

NIRMALA DUTT STATEMENTS

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

Nirmala Dutt (1941–2016) cuts a sharp and unusual figure in Malaysian art history.

She was one of very few women artists in her generation to forge and sustain a practice and presence in the local art scene, and gain recognition beyond. While she preferred not to refer explicitly to gender as a framework, her works addressing social injustice and the atrocities of war highlighted most of all the suffering of women, and children. She was a stridently political artist whose work consistently spoke truth to power, without fear.

She maintained all these positions, and more, because she was an artist first; that is, her primary role and motivation was expression. Her understanding and concept of art was broad and worldly: while schooled and adept in the languages of the Western modernist painting tradition, she also drew inspiration from the spirit of social criticism within Asian art history and its rebel artists, from Jamini Roy to the Zen monk Sengai to Shitao, Bada Shanren and Zheng Xie (who famously resigned from his position as a magistrate after being criticised by wealthy officials for building a shelter and distributing grain to victims of drought).

It was clear that Nirmala’s practice stood apart from as early as 1973, when she presented a pile of rubbish, a grid of photographs of urban pollution, and a collection of newspaper articles as her entry for the *Man and His World* competition at the National Art Gallery. She broke ground in her use of found materials, installation, photomontage, documentary photography, and social commentary, especially in shedding light on environmental issues. Yet her work may remain unfamiliar to many today, even though she was tutored, defended and championed by some of the most influential figures in modern Malaysian art. It is perhaps her tense position on the threshold between outsider and insider that gives Nirmala’s work an added sense of daring and freshness.

In this exhibition, major series of Nirmala Dutt’s works are brought together as a presentation of “statements”, as she herself titled her first major body of works from 1973 to 1979. The works that followed the text and photo assemblages of *Kenyataan/Statements* are mainly series of paintings on canvas, often involving silkscreen, found text and images, and gestural as well as hard-edge elements, with later experiments

in installation and mail art. In each series, Nirmala addressed a specific subject, often triggered by a current event or observation, with recurring images and strategies allowing us to build connections and intuit themes across them.

The exhibition unfolds into three broad sections.

At the heart of the gallery, there are works that speak of the personal and the domestic, of her position as “artist” and the perception of “woman”. The right section of the gallery focuses on her works which reveal the human and environmental costs of building the supposedly “progressive” nation that is Malaysia today. Presented here are her series on pollution, the plight of squatters and urban poor, the displacement of communities for development, the stripping of nature and commodification of culture, and the vanity of the nation’s “Great Leap Forward”, spanning the 1970s to 1990s. To the left, her paintings, made in parallel during the 1980s and 1990s hold up to us the victims of global conflict and racial violence through series after series—*Anak Asia, Vietnam, Africa, Beirut, Bosnia*—and lambast the geopolitical powers and machinations that created them. Finally, in her last major body of work, Nirmala was moved to find expression for the tragedy of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 whose reverberations were felt the world over.

We can read Nirmala Dutt’s “statements” as statements of protest against the violence carried out by man against the environment and his fellow human beings. Or we could read them as witness statements, where the artist is not merely a bystander but actively gathering evidence of and bearing witness to the injustices and tragedies of her time. Or as warning statements, of the consequences of human greed, ambition, hypocrisy, and carelessness.

On another level, they are also a statement of her own existence within it all, a record of the events of her time and her deeply felt responses to them. Each gesture of her brush is an indictment. Today, as climate change accelerates, a new cold war brews, indigenous communities continue to struggle for their land and rights, and urban development shows no sign of slowing, Nirmala’s calls to conscience remain more urgent than ever.

Curated by Beverly Yong, Rahel Joseph, Snow Ng, & Ellen Lee



Tsunami 2004–2005 (VI), 2005
Acrylic on canvas, 101 × 91 cm
Collection of Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia

NIRMALA DUTT STATEMENTS

“Aku pertamanya seorang artis – tidak semestinya hanya seorang artis wanita, artis feminis atau artis politik.”

Nirmala Dutt (1941–2016) seorang yang berwatak tajam dan luar biasa dalam sejarah seni Malaysia.

