



□ The artist in her garden with a model of *Save The Seed That Will Save The Black People*.

2/10/86 Story, sketch and pictures by AHMID FAUZI

*MST.*  
The artist behind the "impolite" art pieces for the Side by Side exhibition is a shy and an intensely private woman — a most unlikely person to attract all that glare and publicity. Now all Nirmala Shanmughalingam wants is to be left out of the recent controversy to continue her work in peace...

## THE VERY PRIVATE NIRMALA



“Nirmala Shanmughalingam — Born in 1941. Studied at Corcoran School of Art, Washington DC...”

So read the opening lines of Penang-born artist Nirmala Shanmughalingam's biography in the *Side By Side* catalogue book, and in fact, it took just 48 words or about two paragraphs.

Too little information? You're lucky to have so much!

For Nirmala ('Nim' to close friends), as one discovers, is an intensely private person.

You would learn more about her from her acquaintances than if you would try to interview her herself.

She rarely gives interviews and when she does it almost always centres around her work. She is shy, reticent about her private life. When she speaks, you can hear the nervousness in her voice. Her friends will tell you that this is normal.

She may seem nervous but you wouldn't know it from observing her works which often carry strong social comments.

Her house, located at the residential area of Bukit Bandaraya in Kuala Lumpur, is filled with plants. When you walk into her home you will at once know that it is an artist's domain. On her living room walls hang paintings that she has done over the years.

Her eyes are sensitive to bright lights. If you are sitting in her living room you will notice that the drapes are always drawn. And when the day grows dark the lights are kept low, just enough for you to see.

She dreads being photographed. But if you insist, then she will probably allow you... after you have gained her trust.

Nervous she may be, but she has a mind of her own. She will tell you that she often gets into heated discussions with her husband.

She takes her art very, very seriously. So much so that, at least for Nirmala Shanmughalingam, the artist is secondary to the art.

For her, the importance of her art lies not only in the technique she employs, but also the message it carries — usually championing causes or highlighting issues.

Nirmala feels that her art should do all the talking for her and she would prefer to stay very much in the background.

Her direction in art really took root back in 1972 when, while looking for suitable landscape locations to paint, she realised the fact that in Malaysia little or no attention was paid to the systematic preservation of the natural landscape.

She found traditional painting techniques unsuitable for an effective vehicle and soon arrived at the idea of using photography.

This produced in 1973, *Pollution Piece*, an art piece consisting of photographs documenting the pollution and decay in greater Kuala Lumpur.

In the same year, she was awarded the Major Prize for her entry of a complex conceptual work on pollution. This was followed by her systematic documentation of children living in the slums.

From 1975 to 1978, she followed her husband — who was completing his doctoral studies at Oxford



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University — to England.

She took this opportunity to enrol herself as a full-time student (up to this point she had only been attending part-time overseas courses) at the Oxford Polytechnic and studied mass communication, graphic art and psychology.

When she came home, she began utilising both her earlier interest in gestural painting (using bold brush strokes) and her interest in photography (and the use of composite effects) in her works.

Her focus was then turned to the sufferings of women and children caught in wars. This produced *Africa II* (1980) which was inspired by the war in Ethiopia, and later *Vietnam II* (1980), an artistic statement about the brutality of the Vietnam War.

And she was again making social statements with her two latest submissions — entitled *Friends In Need* and *Save The Seed That Will Save The Black People* — to the *Side By Side* art exhibition at the National Art Gallery (on until Oct. 19).

And that was when the shy artist met the bold hand of officialdom. *Save The Seed* has a caricature of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher protecting a group of white South Africans. It was taken down minutes before the official opening on Sept. 22.

The day before, Nirmala had already accepted the bitter taste of having her other work, *Friends In Need* (in which Thatcher is seen as a bare-

breasted *wayang kulit* figure) taken down.

(Both paintings were restored to their original display lots the day after the opening).

