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### Publication History

Received: 15 January 2015

Accepted: 24 August 2015

Published: 1 December 2015

### Citation

Sarena Abdullah. Postmodernity in Malaysian art: tracing works by Nirmala Shanmughalingam. *Indian Journal of Arts*, 2015, 5(16), 35-43

# POSTMODERNITY IN MALAYSIAN ART: TRACING WORKS BY NIRMALA SHANMUGHALINGAM

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**ABSTRACT.** Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam is one of the second generation artists in Malaysia. Nevertheless, besides a four-page essay on the artist in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (1983) and a few art catalogues, there are hardly any articles written about her. Despite the very limited sources available about the artist and her work, this paper attempts to draw on the limited understanding of postmodern theory, which fails to include her work as one of the early postmodern artists in Malaysia. This paper, by examining the artist's usage of montage, representation of difference and allegory contends that her works should be seen as some of the early postmodernist works in the Malaysian art scene that emerged in the 1970s.

**Keywords:** Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, postmodern art, montage, representation of difference, allegory.

## INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, postmodernist tendencies in the art scene have flourished since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Wong Hoy Cheong, Liew Kungyu, Chai Chang Hwang, Eng Hwee Chu, Tan Chin Kuan, Raja Shahrman Raja Aziddin and the Matahati artgroup have been described as sharing similar artistic approach. Postmodern strategies have also been used by other artists, namely Yee I-Lann, Nadiyah Bamadhaj, Roslisham Ismail, and Shia Yih-Yiing. These artists have been producing artworks under what is termed as postmodern condition or *situasi percamoden* (Abdullah, 2010). Nonetheless, if we trace the development of art with postmodern strategies that have been adopted by Malaysian artists, postmodern art as a strategy has been employed by a few Malaysian artists as early as the late 1960s and early 1970s. These are mainly collaborative works by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa. The discussions on the works by Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam on the other hand, have been primarily on her roles and concerns as a woman and a political artist. She was not discussed as an important artist who has earlier introduced Malaysian art with a few approaches and techniques relevant to postmodern art strategies.

The very limited sources available about Nirmala and the artworks that she produced have made this paper significant and important. This paper will examine the reasons why her works have been excluded from any postmodern art discussion and the second part will discuss the important aspects of postmodern strategies in the work that she produced in the 1970s and the 1980s. The discussion of this paper will mainly focus on three main strategies -- the artist's usage of montage, representation of difference, and allegory.

Born in Penang in 1941, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam talent had been recognized even before she finished high school and she was also trained under Hoessein Enas. Subsequently, she enrolled herself at Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1966 and Fogg Museum School of Art in Boston in 1971, both on a part time basis. In 1975 was she able to pursue her study full time at Oxford Polytechnic in United Kingdom and later she did her M.Phil. at Goldsmiths College (1992-1995). Besides a four-page essay on the artist in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (1983), and her catalogue entitled *Nirmala Shanmughalingam: The Making of an Artist as a Social Commentator -- a Review* in 1997, essays on this artist is limited to only art reviews in newspapers and several magazine articles. The latest exhibition for which her work was selected is *Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World* which toured the

United States from 2008-2011. Nevertheless, an extensive research on her artistic strategies has not been done.

This is not a surprise since modern art in Malaysia since its inception has failed to generate a substantive critical discourse (Jit, 1994). It can be suggested here that one of the main reason why there is a lack of interest in Nirmala's work is due to the more persistent interest in the mainstream art that preoccupies Malaysian artists during the 1970s and the 1980s. With the domination of works in the Abstract and Abstract Expressionist style of artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Choong Kam Kow, and Chew Teng Beng and also the preoccupation of Malay artists, especially on the adhering to the Malay/Islamic identities, early works that take a more postmodern stance in its approach, subject and techniques by artists like Nirmala during that time were not taken seriously.

