



NIRMALA DUTT STATEMENTS

Who was Nirmala Dutt?

Nirmala Dutt (1941–2016) was a pioneer woman artist who was committed to making art about social issues she cared about like the environment, urban poverty, and the suffering of women and children. She was born in George Town, Penang and her interest in art was encouraged by her artist uncle and her art teacher in school. Nirmala always wanted to be an artist and her painting was shown at the International Exhibition of Child Art in the Hague when she was only 16 years old. Throughout her practice, Nirmala experimented with different mediums and techniques from documentary photography, painting, silkscreen, collage, to public art.

- a. Why do you think Nirmala is described as a pioneer? Think about the subjects she explored in her art and the different mediums she used.

KENYATAAN

1. *Kenyataan I* (1973) is Nirmala Dutt's first piece of work in her *Kenyataan* series. The work encompasses photographs of pollution, a compilation of newspaper and academic articles, and a written statement urging people to take action against environmental degradation.

a. In your opinion, why do you think it is important for us to voice out about environmental issues such as pollution and climate change? What would happen if we stayed silent about such issues?

b. Observe Nirmala's photographs depicting pollution. Based on your own experiences and what you have seen in the media, do Nirmala's photographs appear familiar to you?

c. Other than environmental issues, can you list other issues and challenges our society is currently facing? Is there an issue you are particularly passionate about? Plan an artwork that explores this issue.

i. In your opinion, how can art be used to bring attention to these issues and challenges.



Kenyataan (Statement) I
1973, photographs and found objects
73 × 91 × 124 cm
Collection of National Art Gallery of Malaysia

CREATE

**What's your statement?
Make your own statement and
share it with the world!**

Take a walk around your neighbourhood or visit the places you often frequent; this could be a park, your school or a local market. Observe if there is presence of pollution and collect your own evidence. Take photographs, videos or audio to capture proof of pollution and waste, be it water, air, noise or soil pollution. You may also write about what you see and search for articles online to support your evidence. Collect your materials and use your creativity to develop your own mixed-media statement which you can share with your friends, family or on social media!

2. *Kenyataan I* was also accompanied with an art installation of actual rubbish and industrial waste from the photographed site off Jalan Damansara when it was exhibited at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia for their *Man and His World* competition.

a. Why do you think the artist decided to utilize a mixed medium form (art installation, writing, photography) to convey her message? Reflect on the significance of each form and what role they play in conveying the message.

b. Nirmala's art installation of rubbish and waste was one of the first installations to have ever been shown at the National Art Gallery in Malaysia. In your opinion what makes the medium of art installation effective?

LEARN

LANGUAGE 101

Kenyataan /ke.ny.a.ta.an/

Kenyataan is the Malay word for 'statement' which means to make a clear expression of a belief or an account either in writing, speech or action. Interestingly, the word *kenyataan* also carries the meaning of 'reality'—referencing something perceived to be in true form or the state of things as they actually exist. *Kenyataan* can also refer to a statement made in a court of law.

Now knowing both meanings of *kenyataan*, has your perspective of Nirmala Dutt's *Kenyataan* series changed? If yes, how and why so?

3. More photographs are included in *Kenyataan III*, this time with images of young children. This group of children who live in the squatter settlement of Kampung Batu 4 Jalan Damansara were photographed by the artist over a 4-year period, in 1975 and then again in 1979. In comparison we see how, nearby, Bukit Damansara and Bangsar were rapidly developing to be turned into lush neighbourhoods.

a. Observe the photographs closely in both years, notice the children's facial expressions, their backgrounds and the sites photographed. Note down what you see, and compare and contrast the differences and similarities between the photographs.

b. Reflect on how this artwork makes you feel. Based on your initial emotions and thoughts, do you think the medium is effective?

c. Do you think your own neighbourhood has experienced any change in the last 4 years? Search online or ask around if there is any proof of this change.

