

New Paintings from Solitary Confinement

There are two distinct series of works in SCREAM INSIDE YOUR HEART.
Before Covid and since Covid.

Just like real life.

The earlier works are relatively banal grumbles of a life-goes-on, pre-Covid world where people shook hands, shared food and even coughed in public. We got on planes, visited family, vacationed on a whim anywhere in the world, the more far-flung, the better. We went to the cinema, took a crowded train to work and met at bars after an unbearable week at the office. Certainly, climate change lurked somewhere in the background, irate populist nationalism was rearing its ugly head everywhere and the rich/poor divide was in a free fall. All the stuff that we uncomfortably acknowledged but largely ignored. Gender and race inequalities were issues we saw as 'lacking' but at least - unlike our parents before us - we were finally talking about it.

And *surely* we did more than talk! We were 'activists', part of online tribes that knew for sure that we were part of the solution and not the problem.... never, the problem.

After all, we recycled.

We went to a political rally once every 3 months or so then talked about the sad state of the world over dinner with friends who owned German cars.

We weren't offended by same-sex-marriage.

On holiday we tipped 'generously' and empathised with the *locals*!

To decrease our methane footprint we even ate less beef.

We found the positives in facing our personal loss - deaths in the family, the breakdown of relationships, the stress of a too large mortgage - coming together to smile in the face of these *hardships*.

In Malaysia, we broke an impossible political deadlock that had shaped our Malaysian psyche since Independence. All of which, we put on full display on Instagram or if you were less *woke*, FB.

In my case - I made pictures about 'worthwhile' things.

Surely that was enough. In spite of everything, we were progressing as a species.

Covid put paid to all our delusions of grandeur and pretence of enlightenment.

It seems - this, now - is our true face.

Most glaring is the broad failure of Leadership everywhere in the world. It manifests in a male dominated chauvinistic lust *for* power that, at any cost, wants to stay *in* power. The concept of a compassionate greater good is a distant, hollow call to arms.

We have squander the well being of our elderly, our heralded 'greatest generation' and ignored the plight of genuine asylum seekers for our right to *not* have to wear a mask and to *have* a steady supply of toilet paper.

For someone like me, a direct product of Biggles, Camelot and Empire, it has been uncomfortably revealing. As the beneficiary of that so-called superior Western system of values that has shaped literally everything we understand and feel about freedoms, politics, civilisation, history, language, place, race, culture, music and of course art, the enlightened Truth that has always been promised to us in the so-called 3rd world continues to evade me.

Instead, we fail each other along tribal delineation according to class, geography, religion, race and most importantly, according to our financial means.

Stock markets however ... chug along happily enough. Says a lot about humanity.

As an artist, at this challenging point of our human civilisation, I simply try to describe this world I am currently confronted with.

And how, we all, fit together.

In the process, I hope that, the autobiographical, balanced with aesthetics, humour and a universality of meaning, evokes a response in other people.

I have also always tried to inject both humour and irreverence within the bounds of broader sensitivities, only sometimes successfully, when describing that world we live in.

For the first half of this body of work, in pieces like *Brexit Blues*, *AustraliaN*, *Another Day in Paradise* and *Pet Peeves* I relied on the absurd to lighten the unavoidably loaded narratives in my work. Many of these earlier works, continued to explore the more ludicrous states of Otherness, here in Australia as well as in the larger world.

Drawing inspiration from the histories and collective experiences of consecutive migratory groups to the 'lucky country' seen through the lens of my Malaysian heritage and always set against the backdrop of a world gone bad, levity helps my work, hopefully, avoid being precious or self important. I used humour and satire - as usual - to convey the realities of trying to find that sweet spot of belonging; the delicate balance between the cliches of identity and assimilation. But it could as easily be simply about missing *nasi lemak* with extra *sambal*.

Covid-19 and its fall-out, however, refutes easy depictions and levity.

Take government for example. Used to be an easy target.

Now, even the abject bafoonery of national leaders only evokes fatigue and despair.

First, they alternate between authoritarian fear-mongering and delusional calls for a return to the values of yesteryear. Then they promise a brave new world and the challenges of dynamic futures.

Meanwhile, we rinse and repeat everyday. By ourselves. Far away from family even if they live only a few suburbs away, much less, another country.