Besides that, a narrow understanding of postmodern art has also contributed to the exclusion of Nirmala's work from the discussion of her work on employing postmodern strategies. For example, the late Redza Piyadasa, claimed that Malaysian artists have not been much involved in the postmodernist pursuit except for a few isolated developments in the mid-1970s such as the *Towards a Mystical Reality* exhibition. He also asserted a few other works to be postmodernist and this includes the late Ismail Zain's *Digital Collage* exhibition in 1989, Wong Hoy Cheong and Marion D'Cruz collaboration of performance presentations, Wong Hoy Cheong's video art entitled "Sookching" (1990) and a collaborative effort to produce the installation cum performance art by Liew Kung Yu and Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin in "Two Installations" (1991) (Piyadasa, 1993a, 1993b). In these few instances, Piyadasa's writing seems to limit postmodernist works to the works that involve performance or works that are denoted by time, space and site specificity. This limited and narrow understanding of Malaysian postmodern art seems not to include works that involve other techniques such as photography, montages and allegory and works that raise issues such as feminism, marginalization or the treatment of the 'Other,' even political and social criticism in arts. In this limited scope of writing by Piyadasa, Nirmala's works were not mentioned and discussed as having postmodern artistic inclination and were not given the same merit or recognition as other artists that he had mentioned.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC MONTAGES

Nirmala's usage of postmodern approach could be detected in her works that she produced after coming back from the United States. In the painting "The View from the Federal Hill" (1972), Nirmala had to confronted the reality of the deteriorating Malaysian landscape at that time. It was about this time that she abandoned painting altogether. Traditional painting techniques she felt, could not fulfill her objectives (Piyadasa, 1983). The limitation of painting as a technique in highlighting environmental deterioration made her explore the possibilities of using photography and montage technique in mid-1970s.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the works of Hannah Hoch, among the pioneers of the art form that would come to be known as 'photomontage', Nirmala's works in "Statement 3" (1975-79) (Figure 1) and "Pollution Piece" (1973) are straightforward and fit more into what can be described as a form of "photographic documentation" rather than a photomontage. The technique, however, is almost similar as she pasted photographs or images on the flat surface. At a glance, "Statement 3" is just like a straightforward "presentation board," as the photographic images used have been arranged according to the structure of a graphic presentation in a very literal and straightforward manner. This approach is probably derived from her graphic design background in which she learnt to convey a specific message (or messages) to a targeted audience. This work, consists

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that the term "montage" have never been used to describe any work containing assemblage of photographs, pictures or texts in Malaysian art. The most common term is "collage". Collage have been used usually to describe an assemblage technique but not as an artistic methodology or approach.

of various photographs of children living in the area of her research divided into three sets of photographic images. These photographs were given titles or caption according to the premise of her investigation, differentiating her work from Hannah Hoch's who combines crude images cut and pasted from newspapers during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reflecting the Dada spirit in German.



**Figure 1:** Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Kenyataan 3” (Statement 3) (1975-79), mixed media, 128 x 53cm.

Source: *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan dalam Seni Moden Malaysia 1930-1981*, Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara (1981).

On the left, the caption of the first two panels says *Kanak-kanak dari Kg. Batu 4 Jalan Damansara* (Children from Mile 4 Village, Damansara Road) in 1975 and 1979. The caption in the upper right panel says *Bagi Kanak-kanak Ini Perubahan Tidak Banyak... Batu 4 Jalan Damansara...* (To These Children, There Are Only Few Changes... Mile 4, Damansara Road) in 1975 and 1979. The lower right caption says *Berbanding dengan Pembangunan di Bukit Damansara/Bangsar* (In Comparison with the Development in Damansara Heights/Bangsar) in 1975 and 1979. Undeniably, the clear message is that despite the rapid physical development at Damansara Heights and Bangsar, these physical developments in these two places have no impact to the children who live on Damansara Road, the main road that leads to both of these areas, as they are still living in dilapidated timber houses, deprived of basic amenities. To the audience, the message of this work is very direct and needs no further interpretation.

