

LOVE. As clichéd as it may sound, it is what makes the world go round and in recent troubled times seems to be the answer to all that is happening around us. An exhibition entitled *MA-NA-VA-REH – Love and Loss in the Time of the Big Debate* by Malaysia's very own leading contemporary artist well known for his political commentary on both local and current issues,

Anurendra Jegadeva, opened just as the nation grappled with yet another national tragedy that struck. "I guess in a weird way, it was quite timely – unfortunate for this to have opened on the same day where most Malaysians would have woken up to news of MH17," says Anurendra during an interview with **Benchmark**. The fresh and contemporary narrative that surrounds the artists' latest exhibition explores the notion of the times we live in today and



by Sumitra Valliappan



photos by Anwar Faiz Ahmad Tajudin

demonstrates how he fits into the scheme of things.

When asked if this was meant to be an underground exhibition, the gregarious artist who had just emerged from a recent brush with the authorities for an art piece that was misconstrued, replied plainly "I like the idea that it had to be quieter but it's ridiculous as there's nothing about this work that is confrontational yet these things are seen as controversial".

The Malaysian artist, curator and writer was in the middle of a controversy surrounding his work in a group exhibition last year at Publika. *I is for Idiot*, the infamous artwork, was misinterpreted by certain quarters, causing Anurendra or Anu as he is fondly known, to be called in by the police for questioning. "It was all taken out of context. I'm glad it's all over now but I must admit the incident has since caused a slight dent to my reputation as an artist," he says, looking sullen.

That however did not break his spirit as an artist as he believes his art, which takes on a playful satire of the local scene, explores how we fit into the whole picture without being recriminatory. "That's how I feel right now, that a lot of things are taken out of context, so I wanted to do a show about just love stories," he explains. It started with the "manavareh", which basically means wedding dais in Tamil.

"I look at Malaysia and I think about marriage, which is what we will eventually become – with all the mixed marriages and cultures – or it's what we aim to be, one nation," he says. "However when you speak of mixed marriages, there's still a lot of taboo or discomfort where religion is involved."

Anu's inspiration for this particular solo exhibition was derived from his grandmother who was a renowned wedding planner for Hindu weddings in the 50s and 60s. "In Teluk Intan, where she was living at that time, she would help design invitation cards, decorate venues and most significantly design and build the wedding dais where the couple would sit through the wedding rituals and ceremonies," he says.

In many ways, his inclination for the visual arts was inspired by imaginings



The voice within

Anurendra Jegadeva explores the troubled times we live in and his role in the bigger picture

of how – in his mind's eye – with saw and brush in hand, his grandmother would build and paint the wedding dais which traditionally resembled ancient temple architecture of the *gopuram*, courtyards and central altar. *MA-NA-VA-REH* is a room installation comprising a large painted wedding dais made out of an intricate assemblage of painted panels, altar boxes, printed material, paintings on the walls and kolams on the floor, where visitors are encouraged to weave through the installation to uncover the wonderful stories each and every work tells.

The first art work that greets you as you walk into the Wei-Ling Gallery along Jalan Scott in Kuala Lumpur where the exhibition will be held until Aug 4 is an unassuming photo that was worked onto a cushion.

The wedding picture of a young bride sitting on a chair and gazing up into the eyes of the groom is in fact an actual wedding photo of Anu's parents – with cheeky additions of heart-shapes floating around the couple.

Likening his parents to Malaysia, he says that while they have so much love for each other – they still fight a lot, which is normal but above it all it is the love that prevails. "With this exhibition, I wanted

to play with the whole idea of unions. I wanted to show how people can come together as a nation as we sometimes get too caught up with the obvious and forget the bigger picture," he explains.

Deriving an excerpt which was on display from the *Merdeka Book*, published pre-Merdeka by the *Straits Times*, Anu explains how the talk at that time was not about the economy or the state of development but how the people were going to come together as a nation. "Playing with that, it was hoped that in one generation these differences will not exist anymore," he says. "That's still very central to Malaysians, I wanted to celebrate that," he adds. Bringing us back to the essential piece of the exhibition – a beautifully "noisy" yet serene-looking wedding dais that sits in the middle of the exhibition floor, Anu goes on to describe the narrative of the installation.



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– Anu



it draws together a whole melting pot of Southeast Asia," he says.

The prints that hang from both sides of the dais also depict different cultures, light-heartedly depicted to reflect modern times. In trying to capture the essence of a Hindu temple where every spot is covered with a beautiful painting or statue, Anu successfully did it in "decorating" the wedding dais – which forms the main installation piece of the exhibition. Anu who had previously worked as a journalist shows his love for story-telling in almost all the pieces that are up at the exhibition. His love for books, in particular comic books, also flows into his art with nifty words placed amongst the paintings.

