

Nirmala Dutt
Shanmughalingam

Tsunami 2004-2005

Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: Tsunami 2004–2005

“Behold, He withholdeth the waters, and they dry up: also He sendeth them out, and they overturn the earth.”

The Bible, Job, Chapter 12:15

“The night after it happened, as I was saying my nightly prayers, I felt a deep awe. My response was not disappointment or conflict, but I was speechless – “For He giveth not account of any of His matters” (Job, Chapter 33:13).”

In the wake of the Asian Tsunami disaster of 26 December last year, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam made herself watch the coverage on CNN continuously for one week. Emotionally sensitive and physically fragile, she has for several years now stopped reading and watching the news. All day every day that week, she witnessed the horrifying images of destruction and death, and listened to eyewitness reports and commentary until she was almost numb. In the midst of the horror, however, there were also stories of hope, faith and miraculous survival. She was particularly moved by the story of Dayalan Sanders, the missionary who with his wife saved his family and all the children from his orphanage in Navalady, Sri Lanka, by riding with them out against the tide in a small motorboat.

After hearing the tale, the artist’s first impulse was to try to express something through painting. She found an unfinished canvas from her *Great Leap Forward* series of 1999 and within the existing triangular motif painted a white surge in a single stroke. She was attempting to depict the stunning sudden verticality of the wave, described by one photographer in Bandar Aceh as coming up from the bottom of the sea “like a cobra”. She had also used this idea of a single mark on the canvas, loaded with symbolism and spontaneous feeling, in a few paintings made for her *Virgin Spring* installation of 2003, where she explored the theme of raped innocence.

It was soon clear however that this format would not hold for what she wanted to express, and that an entirely new approach would have to be taken towards this overwhelming and unfamiliar subject.

Nirmala, witnessing and internalising the pain of disaster and atrocity, has always called out to the conscience of man through her work as an artist. While in the very early years of her practice, she worked with abstraction and landscape and nature-based subjects, by the early 70s she had realised her need to say something through her work about the greed, cruelty, and negligence that drives man to inflict pain upon the innocent. Her works on environmental destruction, disenfranchisement, apartheid, the victims of war, political greed and most recently on child abuse, have therefore always employed real material. News images and text, her own photographs, are worked into her paintings as silkscreen or collage, found objects are used in installations; and her works to date have had carefully-devised strategies, presenting evidence, commentary and emotional response.

The artist’s “experience” of the tsunami disaster, and the nature of the event itself, has led her to explore a more purely expressionistic approach. The *Tsunami 2004-2005* paintings, made through a period of four to five months, are her effort to translate her feelings about what might be described as an act of God. She has said she felt “engulfed by awe”.

The compositional scheme Nirmala has found for the series is inspired by eyewitness descriptions of the phenomenon itself, especially from the Dayalan Sanders story.

When alerted of the wave, Sanders’ wife Kohila “ran into the brilliant sunshine and saw the building sea. Even the colour of the water was wrong: It looked, she said, “like ash”.” Sanders himself said, “It was a thunderous roar, and black sea” and described there on the horizon, was a “30-foot wall of water”.”⁽¹⁾

Others also described the unnerving appearance of the tsunami: “We saw the wave on the horizon, like clouds, black against the sky,” (Zuhra Safita, Bandar Aceh)⁽²⁾; “As I swam to shore, my mind was momentarily befuddled by two conflicting impressions – the idyllic blue sky and the rapidly rising waters.” (Michael Dobbs, Weligama, Sri Lanka)⁽³⁾.

With the idea of a flat sky backdrop and dark waves in tumult set in her mind, Nirmala at first used a light, innocent blue, and in *Tsunami 2004-2005 II* places a little paper boat on the waves, in tribute perhaps to the Sanders' boat. Feeling this to be too "pretty", she finally chose Cerulean blue, a deep, brooding yet brilliant colour. She then tried to use collaged newspaper images of tsunami victims on the composition, but abandoned this device also, finally choosing the simplest and clearest form for the paintings.

