind." (Sufi teaching)"

4.

As we gaze at Nirmala's recent tsunami paintings, let us also ponder conscientiously the 'recess space' in our palms as we scoop and try to contain a small reservoir of water in it. Does it form a reservoir in the shape of love, as if whispering to us that we are the containers of love? We are the containers and the contained, intertwined in a reservoir of love, far larger and finer than what we can imagine with the aid of our naked perception. Can we find the frequency...? deep within our heart and soul? Such frequency is called the voice of conscience, the 'lone voice crying in the wilderness' of our own mind. Perhaps we should do more 're-visiting' of our own inner self.

Tsunami 2004-2005

MUZIUM & GALERI SENI
UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

Museum and Gallery, University Sains Malaysia, Penang
12 August – 11 September 2006

NIRMALA
2005

Dengan segala hormatnya menjemput
Cordially invites



Ke Majlis Perasmian Pameran
To the Official Opening of

Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingham: Tsunami 2004-2005

Pada hari Sabtu, 12 Ogos 2006, Jam 3.30 petang
Bertempat di Muzium dan Galeri Seni, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Pulau Pinang
On Saturday 12th August 2006, at 3.30 pm
At Museum and Gallery University Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang

Proceeds from the exhibition after costs will go to the Samaritan Home Relief of Sri Lanka

RSVP
Tel: 04 6533888 samb. 2137
Pakaian: Pejabat

Museum and Gallery, University Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang
Tel: 04 653 3888 (ext. 3267) Fax: 04 6563531 Email: dir_muzium@notes.usm.my Website: www.usm.my

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