Behind the wedding dais also tells a story of immigrants who came to Malaysia and how they have seamlessly assimilated into shaping the country that they now call home. Old postcards dating back to 1920, which the artist had found in the basement of the house where he lived while pursuing his art degree in Australia, also forms part of the display. "I doubt they would never have thought that in time to come, there would be an Asian living in their home," he laughs cheekily. The other striking piece that stands out at the exhibition is the migrant altar as Anu calls it, an installation where he uses migrant people as the main topic to address the issues of belonging and community that have in recent times become a subject of tense racial and religious debates in Malaysia. "Again playing with all the ideas, the migrant altar was meant to be like an inner sanctum of a temple," he explains. Being a Hindu and marrying a Christian wife, Anu has married his personal experience in this art piece

which forms a mix of religions all in one – interlaced charmingly while driving a strong message of religious acceptance home.

Surrounding the dais is a series of paintings that question the idea of unions and the conditional love that is attached to them. Playing on such ideas regarding how people interact and basing it on his colonial lineage came the love

stories that form the other "quieter" yet provocative pieces. "What I found was that we seldom come together anymore, like when we were in school we were all friends and it didn't matter who or what we were," he says. "How did we get to these stark differences where kids today would just hang out with their own 'kind', that is what I wanted to explore," he adds.

In *Face to Face*, Anu takes his art a step further and looked at the idea of mixed marriage. "It's also another uncomfortable topic because in the last two months, we've had people coming to take away brides from weddings or bodies from funerals." These pieces which were started much earlier bear a resonance now as Anu again explores how he fits into the structure of things.

Intricate assemblage of painted works, some painted over old paintings, for example in the piece called *Love is all we Have* – a mixed media on a vintage Moghul paintings, show how the artist has also moved from traditional art forms to push his own boundaries. "I started experimenting with different kinds of media and found that it gives a more lively way to present my work," he says. The whole idea of a Hindu existing within a Muslim context as depicted in the two large 100-year-old paintings of Mumtaz and Shah Jahan is not new. "India has this tradition of Islam as well which I wanted to play with so I took an ordinary couple and painted them onto this old painting, with naughty motives that are used to stereotype Indian

men and women and the whole dating ritual," he says, juxtaposed against the larger-than-life painting.

The whole idea of how our sovereignties are constantly being challenged, whether locally or globally, has been explored in MA-NA-VA-REH, leaving visitors with a challenged mindset. "I would ideally like for them to come in, look at what I'm trying to say and make up their minds for themselves as to how they would want to interpret everything that is going on in the world now," he says. "Everything is up in the air now, so that's why you'll see I've used the last line of The Beatles in these paintings," he says, referring to *Love is all we Have*. A culmination of 20 years of Anu's work can now be seen through this solo exhibition, and how he has matured as an artist is brilliantly displayed in this exhibition.

The full-time artist might be taking a break in the near future, as he plans to take some time off to rejuvenate and refresh himself. "I'm constantly producing work, but you know sometimes it's good to just disappear for a while and come back feeling reinvigorated," he tells us. "This exhibition in a way is a strong reaction to what happened to me last year, when I realised how separate we are as people," he says, admitting that it was a hurtful time which made him think about relationships and question the very organisations that are meant to represent artists. "My work is not meant to be political, but all I'm doing is just trying to understand the world we live in and if in trying to do that (seeing how we fit) it becomes political, then that's just the situation we find ourselves in," he says.

"I would be troubled if people come in with a typical mindset thinking that all I'm trying to portray is what's broken and what's not," he adds, which brings us back to the whole idea behind the exhibition itself – love, the most clichéd word of all times but a stark reminder as to how we should accept and embrace one another's differences. **FOCUSM**

MA-NA-VA-REH is on display at Wei-Ling Gallery until Aug 4



The wedding dais that was built by

Anu himself started with an old picture of his father who was studying in Victoria Institution. A simple group photo of the students and a teacher rang a bell and brought back memories of school days where school children would mingle freely with each other regardless of their colour, race or religion. "The mix you see here is so seamless, from a gender and race point of view – there weren't issues, of course there were things that needed to be rectified and changed but I think we were more hopeful back then," he says, nostalgically. Eyes that are painted on stones are strategically placed around the dais, representing the eyes of the past which Anu says are the eyes of our ancestors looking down on us. "Architecturally of course,

