

# Real life images that come from the heart

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images from the news and daily life that we had forgotten or chosen to ignore.

Since this shift, Shanmughalingam's work has become much more focused, using only a few powerful symbols and images repeatedly as well as a sobriety in colour to create an environmental tribute to - as always - injustice.

The newest paintings deal with figure but from a much looser stance and with a closer regard for the drawn line.

Yet in a painting like *Bosnia I*, the artist manages to introduce painterly passages of dark umber and white drip that are a total departure from the near clinical precision of the earlier collages.

Colour is used to full effect despite a limited palette; tone and hue are important considerations and dramatic contrast is effected by the masterful introduction of token reds.

And unlike the new breed of artists embroiled in their various social message, Shanmughalingam has never lost sight of the purely aesthetic concerns which must always dominate a piece of art.

Despite their stark and sharp renditions, the paintings inevitably come back to the viewer weathered and desolate. And it is more the canvasses' mood rather than their literal meaning that affect us.

It is a painterlyness which the artist has always utilised in her work; even in early works like 1980's *Vietnam*, the images are not literally spelt out.

However, the clever play of white pigment on the darker centrepiece lends for some textural effects, and the unconscious reading of form lends for a composition which immediately conveys the crucifixion at its most dramatic.

In the end, it becomes clear that the artist's selection of symbols and images were not meant to be merely literal nor documentary. Her ideas grow within her and her concerns are deeply felt.

Each image and every period of work has been agonised over and then translated through her creative imagination. Issues of injustice, destruction and the general irreverence for human life, from the state of the Penan to the question of Beirut, infuriates the artist.

With such a theme in mind, Shanmughalingam has always been faced with the problem of communicating to an audience that would prefer to forget.

Again, her strength lies in drawing us into the work through aesthetics rather than shock value, which is so much the easier way out for social commentary these days.

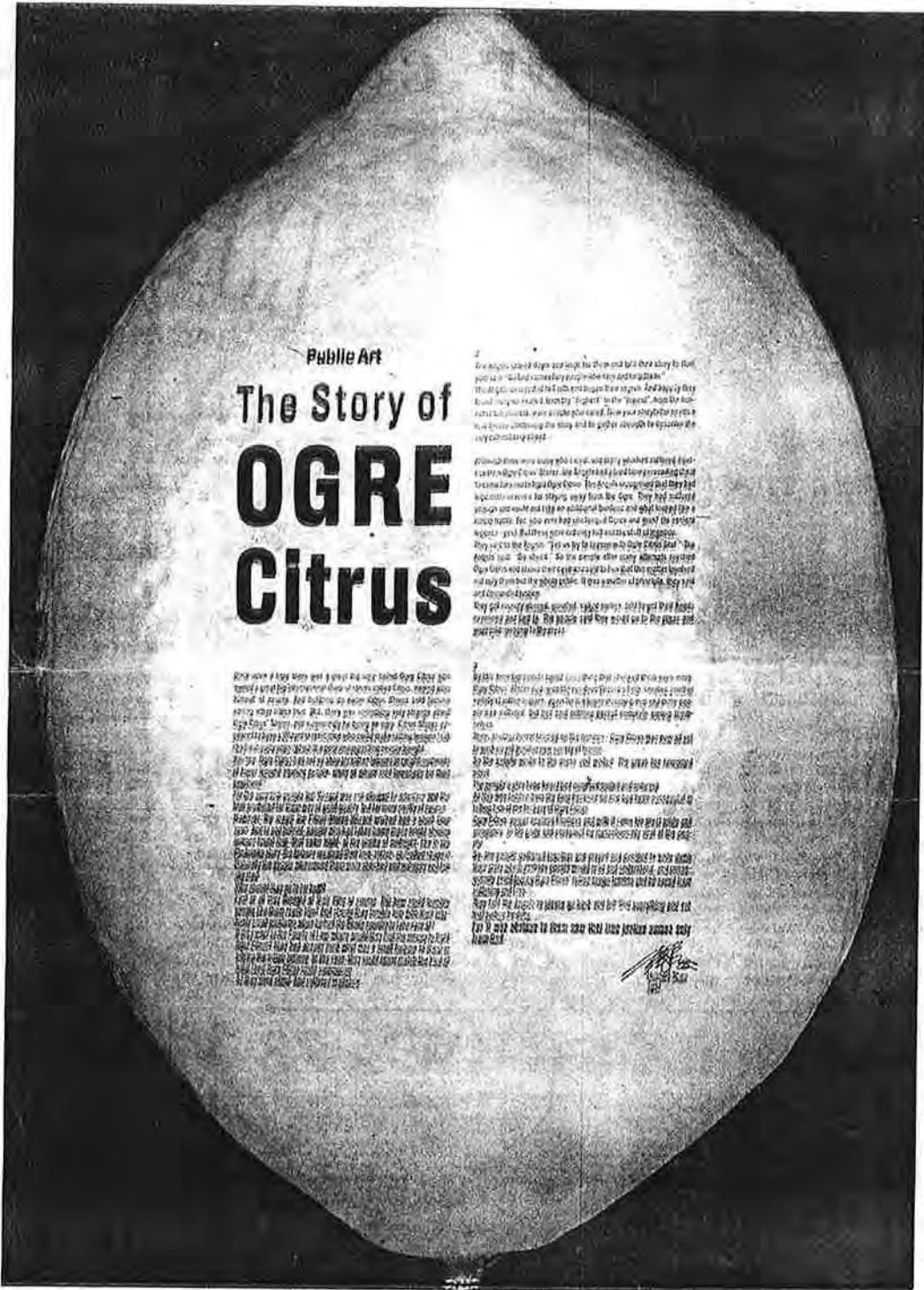
With these problems in mind, the artist has employed popular images as well as universal objects and symbolism to trigger associations, attempting to engage in the viewer's intellect and imagination.

