

# DIVINE INVENTION



**Anurendra Jegadeva** talks about his work, the need for heroism and his latest exhibition: *My God is My Truck – Heroic Portraiture from the Far Side of Paradise*

photography DAMIEN KHOO text DIAN PASQUINAL KAUR



MERRY X'MAS THE WAR IS OVER

**L**im Wei-Ling, the Director of Wei-Ling Gallery, calls Anurendra Jegadeva “one of the few thinking artists in this country”. For many in the know, he is celebrated as a brilliant narrator on canvas, a master storyteller who weaves social issues with poignant tales gathered from his colourful cultural background with a deftness that is rarely encountered.

It is “the story” he has been yearning for, he tells me when met at the studio in his home. “The world is constantly in a state of change. Events that take place in the farthest corner of the world are bound to affect everyone, myself included. These paintings are my story. If my work is political, it is only because they represent my response to the world around me. The many Indian figures you see in my work are my family members, friends and public figures that I have grown up with, and each of them has a story to tell,” he says.



In Anurendra's dining area hangs a painting of a little girl running in a field with numbers circling her head. He tells me that is his daughter Roopa. "My daughter took a long time to get a grasp on mathematics and I remember driving her to the Kumon Learning Center with the hopes that she will master arithmetic. I did this painting based on that experience because it affected my life as much as the 9-11 did," he says.

Anurendra draws his inspiration from various issues – from the transmissions that filter through the television to demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur and even weddings. "On-going issues touch me and I respond to them directly, not by venting my frustrations on the Internet but by unleashing my creative demon on the canvas. I love the human form. While some may say figurative painting is rather banal in mainstream art, I simply love it," says the third-generation Malaysian of Sri Lankan Tamil origin. "As long as there is struggle in the art, the work is defined by it. I am not talking mere aesthetics either. Work is made all the more interesting when in the presence of labour and sincerity."

From the imaginative impressions of Indians to the need for heroism, Anurendra's sometimes controversial and interpretative artistic expressions are bound to throw one onto the path of hope and on a quest in search of one's identity. "The world is a mad place," he says. "I want to bring heroism to the light because each one of us has a great need to be inspired. I am interested in the idea of ordinary heroes."

### MY GOD IS MY TRUCK

For his latest solo exhibition, *My God is My Truck – Heroic Portraiture from the Far Side of Paradise*, Anurendra focuses on the human race's continuous struggle for survival. The fifteen new works bear his usual ballsy strokes rooted in insightful religious, cultural, social and economic aspects and his storytelling flair continues to make its presence felt throughout the latest theme.

*My God is My Truck* is a romanticised take on the hard life of lorry drivers. "Trucks are often regarded as shrines for the drivers with hanging



flowers and pictures of Hindu Gods plastered all over, painting a garish picture. Lorry drivers are a forgotten lot because we do not often depict middle class conditions. I am merely telling their stories, their hopes and what keeps them going," Anurendra says about the painting where bright colours are juxtaposed against the vivid forms of a truck, a man with hooks on his back – a common practice to pay penance during Thaipusam – and pictures of the average Indian's heroes such as the legendary figures of the Indian independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, as well as superstar Rajnikanth. "This work is a celebration of heroic power and the cult of power and personality."

### TRIMURTI

Anurendra's exhibition is not just all about trucks either. The first piece he worked on, *Trimurti*, explores the concept of trinity punctuated with symbols of popular culture and changing of the world order. "Trimurti has Jesus Christ and Che Guevara nailed on the cross and Ultraman with his arms wide open. Che on the cross marks the demise of communism while Mao, a benevolent father figure at odds with who he really was, appears in the background to represent the rise of the new Asia. Ultraman is a hero we all loved as children. I have also added some elements of commercialism and consumerism like Hello Kitty and the Toyota Alphard," he says. "Obama has been reduced to a face on a badge because he struggled to live up to the hype that was generated during his run for presidency. Notice that the size of his face is the same as Hello Kitty's?" he points out with a grin.



"People always do things that are at odds with what religion dictates and that makes an interesting study"

### GIRLS IN CAMOUFLAGE

"I am very interested in religion and violence, especially the yin and yang of it. People always do things that are at odds with what religion dictates and that makes an interesting study. War is universal and often, it is the women and children who suffer the most. All war is created in the name of identity, culture and language," he says.

The conflict in Sri Lanka left a big impression on Anurendra. In *Girls in Camouflage*, Anurendra painted his father's six sisters as sexy, gun-totting brides of the dictator. "I made them frivolous and threw in elements of consumerism such as an iPod, a Hello Kitty keychain, and a Victoria's Secret paper bag." His rendition lends innocence to the ladies.

While many see Anurendra as an artist centred on the Indian community, Farouk Khan – a collector of Malaysian contemporary art – has another take. "I always encourage Anurendra to paint more paintings with references to his culture. The Indians too need to be represented and there are very few artists bold enough to take the path less travelled. Anurendra is among the very few. I am proud to have collected his work. Instead of lecturing us on how the world should be, his works are an autobiographical take on the issues around us," says Farouk.

If there is one thing *My God is My Truck* accomplishes, it moves us to the core of our being. It compels us to re-examine our existence, to look at the people around us and figure out what they mean to us. It moves us to understand how television and the Internet have influenced our lives, our hopes and our dreams for the future. When it comes to capturing truth and presenting it with great strokes of fire, nobody does it like Anurendra. □



### A Wider View

Anurendra's interest in social issues was piqued during his stint at *The Star* newspaper when he highlighted the plight of estate workers on a regular basis. He later worked and lived in Australia for a few years while completing his Masters in Fine Arts from Monash University, Australia.



*My God is My Truck – Heroic Portraiture from the Far Side of Paradise* graces Wei-Ling Gallery from September 13 to October 13. In conjunction with this exhibition, a series of important publications documenting Anurendra's illustrious artistic journey to date will also be launched. For more information, visit [www.weiling-gallery.com](http://www.weiling-gallery.com).