4. The artist captions her photographs with the statement, "Bagi kanak-kanak ini perubahan tidak banyak...berbanding dengan pembangunan di Bukit Damansara/Bangsar" (For these children, not much has changed...compared to the development in Bukit Damansara/Bangsar). While the statement is simple, paired with photographic documentation as evidence, the artwork becomes a photo essay which foregrounds the uneven development between the two sites despite their close proximity.

a. What message do you think the artist is trying to make with her caption and photographic documentation? As you observe the artwork, reflect on who truly benefits from modernisation. If modernisation has been argued to be a sign of progress, do you think there are groups who are instead disadvantaged because of it?

b. Why do you think the artist chose to photograph children and not just the sites themselves? What significance does the children bring to the artist's commentary on urban poverty, the environment and modern development? Consider how they are affected.



Kenyataan (Statement) III
1979, photographs, 127 × 227 cm
Collection of National Art Gallery of Malaysia

GLOSSARY

Art Installation Also known as 'installation art' or 'environments' are 3 dimensional artworks constructed and designed to occupy a specific place (and sometimes a period of time) to create a unique, immersive experience. **Documentary photography** A genre of photography that aims to objectively chronicle a subject or event. **Found object** An object that was not originally designed for an artistic purpose, but has been repurposed in an artistic context. **Photo essay** A photo essay is a form of visual storytelling that develops a narrative across a series of photographs.



The topic of displacement is often followed up with the discussion of 'Home' and 'Belonging' which the artist has associated with the imagery of mother and child in the series. By looking at the artworks and reflecting on your own lived experiences, what does 'Home' and 'Belonging' mean to you? What do you associate with the idea of 'Home' and 'Belonging'?



5. Nirmala's *Kampung Polo* series comments on the forcible eviction of squatters and the demolition of their houses in Kampong Polo. She has experimented with silkscreen printing to include images of newspaper articles reporting this incident.

- Observe the art works very closely and compare and contrast them. What similarities and differences can you identify?
- Next, identify what imagery the artist chose to repeat across the series. Who do you see appearing in all three works? Why do you think the artist chose to depict them as the subject of her artwork?
- The artist has chosen to include newspaper articles in her artworks. Why do you think she has done this? The method of repetition is also heavily used across the series and in the artist's other works. Why do you think the artist used repetition to convey her message? Consider what repetition forces the viewer to do and the role it plays in emphasising emotions and ideas.

From top to bottom
Kampung Polo
 1983, silkscreen and acrylic on canvas
 122 × 206 cm
 Collection of the Estate of Nirmala Dutt

Kampung Polo VI
 1982, silkscreen and acrylic on canvas
 133 × 164 cm
 Private Collection

GLOSSARY

Collage Derived from the French verb *coller*, meaning "to glue," collage refers to both the technique and the resulting work of art in which fragments of paper and other materials are arranged and glued or otherwise affixed to a supporting surface. **Photomontage** A collage work that includes cut or torn and pasted photographs or photographic reproductions. **Silkscreen printing** A stencil-based printmaking technique in which the first step is to stretch and attach a woven fabric (originally made of silk, but now more commonly of synthetic material) tightly over a wooden frame to create a screen. Areas of the screen that are not part of the image are blocked out with a variety of stencil-based methods. A squeegee is then used to press ink through the unblocked areas of the screen, directly onto paper. Screenprints typically feature bold, hard-edged areas of flat, unmodulated colour. Also known as silkscreen and serigraphy.

Nirmala's series *Membalak Jangan Seberangan, Nanti Ditimpa Balak* (1989–1990) is taken from the Malay proverb, *sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga* which roughly translates to, "already fallen, hit by a falling ladder" and it means to experience a series of tragedies. The artworks use patterns of Penan—an indigenous community in Sarawak—weaving patterns and images of Penan community members on silkscreen.

6. Three distinct layers form the composition of *Membalak Jangan Seberangan, Nanti Ditimpa Balak II*. Identify what each layer comprises and what their imagery means to you. Use the prompts below to help you.

- What do you see in the first and top layer? What do the colours and patterns resemble? Why do you think this particular imagery occupies the top layer? What does the top layer signify?
- The second and middle layer presents a much different image. Describe what or who you see in detail. Why do you think the artist has painted the indigenous people of the Penan community in the middle layer? What does the middle layer signify?



