

Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam: Tsunami 2004-2005

“Behold, He withholdeth the waters, and they dry up: also He sendeth them out, and they overturn the earth.”

The Bible, Job Chapter 12:15

“The night after it happened, as I was saying my nightly prayers, I felt a deep awe. My response was not disappointment or conflict, but I was speechless – “for he giveth not account of any of his matters” (Job 33:13)

In the wake of the Asian Tsunami disaster of 26 December last year, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam made herself watch the coverage on CNN continuously for one week. Emotionally sensitive and physically fragile, she has for several years now stopped reading and watching the news. All day every day that week, she witnessed the horrifying images of destruction and death, and listened to eyewitness reports and commentary until she was almost numb. In the midst of the horror, however, there were also stories of hope, faith and miraculous survival. She was particularly moved by the story of Dayalan Sanders, the missionary who with his wife saved his family and all the children from his orphanage in Navalady, Sri Lanka, by riding with them out against the tide in a small motorboat.

After hearing the tale, the artist’s first impulse was to try to express something through painting. She found an unfinished canvas from her *Great Leap Forward* series of 1999 and within the existing triangular motif painted a white surge in a single stroke. She was attempting to depict the stunning sudden verticality of the wave, described by one photographer in Bandar Aceh as coming up from the bottom of the sea “like a cobra”. She had also used this idea of a single mark on the canvas, loaded with symbolism and spontaneous feeling, in a few paintings made for her *Virgin Spring* installation of 2003, where she explored the theme of raped innocence.

It was soon clear however that this format would not hold for what she wanted to express, and that an entirely new approach would have to be taken towards this overwhelming and unfamiliar subject.

Nirmala, witnessing and internalising the pain of disaster and atrocity, has always called out to the conscience of man through her work as an artist. While in the very early years of her practice, she worked with abstraction and landscape and nature-based subjects, by the early 70s she had realised her need to say something through her work about the greed, cruelty, and negligence that drives man to inflict pain upon the innocent. Her works on environmental destruction, disenfranchisement, apartheid, the victims of war, political greed and most recently on child abuse, have therefore always employed real material. News images and text, her own photographs, are worked into her paintings as silkscreen or collage, found objects are used in installations; and her works to date have had carefully-devised strategies, presenting evidence, commentary and emotional response.

The artist’s “experience” of the tsunami disaster, and the nature of the event itself, has led her to explore a more purely expressionistic approach. The *Tsunami 2004-2005* paintings, made through a period of four to five months, are her effort to translate her feelings about what might be described as an act of God. She has said she felt “engulfed by awe”.

The compositional scheme Nirmala has found for the series is inspired by eyewitness descriptions of the phenomenon itself, especially from the Dayalan Sanders story.

When alerted of the wave, Sanders’ wife Kohila “ran into the brilliant sunshine and saw the building sea. Even the colour of the water was wrong: It looked, she said, “like ash”.” Sanders himself said, “It was a thunderous roar, and black sea” and described there on the horizon, was a “30-foot wall of water”.” (1)

Others also described the unnerving appearance of the tsunami: “We saw the wave on the horizon, like clouds, black against the sky,” (Zuhrasafita, Bandar Aceh) (2); “As I swam to shore, my mind was momentarily befuddled by two conflicting impressions - the idyllic blue sky and the rapidly rising waters.” (Michael Dobbs, Weligama, Sri Lanka) (3).

With the idea of a flat sky backdrop and dark waves in tumult set in her mind, Nirmala at first used a light, innocent blue, and in *Tsunami 2004-2005 II* places a little paper boat on the waves, in tribute perhaps to the Sanders' boat. Feeling this to be too "pretty", she finally chose Cerulean blue, a deep, brooding yet brilliant colour. She then tried to use collaged newspaper images of tsunami victims on the composition, but abandoned this device also, finally choosing the simplest and clearest form for the paintings.

Over thirty canvases describe a clear blue sky and the turbulent surges of a sea of ashes. The artist has painted in swathes and cuts, using a roller brush for the flat blue sky, a palette knife and a wide brush to achieve the myriad variations of water flowing, crashing, rising up like a wall. Despite her physical frailty she says she felt her "energy flowing from canvas to canvas", driven by emotion and the call to keep working, which she deems a gift from God. As a viewer we feel that same sense of awe, of being engulfed in something powerful far beyond our control. Complex narratives, moral and spiritual questions, darkness and light, lie deep in the expressive sweep of Nirmala's paintings. The sense of the smallness of man, of human anguish and loss is as strong in these works as it has been throughout her practice - equally compelling however is a prevailing sense of spiritual faith, and within this faith, hope.

Nirmala often cites the phrase "elemental force" to describe the motivation behind all her work, and in this series of paintings we see her meaning most clearly:

"If feeling fails vain will be your art
And idle what you plan unless your art
Spring from the soul with elemental force
To hold its sway in every listening heart."

(from Goethe, Faust)

Beverly Yong, Curator

- (1) John Lancaster, "With little warning, director saves 28 orphans from tsunami", Washington Post, 28 December 2004
- (2) Scott Baldauf, Christian Science Monitor, 21 April 2005
- (3) Washington Post, 26 December 2004