The significance of this work and the discussion of this essay lies in how the artist understands and employs elements of site and time specificity and in her usage of photographic montages. Though “Statement 3”(1975-79) is literal and straightforward, these photographic montage techniques or methods were still new in Malaysia at that time. Since artworks that explore postmodern strategies were still in its infancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the simplistic photographic montage approach in Nirmala's work was actually pragmatic in comparison with conceptual art approach taken by Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa in their *Mystical Reality* attempt (Abdullah & Chung, 2014). This is because the usage of photography as a form of modern expression in the Malaysian art at that time was relatively still new.

Walter Benjamin, in discussing the usage of photography explains, “...[photography] can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether.” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 103). This early photo-documentation by Nirmala is not only important as an original photo-documentation, but most importantly, for the first time, as the artist who

introduced photographic images and the messages that she elevated as a form of art imbedded with political statement on changes that was happening in front of her eyes in Malaysia.

This is quite different, even though not totally irrelevant to the points raised by a postmodern theorist such as Craig Owens. Owens has always linked the use of photography with allegory in postmodern art. He claims that due to the impermanence of site-specific works in postmodern art, a work is frequently preserved in photographs. "As an allegorical art, then, photography would represent our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image." (Owens, 1992, pp. 206-207). Nirmala's photo-documentation, on the other hand, does not preserve the artwork, but it actually preserves the original viewpoint of the artist on the subject seen through her lens by preserving the site and time specific condition of these children of that time as part of the artwork itself. This "photographic montage" technique, although essentially viewed in a very simplistic manner should be seen as an important breakthrough that introduces Malaysian artists to other strategies and techniques in relation with postmodern art. It is unfortunate that Nirmala did not employ and explore photomontage in her subsequent works, but we can still detect the elements of these techniques such as through cropping, editing and making composite images in her silkscreen works that she produces in her later works.

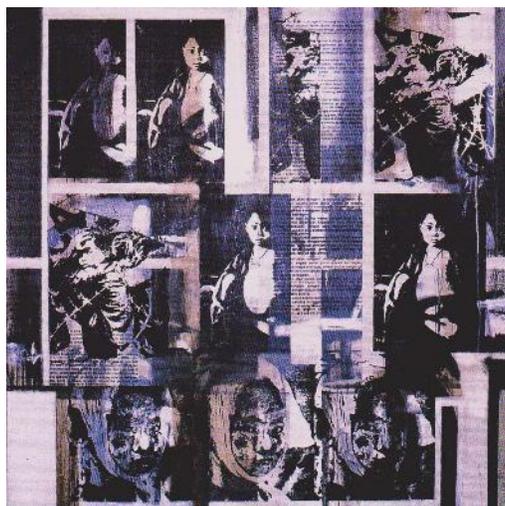
### **REPRESENTATION OF DIFFERENCE**

It cannot be denied that Nirmala's education in both the United States and the United Kingdom had exposed her to the latest artistic discourses and movements contemporary to that time. It was during the 1970s that issues such as feminism and works by feminist artists gained so much attention in the Western art world. Being a woman, it is not uncommon for a woman artist to derive her inspiration from women's and children's experiences. This tendency is sometimes labeled as 'feminist,' even though empathy itself is a universal value belonging to both men and women. However, I will not attempt to argue that Nirmala's work is feminist work, as I think this premise can be much contested but I will point out that Nirmala's "representation of difference," (Owens, 1983, p. 71) in this case of gender difference, should be taken into account in seeing her as a postmodern artist.

Unlike Western feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger and Judy Chicago, Nirmala's works do not try to deconstruct femininity or even try to be feminist, but what Nirmala does is actually to highlight the sufferings of women and children instead. In "Vietnam" (1981) for example, Nirmala uses silkscreen on canvas to capture photographic images of war taken from mass media and international newspapers. Instead of directly cutting images from newspapers and magazines like Hannah Hoch's work, Nirmala transferred these images into her work by using silk screen. The images of women embracing their babies, and children with destroyed homes due to the bombings were repeated and overlapped a few times. Strokes of paints and repetitive texts taken from international news reports on the Vietnam War fill up parts of the canvas, adding tension to the black and the white color of the work. The theme of women and children as sufferers and victims is consistently repeated in her other works such as "Children of Asia I" (1980) (Figure 3) and "Children of Asia II" (1981).