*Friends In Need* is Nirmala's statement on the American bombings of Libya, which has caricatures of US President Ronald Reagan and Thatcher on *wayang kulit* figures juxtaposed with photographs of a child killed in the attack.

“Those two works are actually among my first since I started studying the Eastern culture,” said Nirmala.

She explained that her art education was more rooted in the Western culture since all her previous education had been from the West.

Feeling the need to educate herself on Eastern culture, she began reading up on any source she can lay her hands on on local and regional cultural heritage.

Her self-education began early last year when “I taught myself the history of modern (art) movements in Japan and India.

“I went to the Universiti Malaya library for my reference where I also found a lot of material on the Indonesian *wayang kulit*,” she said.

“I would not have continued my studies into the *wayang kulit* if not for *Semar* and his three sons,” said Nirmala.

*Semar* is a *wayang kulit* character from the *Mahabharata* which represents all that is good and wise. He is actually a Javanese contribution to the *wayang kulit*.

“The *Mahabharata* stories are usually of war and I do not like war but in *Semar* and his sons I have found my source of inspiration,” she said.

One day, she decided to do a piece on the apartheid issue and when she came across a newspaper article on the death of a black child in a riot, she felt moved to do the piece for the British-Malaysian art show.

Wishing to utilise what she has studied, Nirmala easily found a *wayang kulit* character that strongly resembled Thatcher.

The bare-breasted character is called *Raseksi*. She is wife to the demon in the *wayang kulit* story. Nirmala chose the *Raseksi* because the creature has a strong physical likeness to the British Prime Minister.

“You see, the Indonesian range of *wayang kulit* characters is so wide that I can easily find a character that will fill my needs in my artwork,” said the artist.

And Reagan?

“You wouldn't believe it till you see it with your own eyes! There *was* one that resembled Mr Reagan!”

“I picked the *Raksasa Tjakil* for Mr Reagan because the character wore two *keris* (a Malay dagger which signifies warring tendencies) and is a war-like creature,” she added.

Nirmala's reference runs into hundreds, if not thousands, of journals and magazines which included two years' collection of *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Economist*.

She chose the information in these magazines because she felt that no one could then accuse her of being biased as the news were reported by the Western media and not her own opinions as to what happened in South Africa.

Nirmala said that she seeks neither fame nor fortune in her work, rather, it is her conscience that acts as her guide.

Artists of her ilk expect some response from society. And for Nirmala, that response came, rather rudely, that Sept. 22.

No matter who was responsible and for whatever reason, the incident left a few red faces.

There were people who urged Nirmala to pursue the matter and put the national gallery to task for meekly accepting the removal requests. But for Nirmala that would not do at all.

For her it would be like adding salt to the wound to see Malaysians squaring up against other Malaysians.

“I had gone over my mind the events of that day and I am certain of who was really responsible for the removal of my paintings,” said Nirmala. “Anyway, I have prepared a written statement on the matter.”

Her statement reads: “I would like to thank all my friends and the Press for their kindness and generous support. I am truly grateful. But now I beg to be left out of this controversy so that I can continue my work in peace. I am an artist, not an activist, and seek neither fame nor fortune and wish to continue making my statements through my paintings with the conscience God has given me. I wish for nothing more than to be allowed to

□ **SPEAKING UP:** People in the literary and arts circle comment on the 'Nirmala controversy' — Page 3



□ A section of the controversial piece *Friends In Need*

show my work in freedom, especially in my own country.

“To those who with good intentions are trying to establish who spoke the truth and who lied, I have this to say: One day I will stand alone before my Creator to give an account of myself. And they will also stand alone before Him. God knows the truth and I am satisfied.

“We broke free from colonial rule for almost three decades ago. I weep for those Malaysians who cannot break free from their colonial bondage even now.

“I am completely satisfied by the National Art Gallery's stand, and am especially grateful to Tuan Syed Ahmad Jamal for his courage in standing up for his convictions.

