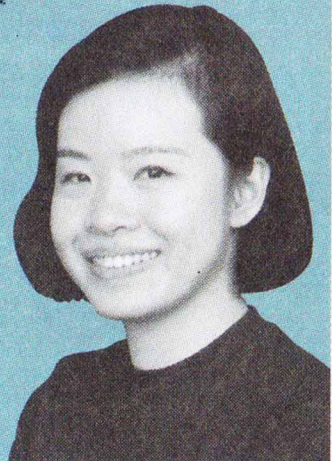


CULTURAL INDEX

The arts at a glance

BY
KONG WAI YENG

Anurendra Jegadeva, fondly known as Anu, has assumed numerous roles through the years — a figurehead of the local contemporary art scene, a daring critic who asks difficult questions through his work, an articulate storyteller, and possibly one of the greatest artists of his/our time. Anu is also a loving father who decided to move back to Australia to be closer with his daughter.

“We moved to Australia [a long time ago] because our daughter was going away to boarding school there. We simply couldn’t deal with being away from her, so we decided to follow and make her life miserable,” he says jokingly.

“She’s in university now and has very little time for us but that’s okay. Where my work is concerned, change is always good. Being taken out of my comfort zone forces a rethinking of the work. A lot of that rethinking is spent sitting around doing nothing much but watching TV and smoking cigarettes. But eventually, an idea begins to take shape.”

A relocation not only granted Anu extra time with his child but also inspired his latest solo exhibition, *On the Way to The Airport — New Keepsakes*, which coincides with the launch of a 300-page tome that documents 30 years of his illustrious career. The extensive exhibition features a series of 35 portraits, all of which are painted on actual pages taken from *The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, a vintage London publication from the 1880s.

“This exhibition is an immediate response to living in Australia, and being away from Malaysia. Of course, I’ve lived in Melbourne before but I was 20 years younger and our circumstances were different. And yet our issues remain the same — identity, place, nation, immigration, displacement, war, discrimination, memory — except that tribes are more rampant and the rhetoric less measured.

“The works respond to a post-Obama world or post-Howard Australia in the shape of pages from a diary. I tell it in my usual vernacular of clichés and irony, of current affairs and personal anecdotes — all through the lens of a Trumpean longing for a post-World War II world order.”

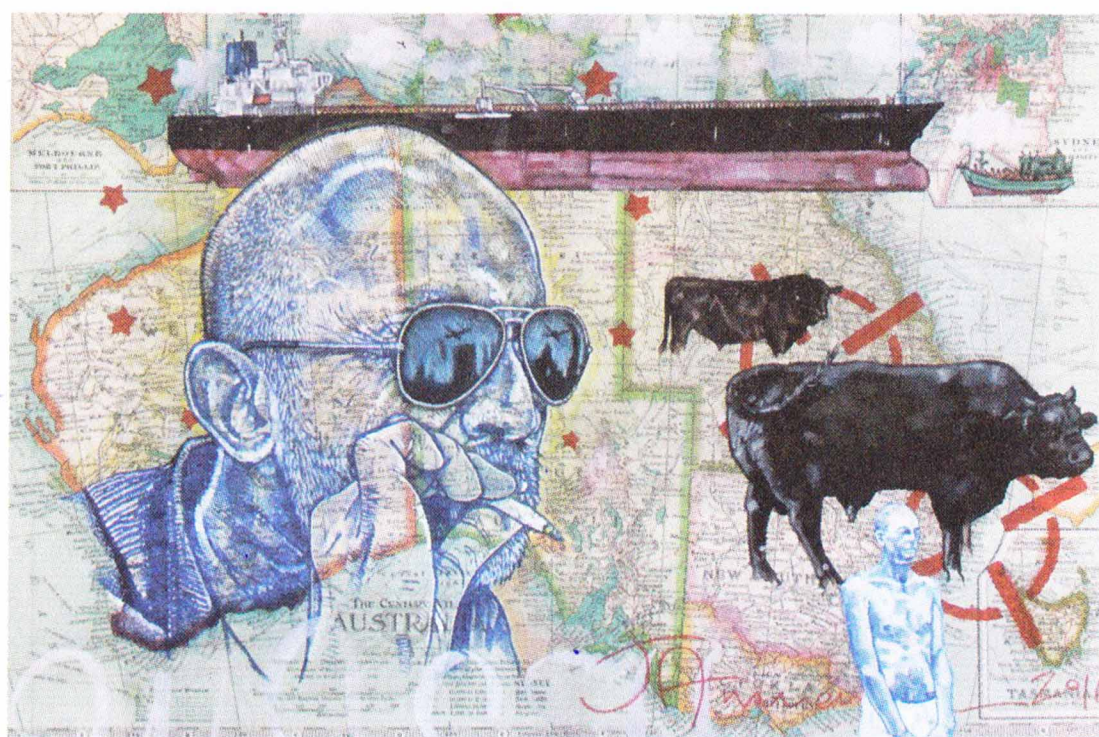
Indeed, Anu has never been a stickler for rules. His works often teeter on the cusp of provocative and thrilling, like how he depicted the complexity and ramifications of local politics via the Hindu wedding dais in his previous installation *Ma-Na-Va-Reh Love, Loss and Pre-Nuptials* in 2013. He is constantly pushing back the boundaries, hoping to enrich public discourse and sound the alarm on issues that matter, be it the post-colonial realities of a multifarious Malaysia or the haunting repercussions of war.

