



Great Leap Forward VII (acrylic on jute, 1998-99).



Visitors at the late artist Nirmala Dutt's exhibition *Great Leap Forward* in Kuala Lumpur. — RICKY LAI/The Star



Membalak Jangan Sebarang Balak - Rumbia (acrylic, silkscreen on canvas, 1990).

Federal Hill (1972) captured a young artist on the rise, but it was hard-hitting works about environmental issues like *Statement I* (1973) and *Pollution Piece* (1974), which marked a watershed in her career.

Nirmala's legacy, despite being described as "the conscience of her times", will always be remembered.

"I am an artist first and foremost – not necessarily just a woman artist or feminist artist or political artist," said Nirmala in an interview in *The Making Of An Artist As A Social Commentator* exhibition catalogue in 1998.

As for her art itself, it remains to be seen if there will be a revival of interest – considering how significantly vital they still are today.

"The National Visual Arts Gallery (in KL) and the National Gallery Singapore already have a good collection of her works. This *Great Leap Forward* exhibition is the start for Our ArtProjects to reintroduce Nirmala Dutt, the artist, to a new generation. Some of the works in this show might be over 30 years old, but they still have a contemporary edge," says Ng.

Indeed, Nirmala was also one of the first Malaysian artists to make

use of documentary photography in her work.

"I wanted to retain the objectivity of the subject, something only a camera can achieve. If I had painted it, a part of me would have come into it," Nirmala once explained in an interview with *The Star* in 1998.

Her research and storytelling, it can be said, also reflected the diligence and social-consciousness of activist reporting.

"I agonise for a long time over what I want to paint; and I found an old Chinese quotation that best described this phenomena – 'before you paint it, let the bamboo grow in your heart,' she said in the same interview.

With the support of artist friends like Redza Piyadasa, Ismail Zain and Syed Ahmad Jamal, Nirmala, fondly known as "Nim", was an artist who never stopped exploring new means of expression. In 1973, she might have shook the art establishment here when she became the first artist to exhibit an installation *Statement I* at the National Art Gallery in KL. In that exhibition/competition titled *Man And His World*, Nirmala was a Major Award joint-winner, along with fellow conceptual artist Sulaiman Esa. But she never remained stag-

nant when it came to creativity and asking questions.

"In art, with experience, hindsight and more exposure, one surely gets much better. In Nim's case, she was greatly fortified by her studies then in the US and London – like on art history and printmaking," explains Ooi Kok Chuen, art critic and writer.

"She had been meticulous in doing research, but she had a flair in manipulating media or incorporating intrinsic elements to drive home the message and impact – silkscreens, mengkudu, the mannequin, print media excerpts/cutouts ala pop with flashes of the gestural, actual debris. She could also internalise the pain of oppression, injustice into her art-body-soul in order to externalise and express in ways she thought best."

Ooi said: "In all she did, there was this operative element of her sharp intelligence."

Nirmala Dutt: *Great Leap Forward* is on at Our ArtProjects gallery at the Zhongshan Building, 80, Jalan Rotan, off Jalan Kampung Attap in Kuala Lumpur. Open daily: 11am to 7pm, Sunday by appointment. Closed public holidays. Admission is free. For more info, visit www.ourartprojects.com, or email: contact@ourartprojects.com.



Great Leap Forward I (acrylic, silkscreen on canvas, 1998).