Beliau seorang daripada segelintir artis wanita generasinya yang telah membentuk dan meneruskan amalan dan kehadiran dalam persada seni tempatan, dan diiktiraf dunia luar. Dalam memilih untuk tidak merujuk secara jelas kepada jantina sebagai rangka kerja, karyanya yang menangani ketidakadilan sosial dan kekejaman perang menonjolkan penderitaan yang menimpa wanita dan kanak-kanak. Ianya tegas seorang artis politik yang tekal menyeru kepada kuasa, tanpa gentar.

Nirmala berjaya mengekalkan kesemua kedudukan ini kerana beliau pertamanya seorang artis; peranan dan motivasi utamanya ialah ekspresi. Fahaman dan konsep seninya adalah luas dan duniawi: dalam ianya terdidik dan mahir dalam bahasa tradisi lukisan moden Barat, dia juga mendapat inspirasi daripada semangat kritikan sosial dalam sejarah seni Asia dan artis-artis penentang, dari Jamini Roy hingga sami Buddha Zen Sengai kepada sami Buddha Cina Shitao, Bada Shanren dan Zheng Xie (yang terkenal dengan peletakan jawatannya sebagai majistret selepas mengingkari pegawai-pegawai atasan dengan membina tempat perlindungan dan mengagihkan bijirin kepada mangsa kemarau).

Jelas sekali amalan seni Nirmala berbeza sejak tahun 1973 lagi, apabila beliau mengemukakan timbunan sampah, grid gambar pencemaran bandar, dan koleksi artikel akhbar sebagai penyertaannya untuk pertandingan *Manusia dan Alamnya (Man and His World)* di Balai Seni Lukis Negara. Beliau membuka landasan baharu dalam mengguna bahan temuan, pemasangan, montaj foto, fotografi dokumentari, dan komentar sosial, terutamanya bagi menjelaskan isu alam sekitar. Namun begitu karyanya mungkin masih lagi asing bagi kebanyakan orang hari ini, walaupun dia dibimbing, dipertahan dan diperjuang oleh beberapa tokoh paling berpengaruh dalam seni moden Malaysia. Mungkin ketegangan kedudukannya di ambang antara orang luar dan orang dalam yang menambah unsur rasa berani dan segar pada karyanya.

Dalam pameran ini, siri utama karya Nirmala Dutt dikumpulkan dalam sebuah persembahan “kenyataan”, sebagaimana beliau sendiri menamakan kumpulan pertama karya utama beliau dari 1973 hingga 1979. Kebanyakan karyanya selepas himpunan teks dan asemblaj foto *Kenyataan/Statements* berupa siri catan atas kanvas, melibatkan cetakan saring-sutera, teks dan imej temuan, berunsur palitan *gestural* dan *hard-edged*, serta kemudiannya eksperimen dengan instalasi dan seni mel (*mail art*). Dalam setiap siri, Nirmala mengolah subjek tertentu, dicetus lazimnya oleh peristiwa

atau pemerhatian semasa, dengan imej dan strategi berulang yang membolehkan kita membuat hubungan dan mengait tema.

Pameran ini terbahagi kepada tiga bahagian am.

Di tengah-tengah galeri, terdapat karya yang bercakap tentang hal peribadi dan domestik, kedudukan Nirmala sebagai “artis” dan tanggapan tentang “perempuan”. Bahagian kanan galeri menumpu kepada karya beliau yang mendedahkan akibat kepada manusia dan alam sekitar dalam membina negara yang dikatakan “progresif”, yakni Malaysia kini. Terpapar di sini ialah siri karya beliau mengenai pencemaran alam, nasib setinggian dan penduduk miskin di bandar, perpindahan komuniti untuk pembangunan, pelucutan alam semula jadi dan komodifikasi budaya, dan kesiasaan usaha ‘lompatan hebat ke hadapan’ negara yang menjangkau tahun 1970-an hingga 1990-an. Di bahagian kiri, terpamer lukisan-nya yang dibuat selari semasa 1980-an dan 1990-an, memapar mangsa konflik dan keganasan perkauman global dalam siri demi siri — *Anak Asia, Vietnam, Afrika, Beirut, Bosnia* — mengecam kuasa dan muslihat geopolitik yang menciptanya. Akhir sekali, dalam karya utama terakhirnya, Nirmala tergerak untuk mencari ekspresi bagi tragedi

tsunami Lautan Hindi 2004 yang gemanya dirasai seluruh dunia.