“I am deeply touched by the support of my fellow artists and those Malaysian writers who have spoken to me, have told me to continue, to fear nothing, and that they will back me all the way. I could not ask for more and will always remember all those who stood by me. Thank you, again.”

# Speaking out in support of Nirmala's art

2/10/86 NST  
By AHMAD FAUZI

NIRMALA Shanmughalingam has been known to be a very private artist who makes thought-provoking social comments on society through her art.

She has always preferred to let her works speak for her. She, herself, prefers to be in the shadows, so to speak.

But many a time, because of the seriousness of her messages in her works, the person is very much focused upon.

One such incident was at the official opening of the *Side By Side* show of Contemporary British-Malaysian Art at the National Art Gallery by the Prime Minister's wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, on Sept 22.

That day saw the removal of Nirmala's painting from the exhibition gallery minutes before the Datin Seri entered the gallery.

The piece in question — *Save The Seed That Will Save The Black People* — has a caricature of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (seen as a *Wayang Kulit* figure) protecting a group of white South Africans.

The day before, Nirmala had already accepted the bitter taste of having her other artwork — *Friends In Need* — taken down.

*Friends In Need*, her statement on the American bombings of Libya, had caricatures of U.S. President

Ronald Reagan and Mrs Thatcher on *Wayang Kulit* figures juxtaposed with photographs of a child killed in the attack.

Initial reports placed the British High Commission as being responsible for the removal. However, subsequent Press reports revealed that the request came from the art exhibition's co-sponsor, the Malaysian-British Society.

The following are just a few of the reactions that came about from these incidents:

□ Ms Mary Rose Beaumont, British Contemporary Art Critic in charge of selecting the British works in the *Side By Side* show: "I feel the whole business is absurd. I saw nothing wrong with either of the artworks.

"In Britain, we have a tradition of satires and Mrs Thatcher has been the subject of caricatures and satires. You see, not every Briton agrees with Mrs Thatcher's policies.

"I am quite certain it would not have offended any Briton."

□ Puan Adibah Amin, editor, journalist and freelance-writer for various newspapers and magazines: "I've talked to various Americans and British on the incident and they also felt that art for a cause is very badly needed in this world.

"I also feel that was mis-commun-



NIRMALA SHANMUGHALINGAM's *Friends In Need*, one of the two paintings removed from the *Side By Side* exhibition

ication somewhere. Sometime, the Malaysians' over-emphasis on courtesy curbs our own people unnecessarily."

□ Encik Usman Awang, prominent writer, playwright and national poet: "From the newspaper reports, I felt that the removal of her paintings had political overtones to it.

"In which case, I am neither sad nor sorrowful over the matter. Rather, I am angry because not only is this an insult to an artist but this is also an insult to our Prime Minister.

"I do not know who is responsible for the removal of her works, but that is of secondary importance.

"If the decision came from either the British Council or the British High Commission, than it means

that they have acted very arrogantly as would a super power on a small, helpless country.

"And if the decisions were made by the Malaysian side, then those particular Malaysians are still colonialists at heart, and I know very well how these 'colonialists' think as I have lived under the actual colonial rule before.

"Even after 30 years of independence, there still seems to be residue of the 'Yes, Sir' school of thought left around."

□ Puan Sri Dawn Zain, a one-time art critic with the Straits Times and manager of Gallery Eleven: "I have only two things to say, really. Firstly, Nirmala is making a social comment on society. And the response (removing the paintings) is really

like society answering in the most obvious way.

"The controversy, however, not only brought media attention to the paintings but, more than that, has managed to highlight the issues discussed in the paintings. In this respect, Nirmala has won.

"Secondly, the issues she raised are really Malaysia's point of view. It is well-known that Malaysia is a leading opponent of Apartheid in South Africa.

"Even our PM has indicated that Malaysia does not care about Britain's feelings on the sanctions against South Africa.

"And everybody knows how our PM felt about the American attack on Libya."