Membalak Jangan Seberangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak II
 1990, acrylic, ink and mengkudu dye on canvas, 122 × 102 cm
 Collection of Tan Sri Nazir Razak

7. The bright red colour which the artist uses in this work is made from *mengkudu*, a plant used by the Penan community as pigment in traditional, natural dye. The artist therefore comments on how nature can be utilised in creative art forms, and how inspiration can come from the natural world. However, it is these very natural sources which are being threatened by logging and deforestation, and faced with the potential of complete destruction.

- The work below appears very cloth-like with textile motifs. What do the textile patterns in the artwork resemble? (think of how these patterns manifest in nature).

CREATE

DIY PRINTMAKING

Make your own prints and patterns with vegetable stamping!

You require the following materials:

- Acrylic or tempera paints
- Pen, pencil or marker
- Paper plate or large painting palette
- Kitchen knife
- Art Block paper or plain fabric
- Leaves and vegetable scraps such as: Potatoes, okra/ladies fingers, onions, celery, capsicums and other vegetables you have lying around the house.

Steps

- Gather some leaves (dried leaves also works) and vegetable scraps and ask a parent to carefully cut the vegetables to a desired pattern. You may cut them at different angles or shape them however you like.
- Pour your preferred paint medium on a paper plate or large painting palette.
- Dip your vegetable stamps and leaves in the paint and stamp away on your art block or fabric.
- Be creative and experiment with different patterns and colours. You can also use your pen, pencil or markers to make outlines and drawings.



Membalak Jangan Seberangan Nanti Ditimpa Balak - Rumbia
 1990, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 × 92 cm
 Collection of the Estate of Nirmala Dutt

GLOSSARY

Printmaking A work of art on paper that usually exists in multiple copies. It is created not by drawing directly on paper, but through a transfer process. The artist begins by creating a composition on another surface, such as metal or wood, and the transfer occurs when that surface is inked and a sheet of paper, placed in contact with it, is run through a printing press. Four common printmaking techniques are woodcut, etching, lithography, and screenprint. **Composition** The arrangement of the individual elements within a work of art so as to form a unified whole; also used to refer to a work of art, music, or literature, or its structure or organization.

TSUNAMI



Tsunami 2004 – 2005 IX
2005, acrylic on canvas, 101 × 91 cm
Private Collection



Tsunami 2004 – 2005 XII
2005, acrylic on canvas, 101 × 91 cm
Private Collection

9. **Tsunamis are gigantic waves caused by earthquakes or volcanic activity under the sea. They are natural occurrences and are called 'Natural Disasters'. Natural disasters can devastate an entire nation but can also affect the international community as the media now allows us to tune into global events.**

- In your opinion what can be said about the duality of nature? Between its ability to exude beauty and serve as a resource for humankind but also its capability for destruction.



Tsunami 2004 – 2005 VI
2005, acrylic on canvas, 101 × 91 cm
Collection of Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah,
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Even though the tsunami occurred many years ago, would you say you are still able to feel the aftermath of the event through Nirmala Dutt's paintings? Reflect on how current natural disasters all over the world and locally affect you.

8. **On 26 December 2004, the third most powerful earthquake in recorded history erupted off the coast of Sumatra. The Indian Ocean Tsunami devastated communities all along the coast of the Indian Ocean, killing over 200,000 people across 14 countries. After watching news reports on the tsunami and the devastation it had caused, Nirmala Dutt turned to art to express the intense emotions and sentiments that shrouded the tragedy.**

- Identify the different elements of the paintings. What do they resemble?
- Look at each painting and then observe all of them as a whole. Note how the painting makes you feel. Do you feel moments of calm or anxiety?
- Just by studying the painting, what sensations can you feel? Imagine how the waves would feel and sound like.

GREAT LEAP FORWARD

This artwork is from Nirmala Dutt's *Great Leap Forward* series, its title a reference to the socio-economic policy of the same name created by China's Communist leader Mao Zedong in the late 1950s.