In the course of this body of work, I have repeatedly used the grey rooms to convey this sense of isolation during lockdown. Stripped of much of the clutter and decoration of symbols that dominated my visual vocabulary in past works, for most part, the new compositions are occupied by a solitary sitter, often, conveniently my daughter, the other person in the house.

Letter to My Grandmother explores how big and far away the world has become again. It is my lament about the feelings of self-imposed exile as home and family becomes completely inaccessible. In Melbourne, we haven't been out of a 5km radius of our home in nearly 6 months, over two lockdowns and numerous domestic tensions.

That's longer than the lockdown in Wuhan.

It is a grey existence.

This theme continues in works like *Nowhere to Go*, one of the later works in the series near the end of Melbourne's second lock down. Having our daughter home for the duration of the lockdown while parentally fulfilling, really brings home the challenges for young people, not only the immediacy of isolation and separation but their very real and uncertain futures.

Employment, travel, education, and of course social interactions..... dating.... all the things we took for granted for ourselves as well as our children are changed forever or at the very least, for the foreseeable future.

One Day I'll Fly Away is the final portrait of Rupa. This large portrait with mask departs from her grey interiors for the backdrop of open blue skies. As if part of some AA mantra, the painting tries to convey a pragmatic acceptance of things we cannot control and the resolve to face the challenges of the brave new world that we cannot control. The scale of the painting is a taunt of open skies at odds with the strict travel restriction imposed on us for nearly 6 months now. Personally, it also serves as a warning to us, as parents, that the current closing of ranks of the immediate family unit, perhaps the only positive effect of the pandemic, is forced... merely temporary.

It is my grey existence.

In the stand-alone triptych, *Grey Dancer I & II* as well as *Orange Dancer*, I revisit old friends and frequent actors from past works. The Bharatanatyam dancers are presented within their Covid contexts. The players, set within the confines of their grey isolation capture the performer sans audience.... resplendent in the decoration and drama of their art form but without any real reason for being.

If a tree falls in the forest, and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a noise?

For me, as a member of the arts fraternity, the masked performers also represent a kind of shaming of dismal governmental initiatives and subsidies to support the arts industries and its educational frameworks during the fall out of this ongoing health and social crisis.

All over the world, across the board, the arts, it seems, is not essential to society.

Likewise, the large diptych *Trials and Tribulations of Wuhan Wendy and Shanghai Sally*, echo many of the self-same sentiments as the *Grey* and *Orange Dancer* paintings. The *wayang* of the Chinese opera has also been a recurring theme in my work but is presented here within their grey cocoons of silence. Wendy and Sally, resplendent in all the detail, pomp and ceremony of performance are dressed up with nothing to do nor anywhere to go.

Just for effect - the making of these works coincided deliciously with the Trumpian call to blame China for the Virus, for creating it, spreading it, keeping it secret and then profiting from it, a call that has since been echoed, closer to home, by the Australian government.

It is their grey existence.

And like a perfect storm, in the lead-up to the terrible effects of Covid, we experienced the usual palaver and *sendiwara* of politics in Malaysia. A child of the Mahathir years, the Leader has been a constant subject since I was a school boy. Having done over 20 portraits over 40 years, *A Nation Turns its Lonely Eyes to You* commemorates the latest political cluster**** with a straight up portrait based on a famous press image but nevertheless, pacifies my increasingly fruitless ambition to have Dr M sit for me in person. Painted at the point of the PM's resignation (5.0?), this large portrait is a sad counter to the earlier *Mamak Kool* which celebrated the ousting of PM Najib. That election, for the first time, gave Malaysian voters the taste of an alternative to Barisan Nasional which many saw as a relic of its once glorious past.

Using a self portrait with purple voting finger, wearing a ceremonial military *songkok* and surrounded by the debris of our colonial pasts, I created an, admittedly, rambling narrative that meandered through racial stereotypes and colloquialisms. Today, in the light of everything that has happened since, *Mamak Kool* remains, ironically, more hopeful than ever, albeit, tinged with a wistful longing for what might have been.

Like *A Nation Turns its Lonely Eyes to You*, *IN-OUT*, painted in the aftermath of that event, examines political systems, democracy and always, outcomes that inevitably, are at odds with the will of the people. Based on a photoshoot by my friend Rizal of our friend Wandu a few years ago, the depiction of the subject sheathing and unsheathing... the *in* and *out* of the *kris*, gives voice to the fears of the Other on both sides of political divides, of political retribution - specific to Malaysia but in a broader global sense as well.

