

Her art a window to the conscience

By Ooi Kok Chuen

THE calm about Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam is deceptive. In her inner sanctum, the "Arctic room", as she calls the air-conditioned studio in her Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, house, a seething struggle is being waged within her fragile, sensitive soul.

She's like a temple of experiences, a halfway house of the plight of the innocents, the impoverished, the marginalised of society.

Her works are a window to the conscience, an indictment against injustices and institutionalised discrimination. The squatter squalor of Kampung Polo in Damansara, Kuala Lumpur (1975, 1978); the Memali Incident (1979); the ravages of war in Vietnam (1980), Beirut (1983-85), Ethiopia, and more recently, Bosnia; the massacres at Sabra and Shatila (1982); the environmental issues of Endau-Rompin and Bakun; indiscriminate logging; and the Penan diaspora.

Proof of her courage, her unwavering commitment to truth and justice can be found in her canvases of raw, haunting images.

Restless, anxious, vulnerable, yet she draws, and exudes incredible confidence and strength.

"My strength is in my work," she says in her gentle way.

Few can be said to have suffered so much for their art - in the process, the heartfelt empathy and solidarity with the causes,

with the human suffering around her.

She harnesses the second-hand pain simmering in her into a potent weapon through her art. It is as if by wielding a shield, she is cushioning the psychological body blows, the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune".

Pain is also in the waiting. The right strokes, the right colours, the right temperament, the right form.

"When I read a (newspaper) report quoting Chung Chen Sun, who said 'There are periods we can't work, and that makes me very sad,' my heart went out to him.

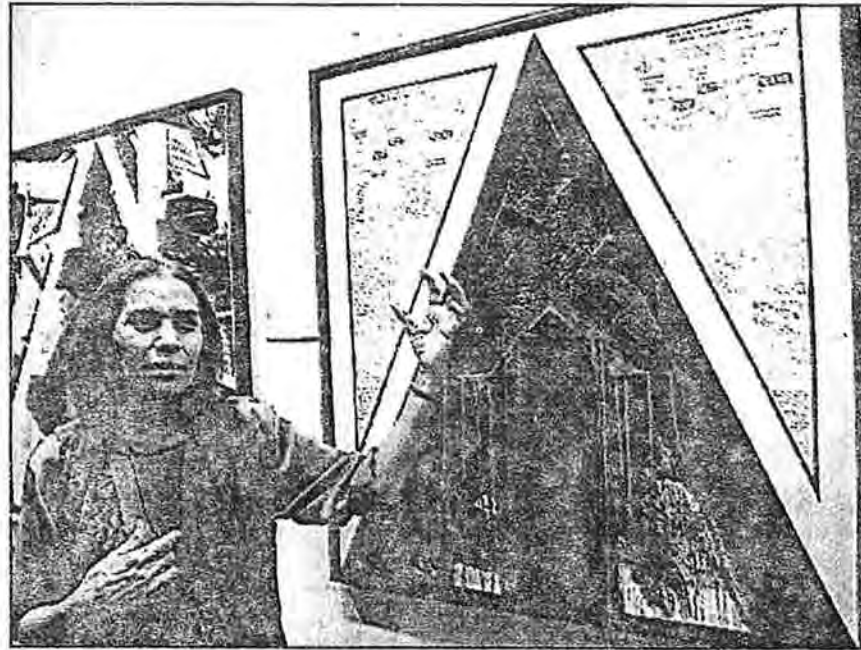
"I know what he meant." The gestation period before the fruition of her kind of art seems mandatory. Rarely does she head straight for the canvas with emotion and paint.

"So I wait, I suffer when I wait ... when nothing has moved me yet. And then it comes, and then I must not be interrupted," says Nirmala, who at 57 has been painting since she was 10 when she decided on a career as an artist.

The Chinese adage, "Let the bamboo grow in your heart before you paint it," echoes on the fringe of her consciousness.

"When I don't feel, I'm dead. If I don't work, my life goes out of me," says Nirmala, whose art is her religion, and religion sometimes her art.

Let one gets the feeling that she feeds somewhat morbidly on this art of suffering, she replies obliquely: "What I want to say in my art is what I feel strongly. The thing that



NO LABELS, PLEASE ... Nirmala says distinctions about women are painful

moves you most strongly is the only thing that will make good work."

So can art change things? Her voice, after a hesitation, is firm, if a little hurt.