On the Way to The Airport — New Keep-



CHANGE OF SCENERY

Leading local artist Anurendra Jegadeva paints his observation of contemporary Australian life in the form of a diary in his new solo exhibition, *On the Way to The Airport — New Keepsakes*



When Dave Came to Town

sakes is another courageous example of challenging the norm. Anu chanced upon the vintage publication he drew the portraits on in an antique bookshop nearly three years ago. Quite a hoarder himself, he was enamoured with the “old, beautiful and distressed” book printed on heavy paper, and thought it would serve as the perfect background for his new work. He likens the publication to *National Geographic* before photography. It is a periodical that describes the Australia of the time, which includes its climate, flora, fauna, cities, indigenous people, economy, security and architecture.

Anu’s latest is a rumination on the meaning of change, and he cleverly illustrates it by juxtaposing the contemporary notions of the world around us with the depictions of a Victorian Australia.

“For the last two years, I’ve watched Fox News and CNN in disbelief as the world around me changed by the minute — from the civil war in Syria to the changing face of Europe, from the debate on refugees, immigration and terrorism to the debates

on the word Allah and the hudud law. And nearly half a century of trying to be civilised — from the Nuremberg Trials, the civil rights movements all over the world and the fall of the wall to the Obama presidency — it seems we have reverted back to a world where intolerance, prejudice and self-interest are now out in the open.

“This is why I thought it would be appropriate to use these Victorian versions of the world as the backdrop for the realities of contemporary life. It seems as if what everyone wanted all along was for the status quos of the 1950s to be intact — for us to all know our place within the social and global pecking order,” Anu laments.

Each page of Anu’s “diary” is presented in locked cabinets, reminiscent of notice boards in government school (or *papan kenyataan*, as we know it), alluding to the fact that we still need to be schooled, whether we are a First or Third World country, progressive or conservative, globalist or nationalist, from the East or West. Anu explains, “What the last decade and more pointedly, the last 18 months have shown

is that we are all idiots. And we all need to be schooled.”

Anu is unflinchingly honest like that. His creativity and candour shape his thoughts into art that impels us to confront the atrocities of the past and also question the way we view the present. Art is meant to inspire, intrigue, motivate and provoke. But public reaction can be as thorny as the issues the work addresses, just like how Anu’s painting *I is for Idiot* — which actually referred to former US president George W Bush — was seized by the police four years ago for allegedly insulting Islam.

Artists and curators in Malaysia are navigating delicate terrain as they continue to fight for free artistic expression without running afoul of the country’s censorship rules. I ask him if things have become increasingly difficult as an artist in Malaysia, to which he gladly answers, “No, definitely not in Malaysia”.

“I think as a Malaysian artist and curator — and more importantly also having been a Malaysian journalist — we are sensitive to the sensitivities. If one can balance their version of the truth with an attempt to understand and accept the view of another, and then tell their version through a filter of humour, irony, sincerity and care, one can still express what one thinks. I think writers and filmmakers have it much harder. Sometimes, I think visual artists are seen as too frivolous — it’s good we get to say much more because of that.”

On the Way to The Airport — New Keepsakes is showing at Wei-Ling Contemporary, 6th Floor, The Gardens Mall, from July 5 to Aug 14. For more information, visit welling-gallery.com.