**Figure 2:** Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Vietnam” (1981), acrylic on canvas, 102 x 201cm.  
 Source: *Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, the making of an artist as social commentator*,  
 Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art (1998).



**Figure 3:** Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Children of Asia I” (1980), acrylic on canvas,  
 153 x 153 cm.  
 Source: *Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, the making of an artist as social commentator*,  
 Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art (1998).

It cannot be denied that the introduction of silk-screen technique in the realm of art is synonymous with the works by Andy Warhol. Robert Motherwell and Robert Rauschenberg, Warhol’s contemporaries have been noted to have a deep influence on the artist herself. Piyadasa writes,

“The two trips that Nirmala made to the United State are significant in that she became exposed to the excitement of the American *avant-garde* scene. She has recalled that she was influenced by Abstract Expressionism and also by Pop Art tendencies. Two particular American painters, Robert Motherwell and Robert Rauschenberg seem to have been her favourites.” (Piyadasa, 1983, p. 156)

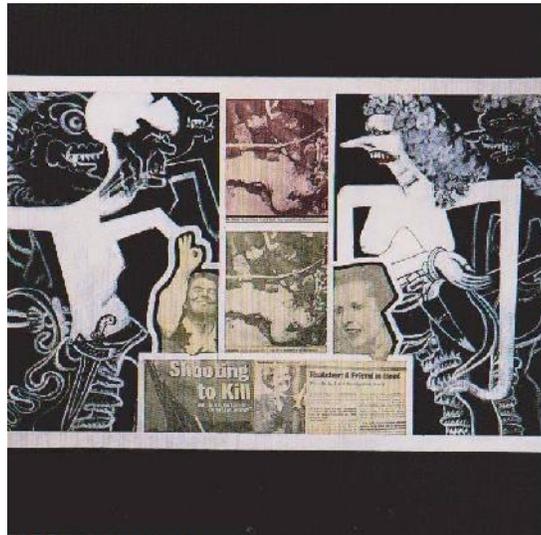
As her stylistic approach is similar to Warhol and his contemporaries, so is the connotation of women and themes such as suffering and death. Thomas Crow in discussing Warhol’s work argues that Warhol “produced his most powerful work by dramatizing the breakdown of commodity exchange” in which “the mass produced image as the bearer of desires was exposed in its inadequacy by the reality of suffering and death” (Crow, 1986, p. 313). Crow

even further argues in discussing works by Warhol that the semiotic styles that bind Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Kennedy in his pop art works are the fact that they are bonded with the threat or the actuality of death. The usage of the silk-screen technique in portraying women as sufferers and victims is fitting both in Warhol and Nirmala's work. Crow, in tracing the use of silk-screen in Warhol's work claims that, "The screened image, reproduced whole, has the character of an involuntary imprint. It is memorial in the sense of resembling memory: powerfully selective, sometimes elusive, sometimes vividly present, always open to embellishment as well as loss." (Crow, 1986, p. 316).

Nirmala's representation of women and children in most of her work differentiates her from other artists in Malaysian at that time. Artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal started to look up to his Malay roots for his source of artistic inspiration, Nirmala however, addressed the gendered universal plight that crosses boundaries of culture and religion. Nirmala's insight and highlight on the plight of women and children can be argued as exemplifies Owen's argument that "women's insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought." (Owens, 1983, p. 61-62). Since plurality of cultures is part of the crisis of cultural identity linked to the postmodernism condition, Owen argues that postmodern thought is no longer binary thought of male and female, men and women. "The feminist voice," he explains, "is usually regarded as one among the many, its insistence on difference as testimony to the pluralism of all times." (Owens, 1983, p. 62). Thus, these images of women and children in Nirmala's works can be evaluated as one form of 'representation of difference,' since most of her subsequent work dealt with the subject.

