



*Membalak Jangan Sebarang Nanti Ditimpa Balak* (acrylic, silkscreen on canvas, 1989). — Photos: Our ArtProjects



*Kampung Polo II* (acrylic, silkscreen on canvas, 1984).



Nirmala Dutt (1941–2016) with her acrylic painting depicting children of refugee camps in 1985. — Filepic

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THE faces of helpless squatter family members in the slums of the Kuala Lumpur, the displaced Penan people in Sarawak and the dire consequences of urban poverty and pollution.

They are just some of the uncomfortable truths laid bare in the works featured in the late Nirmala Dutt's *Great Leap Forward* exhibition, which opened yesterday at the new Our ArtProjects' gallery at the Zhongshan Building, off Jalan Kampung Attap in Kuala Lumpur.

The show, bringing together 14 rarely seen works from Nirmala's estate, focuses mainly on the Penang-born artist's various Malaysian-centric series.

Nirmala died peacefully in her KL home on Dec 5. She was 75.

"I think, throughout Nirmala's creative life, she saw the role of the artist as someone who chases whatever inspires them, and makes whatever it inspires them to make. No compromises. Her path – a relentlessly committed one – was to explore the role of the artist as a social commentator, and to direct our attention towards the plight of the down-trodden," says Snow Ng, one of

## Legacy of storytelling

Through a posthumous exhibition, Nirmala Dutt's art continues to play an irreversible role in portraying society's uncomfortable truths.

Our ArtProjects gallery's directors. "Her art wasn't necessarily popular during its time. She was a truth seeker, she was in your face and her work was very direct."

This exhibition, which Our ArtProjects planned with Nirmala early last year, presents her Malaysian-themed works, mostly from the 1990s.

"There is no grand curatorial brief here. It's a small sampling from her vast personal archive. We spoke to Nirmala about exhibiting her works, which only had themes closer to home – something which had never been done before," adds Liza Ho, fellow gallery director.

In Oct 2015, Our ArtProjects, with Fergana Art, curated a show in Penang on Nirmala's London years.

Our ArtProjects, which now handles Nirmala's estate, has doc-

umented over 200 works from the artist since 2013.

"Initially, she was reluctant to let go (of her art) when we started the documenting. 'They must go to a good home,' was something she would often say. In conversation, she recollected everything ... the title, the dimensions of the works. She could vividly remember the photos of her friends she put in her works, especially (writer/poet) Adibah Amin, who appears in the *Kampung Polo* series," says Ng.

This *Great Leap Forward* exhibition, spans works from the early 1980s *Kampung Polo* series right through to 1999's *Bakun* series. The pieces from this period have also attained an impact that is hard to ignore. Her strength lies in drawing the viewer into the works through aesthetics rather than sensationalistic values. It

was the mood that she created on the canvas that affected rather than their literal meaning.

The *Kampung Polo* series combines photographic images of mothers and children with gestural abstraction. The plight of the urban poor comes through clearly in these monochromatic works, generating, if we can say, a certain spontaneous power of empathy.

In the early 1990s, Nirmala turned her focus to environmental issues, notably, illegal logging and deforestation in Sarawak. She called this series *Membalak Jangan Sebarang, Nanti Ditimpa Balak* (*Do Not Log Carelessly, Lest Misfortune Befall You*), a title inspired by a Malay proverb.

It is interesting to observe how Nirmala arrived at using the red dye in some of these paintings, drawing upon her research into the ikat and pua textiles.

As a second generation Malaysian artist, Nirmala's artistic career began in the late 1960s in KL. Her formal art education in the 1970s included stints in the United States and Britain, notably art history at Fogg Museum of Art at Harvard University and drawing at Boston College of Art and Cambridge Education Centre in the US.

Later on, she embraced post-modernism through the 1970s as she created pioneering work that tackled difficult and urgent topics, such as global conflict, political injustices, refugee crisis, environmental pollution and women's issues.

Through painterly collages and silk screens, Nirmala evolved her art, while exploring her social and political themes. Her abstract expressionist landscapes like *Landscape* (1972) and *View From*