Finally, the glorification and the depiction of the Malay Warrior class, a kind of right-of-passage amongst some Malaysian artists of Malay ethnicity is something I have always been curious about. In my on-going search for heroes within my own artistic practise, albeit from the vantage point of the 'outsider', I wanted to see if I could own it too. After all if I can appropriate Captain America and Batman, why can't I own Hang Tuah?

It is our grey Malaysian existence.

While the autobiographical dominates much of my favoured narratives - popular culture, music, literature and the news on TV has always informed them. Works like *Same Old Story* and *Trouble at the Border* respond directly to world events that, in one way or another, eventually touch all our lives.

The killing of George Floyd and the ensuing protests in America seamlessly intersect with those in HongKong in the *'they can't breathe'* triptych. Similarly, *Trouble at the Border* references recent skirmishes at the Sino-Indian border around Ladakh and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Indian and Chinese troops gave in to their baser instincts, killing each other with sticks and stones in accordance with their non aggression peace pact of 1969. In a desperate pursuit of mirth, in my versions of the event, I imagine they are wearing masks while beating each other to death.

Yet more damning indictments of the abhorrent failure of even the most meagre examples of leadership around the world with the exemption of the few lucky countries that boast women *in* or *near* seats of power. But that is a series of work for another time.

As a journalist and as an artist, I was always taught that my work must speak beyond the artist's or writer's own voice. Still, at this very moment, under these specific circumstances, I want to express, through these works, the deep sadness I feel about the fractured, tribal, self-serving, selfish greed of our world leaders in the calamitous years leading up to this pandemic.

It puts to rest the myth, certainly in my lifetime, of the idyll of a World Community, the marriage of Nations.

Covid has definitely stripped *that* bride bare.

From the big issues like vaccine and PPE nationalism and the failure to protect our most vulnerable, from the aged to asylum seekers on the high seas to petty refusals to wear masks or even share toilet paper, we citizens have shown ourselves to be desperately and miserably uninspired.

But hey, who cares what i think. I am nobody with my own set of bad habits.

So I made these paintings. It is the only thing I know how to do.

If nothing else I have had it relatively easy.

After all, Covid got me off my bum and it forced me to make work every day of confinement.

And when I wasn't in-studio, I was shopping. Just look at my on-line search history.

What I Bought During Lockdown is my confession that retail therapy *does* alleviate the loneliness of isolation and the desperation born of a 24-hour news cycle that spews division, contradiction and hate.

Forget about the climate and my carbon footprint, how other people are going it tough, whether my wife loses her job or not, how lonely my mother may be - I can make it all bearable with presents to myself.... t-shirts, books, comics, toy cars, LEGO, a chair, a stone Ganesh, a rice cooker, a soda stream machine, fancy masks, an Afghan war rug and this limited edition large sculpted statue of Miller's *Dark Knight*.

Made in China, this sculpted action figure is, for me, the very symbol of the once proud and dynamic, so diminished, hollow state of American exceptionalism.

What I Bought During Lockdown, my still life of the Batman is the final work in my Coronavirus diary. Finally, amidst the cacophony of so much difficult news and the desperation of isolation, I often think of home and one day I remembered Ismail Hashim. *Ismail* is my tender and loving respite from our preoccupations with self and our current realities. Painted on one of the late photographer's damaged prints that he had given me during an interview we did in Penang many years ago, my portrait of *Ismail* is a tribute to simpler times, a smaller world and an artist I loved from the day we met.

Painting him made me happy.

SCREAM INSIDE YOUR HEART finds inspiration for its title from a news item about a theme park re-opening in Japan in the early part of the pandemic. The advertising for the relaunch featured a safety video of two masked company execs sitting dead-pan, in suit and tie, on a roller-coaster as it took all its twists, turns and loops. They don't move, they don't stretch their arms out, they don't make a squeak. At the end of the ride, they look in the camera and whisper '*scream inside your heart*'.

This is the strange, brave, *whatever-you-want-to-call-it* socially distant world we bequeath to our young and their generations to come.

Anurendra Jegadeva
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