## **ALLEGORY**

In 1986, Nirmala produced "Friends in Need" (Figure 4), another work that combined the photomontage and silkscreen techniques in which she employs allegory as its main artistic approach. Nirmala produced this work from the images of President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has taken from newspapers with mimicking characters of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) silkscreened, both on the left and right of these two leaders. As defined by Oxford Dictionary, allegory is "a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one" (*The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Difficult Words*, 2001). In terms of artistic technique, Craig Owens in discussing allegorical impulse in postmodernism says allegory has an all in one component – the attitude, technique, perception and procedure in which one text is being read through another. Therefore, allegorical imageries can also become appropriated imageries in which an artist adds another meaning to the image. The link between allegory and contemporary art could be seen from the works of "artists who generate images through the reproduction of other images. The appropriated image may be a film still, a photograph, a drawing; it is often itself already a reproduction. However, the manipulations to which these artists subject such images work to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning." (Owens, 1992, p. 204-205). In other words, it is the kind of artwork that have both an apparent and a deeper sense or meaning; in which it can have layers of meaning that seem to contradict each other but yet co-exist and are present together in the work, so that the work never comes to rest on a single interpretation.



**Figure 4:** Nirmala Shanmughalingam, “Friends in Need” (1986), acrylic and collage on canvas, 123 x 123cm.

Source: *Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam, the making of an artist as social commentator*, Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art (1998).

“Friends in Need” (1986) as well as “Save the Seed That Will Save the Black People” (1986) have hit a controversial note due to their allegorical nature. These works were even removed before the opening of an exhibition entitled *Side by Side: Contemporary British and Malaysian Art* in 1986. “Friends in Need” (1986) for example, is an anti-war statement against the US bombing of Libya supported by Margaret Thatcher. The characterization in this work was inspired by Nirmala’s research into the arts and crafts of Southeast Asia at that time, particularly shadow puppet theatre. Accordingly, the *wayang kulit* character, the Raksasa Tjakil, the arch villain on the left, personifies Ronald Reagan. Raksasa Tjakil was chosen to represent Reagan because the character is a warlike creature that wears two *queries* (a Malay dagger which signifies warring tendencies). On the right, Margaret Thatcher is depicted as a bare-breasted *wayang kulit* figure called Raseksi, the demon’s wife in the *wayang kulit* story. Nirmala has chosen Raseksi because the creature has a strong physical likeness to the British Prime Minister. These *wayang kulit* figures are juxtaposed with photographs of a child killed in the attack and a newspaper cutting from which the title was derived (Ahmad Fauzi, 1986). Therefore, it was interpreted as an allegory that criticizes international political events related to these two leaders. As sometimes intertwined stories and plots in *wayang kulit* highlight various crises, backstabbing, friendship and loyalty among the royal people, these works that appropriate these two main characters from *wayang kulit* can be suggested as portraying the realities among political powers.

## CONCLUSION

It must be noted that Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam’s work on the three premises that I have discussed seem to be very direct, simple and straightforward, and these initial attempts actually are important as the art that uses postmodern strategies becomes more complex. The investigation on Nirmala’s however, is very important in helping us understand the current art situation in Malaysia and how it has developed and changed over the years. In comparison to the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, postmodernity in Malaysian art has now become more intricate. Female artists like Shia Yih-Yiing, Nadiyah Bamadhaj, Yee I-Lann and Sharmiza Abu Hassan have used these overlapping strategies in producing their works. The acceptance of more complex artworks in terms of themes, techniques and approach was made possible by the early attempts made by an artist like Nirmala herself.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the National Visual Art Gallery for allowing this paper to be presented and published for this conference. The paper was initially submitted to the BSVN's monograph *Kata-kata Seni*, that has not been published until today. The author would also like to thank Universiti Sains Malaysia's Short Term Research Grant (304/PSENI/6312126) for funding this presentation.

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