Over thirty canvases describe a clear blue sky and the turbulent surges of a sea of ashes. The artist has painted in swathes and cuts, using a roller brush for the flat blue sky, a palette knife and a wide brush to achieve the myriad variations of water flowing, crashing, rising up like a wall. Despite her physical frailty she says she felt her "energy flowing from canvas to canvas", driven by emotion and the call to keep working, which she deems a gift from God. As a viewer we feel that same sense of awe, of being engulfed in something powerful far beyond our control. Complex narratives, moral and spiritual questions, darkness and light, lie deep in the expressive sweep of Nirmala's paintings. The sense of the smallness of man, of human anguish and loss is as strong in these works as it has been throughout her practice – equally compelling however is a prevailing sense of spiritual faith, and within this faith, hope.

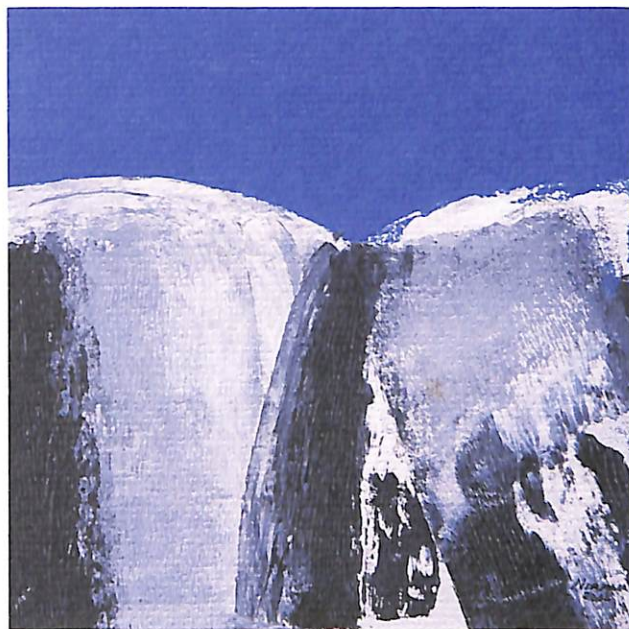
Nirmala often cites the phrase "elemental force" to describe the motivation behind all her work, and in this series of paintings we see her meaning most clearly:

"If feeling fails vain will be your art
And idle what you plan unless your art
Spring from the soul with elemental force
To hold its sway in every listening heart."


(from Goethe, Faust)

Beverly Yong, Curator

- (1) John Lancaster, "With little warning, director saves 28 orphans from tsunami", Washington Post, 28 December 2004
- (2) Scott Baldauf, Christian Science Monitor, 21 April 2005
- (3) Washington Post, 26 December 2004



"Tsunami 2004-2005 XXV"
2005
Acrylic on canvas
51 x 51 cm

Part of the proceeds from *Tsunami 2004-2005* will be donated to  **microseed**, a non-profit group supporting entrepreneurship among those who suffered most from the Asian tsunami.

Exhibition dates: 14th December 2005 – 14th January 2006

VALENTINE
WILLIE
fine ART

1st Floor, 17 Jalan Telawi 3 tel: 60 3-2284 2348
Bangsar Baru fax: 60 3-2282 5190
59100 Kuala Lumpur valentine@artsasia.com.my
Malaysia www.artsasia.com.my

Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art

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 associate.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1981 The Condition of Being, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
 1998 Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: A Review, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.
 2003 Virgin Spring Today, installation artworks at the artist's studio, Kuala Lumpur.

EXHIBITIONS AND ART EVENTS

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 Eht, 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 Puteri Malaysia, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.
 1983 National Invitation Show, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.
 Titian 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 Se zaman Malaysia, Menara Maybank, Kuala Lumpur.
 Wanita Malaysia Sejarah Cabaran, 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 Pusi Alam (Poetry on the Environment), Kuala Lumpur.
 Modern Masters, Galeri Wan, 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.
 1999 Two Women, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur.
 2002-2005 Breaking the Veil: Women Artists from the Islamic World, Amman, Jordan; Rhodes, Greece; Valencia, Spain; Naples, Italy; Luxembourg; Barcelona, Spain.
 2003 Public Art II: Siti, Distributed by mail.
 2004 Dewicitra, Galeri Shah Alam, Malaysia.

AWARDS

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

INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

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