Great Leap Forward V - Twin Towers
1998, acrylic on canvas, 102 × 92 cm
Collection of Shantini Vanniasingham

10. **The artwork consists of an image of the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers against the backdrop of an inverted M between two other triangles. When it was completed in the late 90s, the Twin Towers stood as a symbol of development and modernisation as it became one of the world's tallest buildings. This is in contrast with the use of the hard-edged triangle shape, possibly a reference to the *Kayon* or *Gunungan* puppet used in *wayang kulit* performances.**

HOMELESSNESS

11. **London's Homeless series was produced during Nirmala's time in the United Kingdom in the 90s, when she pursued postgraduate studies in printmaking at University College London and research at Goldsmiths, University of London. She continued to be preoccupied with the idea of suffering, and the most notable works from her London years are her etchings of the city's homeless population.**

- Do you know what it means to be homeless? Imagine the struggles and challenges those without a home must face. Do you think the artist effectively managed to capture the plight and conditions of the homeless population?

- The series depicts recurring images of people hugging, leaning and huddling over each other. What does this tell you about the homeless people the artist sketched? What is significant about the act of hugging and huddling. What is represented by this closeness especially after experiencing the COVID pandemic where social distancing was heavily practiced?

Homelessness is not just an issue found in Nirmala Dutt's experience of London. It is found in every part of the world including right here in Malaysia. Think about the *Ken-yataan* works.

As you observe the artist's sketches reflect on the consequences for those who live life in poverty as societies around the world rapidly urbanise and modernise.

- What message do you think the artist was trying to convey with her juxtaposition of traditional motifs (the hard-edged triangles) and symbols of modernisation (the Twin Towers)?
- Considering the title of the work and series and the artwork itself, what do you think Nirmala's thoughts on development in Malaysia were? Was she optimistic or pessimistic about it?
- Do you think development and industrialisation are marks of a 'great leap forward'? How can we ensure sustainable practices in our day-to-day to allow a co-existence between nature, modernisation and future technologies?



London's Homeless V (AP)
1993–1995, Lithograph with hand drawing
14.5 × 31 cm
Collection of the Estate of Nirmala Dutt

CREATE

AN ARTIST'S JOURNAL Sketch your life and the people you meet.

Create your own artist journal where you can fill with sketches of your everyday life. The challenge is to sketch the silhouettes, faces or figures of people you cross paths with in your day-to-day. Remember, ideas for art can come from anywhere if you look hard enough.

GLOSSARY

Sketch A rendering of the basic elements of a composition, often made in a loosely detailed or quick manner. Sketches can be both finished works of art or studies for another composition.



Vietnam

1981, acrylic on canvas, 102 × 201 cm

Collection of National Art Gallery of Malaysia

The artist was very emotionally affected by the news articles she read about the different wars and conflicts happening in the world. This included the Vietnam War which raged on for 20 years, finally coming to an end in 1975.

In Nirmala's works about the atrocities in Vietnam, images of weeping mothers and depictions of children as refugees and child soldiers, are repeated to underscore the depths of their suffering. Nirmala's dramatic brushstrokes inspired by Chinese brush painting, convey the emotional depths of her outrage at man's inhumanity to man, and the violence and destruction of war particularly on women and children. Think about the different areas in the world presently suffering from war and conflict. Imagine if you were a refugee leaving your country and home because of war and conflict. Write a story or make an artwork describing your feelings.

GLOSSARY

Calligraphy is the world's oldest abstract art—the art of the line. This basic visual element can also hold a symbolic charge. The responsiveness of the pliant brush lends itself to registering the subtle changes in pressure, direction, and speed in the force transmitted from the shoulder of the calligrapher, to his arm, wrist, and finally fingertips. This accounts for calligraphic brushstrokes' unique facility in capturing with great vividness and immediacy the kinetic energy that coursed through the calligrapher's body during the creation process.

ILHAM 

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Cover Image

Self-potret (work-in-progress)
1999

Photograph and acrylic on canvas
40.5 × 40.5 cm

Collection of the Estate of Nirmala Dutt