"Art can create awareness, we hope. People say that to you, sometimes you feel discouraged. What am I doing? What can I do? Creating awareness is important ... I will keep doing it as long as God gives me the energy and the will and the inspiration.

"Injustice, it affects me. It hurts people, it hurts you, it hurts others. When you see injustice, like somebody kicking someone, a big boy beating someone,

you will stop him. It is unjust. You interfere to do something. In the same way, I interfere to say something."

Her philosophy in art, and in life, is based on the absolute truth. "We are truth seekers. I am a person who lives alone a lot. I commune with my spirit, and I think about the truth a lot.

"I am a God-fearing person. I thank God every day for my inspiration, my work, because he can take it away, like that.

"I would not have pride because how can I be self-righteous, indignant ... help the downtrodden? My phi-

losophy is a very personal one, not church-related (she's a Methodist).

"I don't look upon myself as a judge but it is my duty, I have to do it, I cannot stand by and do nothing."

How does she reconcile the irony of her art, which is about the oppressed and the downtrodden, being shown at commercial galleries with all the glass-clinking?

"What can I do? What did I do with the *Citrus Ogre* poster? Didn't I correct that by making public, non-elitist art?"

"My public art is for the public. You don't have to

go to the gallery to 'clink glass' - look at the price (of my painting) and only one person can have it. (With *Citrus Ogre*), now 2,000 people can have it.

"The poor, the rich. Nobody has to go there, nobody has to stand in the gallery, dress up, make a trip. It (the art) is equal for all."

At her own expense last year, Nirmala specially designed a poster; copies were handsigned and sent to friends and placed at commercial outlets for free distribution.

It was a modern Malaysian parable about an unscrupulous commercial giant foisting a reworked faulty product onto consumers.

Some of those who got hold of the posters were bewildered by this Post Office-Art allegory, which was used to sidestep legal landmines.

Until recent years, hers was not an art even the more open-minded of collectors could feel comfortable with.

"Nobody was buying my art before. People used to tell me to my face, 'I like your art, but I am afraid I can't live with it.'"

Penang-born Nirmala sold her first work in 1963 to the National Art Gallery.

In her latest works, in acrylic, the canvas is clinically "cut up" by a dominant cone, which is collapsing around the edges, reflecting her concerns about the situation in the country, especially in the aftermath of "Black September" when the surg-

ing economy took a drastic plunge.

All the subjects in her art are thoroughly researched. "I always like to have half an idea; the other half comes from my subconscious, my God-given inspiration. My part is to structure the formal elements.

"For example, in my 'cone' work, I have an idea that, say, a cone is all right. I know brushwork is going in but I don't plan the brushwork."

Nirmala, who has exploited the stark veracity of print media photographs in her repertoire since 1979, says: "I have already stopped using anybody else's photography since 1995.

"I stopped using photo-screens of other people's photographs in 1992. I only use my own. There comes a point when I feel I have to move on."

There was the controversy over her painting, *Friends In Need*, in the *Side-by-Side: An exhibition of contemporary British-Malaysian Art* at the National Art Gallery.

It was about British-American collusion, symbolised by *wayang-kulit* caricatures of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, in the bombing of Libya.

Her paintings were removed on opening day for fear of offending the bigwigs attending, but a wave of support, including from then-NAG director (now Datuk) Syed Ahmad Jamal, forced their reinstatement.

This was not her first brush with officialdom. Her

work *Statement II* was rejected by the NAG because it was found to be too socialist. Her *Statement I*, about pollution, was joint winner of the Major Award with Sulaiman Esa's *Self-Portrait*, in the *Man and World* exhibition.

She abhors labels. "The distinction about women is painful. Some said I painted to pass the time. God Or as they are wont to put it, while husbands do their PhD, women do PhT (putting husbands through).

"When a man goes to work and has a salary, he's an artist. A woman artist lives in the house and works (paints), what's the difference?"

She bristles when asked when she became a full-time artist.

"Whether I was working, homemaking or studying, I have always been a full-time artist. I have been a full-time artist since I can remember.

"I look after my family and work (paint). I nurture and work (paint). I have worked (in an office) twice, but my art has never stopped.

"When I was working, I also painted at home. That is in my heart, if I can do little, little; can do more, more."

□ A review of Nirmala's works is on show at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Bangsar Baru, Kuala Lumpur, until March 31. This exhibition comes 17 years after her first and only solo, entitled 'Condition of Being Held', at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.