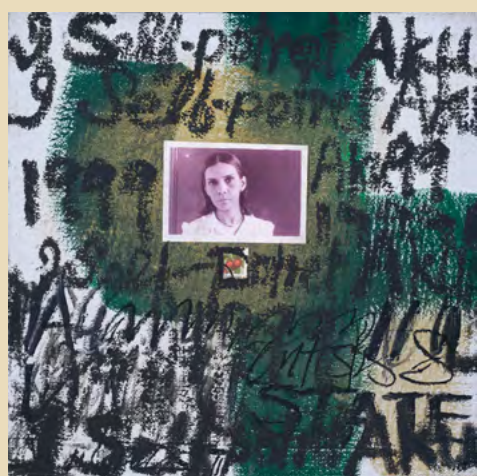
Kita boleh membaca “kenyataan” Nirmala Dutt sebagai pernyataan bantahan terhadap keganasan yang dilakukan oleh manusia terhadap alam sekitar dan sesama manusia. Atau kita boleh membacanya sebagai kenyataan saksi, di mana si artis itu bukan hanya pemerhati tetapi secara aktif mengumpul bukti dan menjadi saksi kepada ketidakadilan dan tragedi pada zamannya. Atau sebagai kenyataan amaran, tentang akibat ketamakan, cita-cita, kemunafikan, dan kecuai manusia. Pada tahap lain, kenyataannya juga merupakan kenyataan tentang kewujudan dirinya sendiri di dalam semua itu, sebuah rakaman peristiwa pada zamannya dan tindak balasnya yang mendalam terhadapnya. Setiap palitan berusnya adalah dakwaan. Dewasa ini, apabila perubahan iklim semakin pantas, perang dingin baharu bermula, masyarakat orang asli terus berjuang untuk tanah dan hak, dan pembangunan bandar tidak menunjukkan hasrat mengundur, seruan Nirmala kepada hati nurani kita nyata semakin mendesak.

Dikurangkan oleh Beverly Yong, Rahel Joseph, Snow Ng, & Ellen Lee

Anak Asia, 1983
Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 81 × 61 cm
ILHAM Collection



Self-potret (work-in-progress), 1999
Photograph and acrylic on canvas, 40.5 × 40.5 cm
Collection of the Estate of Nirmala Dutt



NIRMALA DUTT

Born in George Town, Penang, Nirmala Dutt (1941–2016) was a pioneering figure in Malaysian contemporary art. Committed to using art to awaken social conscience, her practice spanned documentary photography, painting, silkscreen, collage, and public art.

Nirmala's early interest in art was encouraged by her uncle, and by her Methodist Girls' School art teacher and her artist husband, Mr and Mrs Tay Hooi Keat. After moving to Kuala Lumpur in 1962, she worked at the Tourism Department. She began painting classes with Hoessein Enas, and then later with Ismail Zain in 1973. While she and her husband were living in the US between 1966 and 1972, she took art courses at the Corcoran School of Art, the Fogg Museum School of Art, and Boston College of Art. In 1975, she obtained a Bachelor's degree

in Art History and Psychology at Oxford Polytechnic, United Kingdom. She would return to the United Kingdom in the 90s as a Chevening scholar to pursue postgraduate studies in printmaking at University College London, and research at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Nirmala participated in group exhibitions in Malaysia as early as 1964. In 1973, she won a Major Award in the National Art Gallery's *Man and His World* competition. Her first solo exhibition was *The Condition of Being* at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur in 1981, followed by *The Making of an Artist as Social Commentator — A Review* at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur (1998), *Tsunami: 2004–2005* at USM, Penang (2004), Valentine Willie Fine Art (2005), *The London Years* at Whiteways, Penang (2015), and a posthumous exhibition,

Nirmala Dutt: Great Leap Forward at OUR ArtProjects, Kuala Lumpur, in 2017. Her work has also been exhibited internationally, including at the Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan, the Barbican Centre in London, the Singapore Art Museum, and the National Gallery of Fine Art in Jordan. On 5 December 2016, Nirmala Dutt passed away in Kuala Lumpur at the age of 75.

