



Mohamad 'Ucup' Yusuf's *Jendela Antara* (Mdf blockprint reduction, 2016)



Hug Yin Wan's *The Crow XIII* (woodcut on plywood, 2016).



Sabihis Pandi's *King Of Hearts* (woodcut print on canvas, 2016).



Nirmala presenting her work *Great Leap Forward VI - Bakun* at the launch of her *The Making Of An Artist As Social Commentator* exhibition at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur in 1998.

— Photos: Filepic

Ahead of her time

Nirmala Dutt called upon the artist to engage in the role of a social commentator.

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PENANG-born senior artist Nirmala Dutt, who is regarded as one of the unflinching social commentators in the Malaysian art scene, died peacefully at home on Dec 5. She was 75.

Born in George Town and schooled at Penang's Methodist Girls' School, Nirmala first started out as a tourist officer before she travelled to the United States in 1966, where she took up part-time art classes. Upon her return to Malaysia in 1967, her artistic career began in earnest.

In the late-1960s, she was active in the vibrant Klang Valley art scene, often participating in exhibitions held by institutions like the National Museum of Art (now known as the National Visual Arts Gallery) in KL. As a young artist, she attended portrait painting classes and also trained under legendary portrait painter Datuk Hoessein Enas (1924-1995) in KL.

However, Nirmala's artistic individuality was to be informed by Abstract Expressionism, her favourite painter was Robert Motherwell. Pioneering Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg was also an influence in developing her collage style.

Through her art, Nirmala demonstrated an artist – a restless, highly-creative and intense soul at that – hugely ahead of her time. Her themes were hardly pretty.

She addressed difficult and urgent subjects like political injustices, global conflict, refugee crisis and environmental pollution.

Alongside her artist friends, such as Redza Piyadasa, Ismail Zain and Ismail Hashim, Nirmala, fondly known as "Nim" was a pioneering force in her own right.

In 1973, she shook the art establishment here when she became the first artist to exhibit an installation at the National Art Gallery in KL. In that exhibition/competition called *Man And His World*, Nirmala was a Major Award joint-winner, along with fellow conceptual artist Sulaiman Esa.

Nirmala's *Statement 1* installation, featuring actual rubbish and industrial waste, highlighted the seriousness of environmental problems in Malaysia. It has been recognised as a liberating work in Malaysian art, pointing the way forward for local art that went beyond painterly pursuits.

Nirmala was also one of the first Malaysian artists to make use of documentary photography in her work.



Nirmala's work *Study For Anti-Apartheid Work: Study For Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People* (collage, acrylic and ink on canvas, 1986).

Later on, Nirmala went on to train at art schools in the United States and Britain, returning to Malaysia in 1978.

Her paintings from the 1980s/90s have been provoked by international atrocities and much closer to home, the deforestation of Malaysia's jungles and women's rights.

Her work has been exhibited internationally, at the National Gallery of Thailand, the Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan, the Barbican Centre London and the Singapore Art Museum. Last year's *Nirmala Dutt: The London Years* show in Penang saw her prints and paintings from the 1990s exhibited at Fergana Art Space. Most recently, her work *Great Leap Forward VI - Bakun* (1998) was shown at the *Era Mahathir* show at Ilham Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, while her collage piece *Friends In Need* (1986) – portraying Thatcher, Reagan and their 'Special Relationship' – is now on display in the *Between Declarations And Dreams* exhibition at the National Gallery Singapore.

Next month, OUR ArtProjects, which represent Nirmala's art, will be hosting its inaugural show *Nirmala Dutt: Great Leap Forward* at its new gallery in Kuala Lumpur. The exhibition, which centres on her 1990s output, had been planned earlier this year.