Both the development of the work as well as the careful consideration of the pure aesthetic quality of a piece of art successfully leads the viewer in a procession through the artist's dearest concerns and her sophisticated way of telling the story.

The retrospective show is a powerful personal, artistic and vital documentation of the journey taken by Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam in voicing all the anxieties that have grown in her heart.

She has become one of the most significant contemporary Malaysian artists in her unending struggle to create new ways to synthesise politics, society and art.

□ Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: A Retrospective will be held at Valentine Willie Fine Art from March 3-31. Details: ☎ 03-252 1449.



## Public Art The Story of OGRE Citrus

The story of the OGRE Citrus was beautiful. The nuances are obvious and yet few people who received the OGRE Citrus poster in the mail late last year could make her head or tail, nor peel or pulp of any fruit at all.

With this piece of work, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam took her work a step further in an effort to reach as many people as possible, at her own cost and to what end?

People scratched their heads, they read the poster this way and that, smiled a little bit and guessed at what it was all about.

An artist whose primary concerns have always surrounded the injustices inflicted on her fellow human being, here was the cause which the artist felt strongly about to ponder over and try to get us thinking.

Yet, the satire never attempts to come and say it all.

The artist tells us how the angels searched for someone who cared. It seems everyone did but nobody dared.

But these were ordinary folk not the stuff of legends.

So the people decided to reason with the OGRE Citrus and they demanded justice.

They got roundly abused, insulted, called names, told to get their heads examined and lied to.

All the time, new rotten lemons were being produced... the people lived in hope and they told the Angels to ask God for Justice.

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

Each poster is personally signed by the artist herself.

The puns on the Citrus - both the word and the image - is effortless and enjoyable, and it tells a tale of injustice and abuse with a lightheartedness that makes it easier for us all to live with our everyday realities. - By J. ANU

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# Fruity tale with a hidden message

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While the major part of her works have addressed specific issues with a specific sobriety of colour and image, with this piece of "Public Art," Shanmughalingam employs a kind of sharp humour and painful irony in all the allegories she gently pushes in our direction.

And we realise that while the artist has a deep understanding of form, image and symbol, she has an equally delightful grasp of imagery within the word and the cadence of their sounds when you say them:

Here is a once upon a time story about the OGRE Citrus set in the realms of a Magical Mystery World, where Ogres run multinationals and wizards make rotten fruit appear irresistibly juicy.

The poor saved and saved to have a taste of this lemon and when they realised its true nature felt cheated.

The King was busy.

The Courts of Law were expensive.

The people suffered.

The artist tells us how the angels searched for someone who cared. It seems everyone did but nobody dared.

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