Through most of her career, she went by her married name Nirmala Shanmughalingam, and then Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, but chose to use 'Nirmala Dutt' from the time of her solo exhibition *The London Years* in 2015.

Nirmala Dutt (1941–2016) dilahirkan di George Town, Pulau Pinang. Beliau merupakan sosok terawal dalam seni kontemporari Malaysia. Dengan memberi tumpuan terhadap kesedaran sosial, karya-karyanya mengambil pelbagai bentuk seperti gambar, lukisan, sutera saring, kolaj, dan seni awam.

Nirmala mendapat dorongan awal daripada pakciknyanya serta guru seninya di Methodist Girls' School dan suami guru tersebut, Tay Hooi Keat, juga seorang seniman. Setelah berpindah ke Kuala Lumpur pada tahun 1962, beliau bekerja di Jabatan Pelancongan. Beliau belajar daripada Hoessein Enas dan kemudiannya dengan Ismail Zain pada tahun 1973. Sewaktu beliau dan suami bermastautin di Amerika Syarikat dari tahun 1966 sehingga 1972, beliau mengikuti kursus seni di Corcoran School of Art, Fogg Museum School of Art,

dan Boston College of Art. Pada tahun 1975, beliau memperoleh ijazah Sarjana Muda dalam bidang sejarah seni dan psikologi dari Oxford Polytechnic, United Kingdom. Beliau kembali ke United Kingdom pada tahun 90-an di bawah biasiswa Chevening untuk melanjutkan pelajaran pasca-sarjana dalam bidang seni cetak di University College London, dan melakukan penyelidikan di Goldsmiths, University of London.

Nirmala turut serta dalam pameran berkumpulan di Malaysia seawal tahun 1964. Pada tahun 1973, beliau memenangi Hadiah Utama dalam pertandingan anjuran Balai Seni Negara yang berjudul *Manusia dan Alamnya*. Pameran solonya yang pertama adalah pada tahun 1981 di bawah judul *The Condition of Being* di Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, diikuti dengan *The*

Making of an Artist as a Social Commentator — A Review di Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur (1998), *Tsunami: 2004–2005* di USM, Pulau Pinang (2004), Valentine Willie Fine Art (2005), *The London Years* di Whiteways, Pulau Pinang (2015), dan sebuah pameran anumerta, *Nirmala Dutt: Great Leap Forward* di OUR ArtProjects, Kuala Lumpur, pada tahun 2017. Karya-karya beliau juga pernah dipamerkan di peringkat antarabangsa seperti di Fukuoka Art Museum di Japan, Barbican Centre di London, Singapore Art Museum, dan National Gallery of Fine Art di Jordan. Pada 5 Disember 2016, Nirmala Dutt menghembuskan nafas terakhir di Kuala Lumpur pada usia 75 tahun.

Sepanjang pengalamannya berkarya, nama yang lazim digunakan ialah Nirmala Shanmughalingam, kemudiannya Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam sebelum memilih 'Nirmala Dutt' bermula dengan pameran solo *The London Years* pada tahun 2015.

VISITOR GUIDELINES

To protect the artworks from damage, we ask that visitors please refrain from touching any of the artworks on display.

Food and drinks are not allowed in the gallery.

While we do not allow flash, we do encourage photography in the gallery!

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Please share your photos and experiences at the exhibition with the hashtag #ilhamgallerykl



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Bagi mengelak karya-karya seni daripada ditimpa kerosakan, kami meminta para pengunjung untuk tidak sesekali menyentuh sebarang karya yang dipamerkan.

Makanan dan minuman tidak dibenarkan dibawa masuk ke dalam galeri.

Walaupun kami tidak membenarkan penggunaan denyar (flash) kamera, namun kami menggalakkan orang ramai mengambil gambar di dalam galeri kami!

APA PENDAPAT ANDA?

Sila kongsi foto dan pengalaman melawat pameran dengan tanda pagar #ilhamgallerykl

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Cover

Nirmala Dutt

Great Leap Forward V - Twin Towers
1998

Acrylic on canvas

102 × 92 cm

Collection of Shantini Vanniasingham