

Finding Graceland (2011) – Anurendra Jegadeva

*Before it can ever be the repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock. - Simon Schama*

One of our deepest needs is for a sense of identity and belonging and this longing is often located in our attachment to landscape and place. Landscape is not simply what we see, but a way of seeing. It is defined by our vision but interpreted with our minds and is often the repository of our personal and collective memories.

This sense of yearning permeates through “Finding Graceland”, twenty two landscape paintings by artist Anurendra Jegadeva. Set against the panoramic backdrop of Perak’s iconic landscape, from its limestone mountains to the gigantic Mercedes Benz logo which for so many years acted as landmark to all those entering Ipoh from the south, the artist has created a series of works which at its simplest level, was inspired by his family’s long history and connections with the state.

The artist’s connections with the state of Perak go back to over a century ago. In 1898, his great grandfather left his hometown in Sri Lanka to arrive in Taiping to take up a position as chief court interpreter. Over the next three generations, Anurendra’s family continued to live and work in Perak with both his grandfather and father serving in the civil service.

While Anurendra himself was brought up in Kuala Lumpur, every school holiday his family would take the five hour drive back to Perak with the requisite stop-over at Tanjung Malim for their famous “paus.” Perak signified grandparents, uncles and aunts, weddings, funerals, circuses, indulgent nannies, freedom from school; to put it simply, Perak was home.

As an artist who is often described as a consummate storyteller, Anurendra has frequently borrowed from the autobiographical but nowhere has this been more evident than in this particular body of work. Inspired initially by a detour down old trunk roads on a recent family trip, the artist went on to make weekly trips to Perak with his father over a six month period. "We are Perak people", his father said and as they drove their way through the state (with Elvis playing in the background) temples, government rest houses and bends in the river became the catalyst for his father's recounting of personal memories and family stories.

Anurendra has commemorated those weekly pilgrimages with his father in this body of work, elevating those obscure railway crossings, disused tin mines, mamak restaurants and old coffee shops - the stuff of our everyday landscapes - into significant landmarks in the artist's retelling of his family history and in a wider sense, the history of Perak and Malaysia itself.

In "Finding Graceland" past and present, real and imagined, fact and fiction, historical and contemporary combine and collide. Under the bright blue Perak sky, generations of its people pose in technicolour glory: and elderly Indian couple, set against a background of bright yellow, clasp hands beneath the shadow of a newly-built Batu Gajah mosque; a schoolgirl stands resplendent in Adidas trainers, a descendant of those early migrants who first mined tin in Perak; the artist's young daughter, a fourth generation Malaysian of Sri Lankan descent plays the electric guitar under the benign eye of Goddess Kuan Yin; three old men - unlikely poster children for the "One Malaysia" policy - smoke and "talk cock" in a Chinese coffee shop; a young woman clutches her rooster while the padi gently flowers behind her - all of them, indistinguishable from the landscape of the state - and in a larger sense, the country that they and their forefathers helped build.

In these works, landscape is not limited to mere geography but includes people, objects, myths, stories, concepts and words. Because all experience is contained in our memory, it is memory itself that becomes the very landscape.

The portrait of a controversially appointed Chief Minister captures something of the divisiveness and disquiet beneath the surface of the modern day Malaysian socio-political landscape but polemics are tempered here with a sense of hopefulness, even optimism. He shows us a world in which individuals can go beyond divisions created by institutions and identity politics - where a devout Hindu grandmother can make regular donations to a local mosque and where the Malaysian Islamic Party can hold sway in a Chinese-majority area.

Images of aeroplanes in flight appear in many of the paintings. The concept of arriving, of returning and the need to belong is one that has a particular resonance in the Malaysian landscape. This sense of yearning to find one's place is echoed through the work as the artist explores his own sense of belonging as he travels through the landscape - both physical and psychological - that four generations of his family have called home.

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But more than anything else, this exhibition is about family, about the ties that bind us from generation to generation. It is about that last vestige of unconditional love, the relationship between parent and child, a father and his son in all its tenuous fragility. Proving that there is still a place for emotional narrative depth in art today, Anurendra has used his family memories as a way of making history intimate and human. In doing so, he reminds us that no matter how far we travel, we can never truly leave home.

Rahel Joseph, 2011.