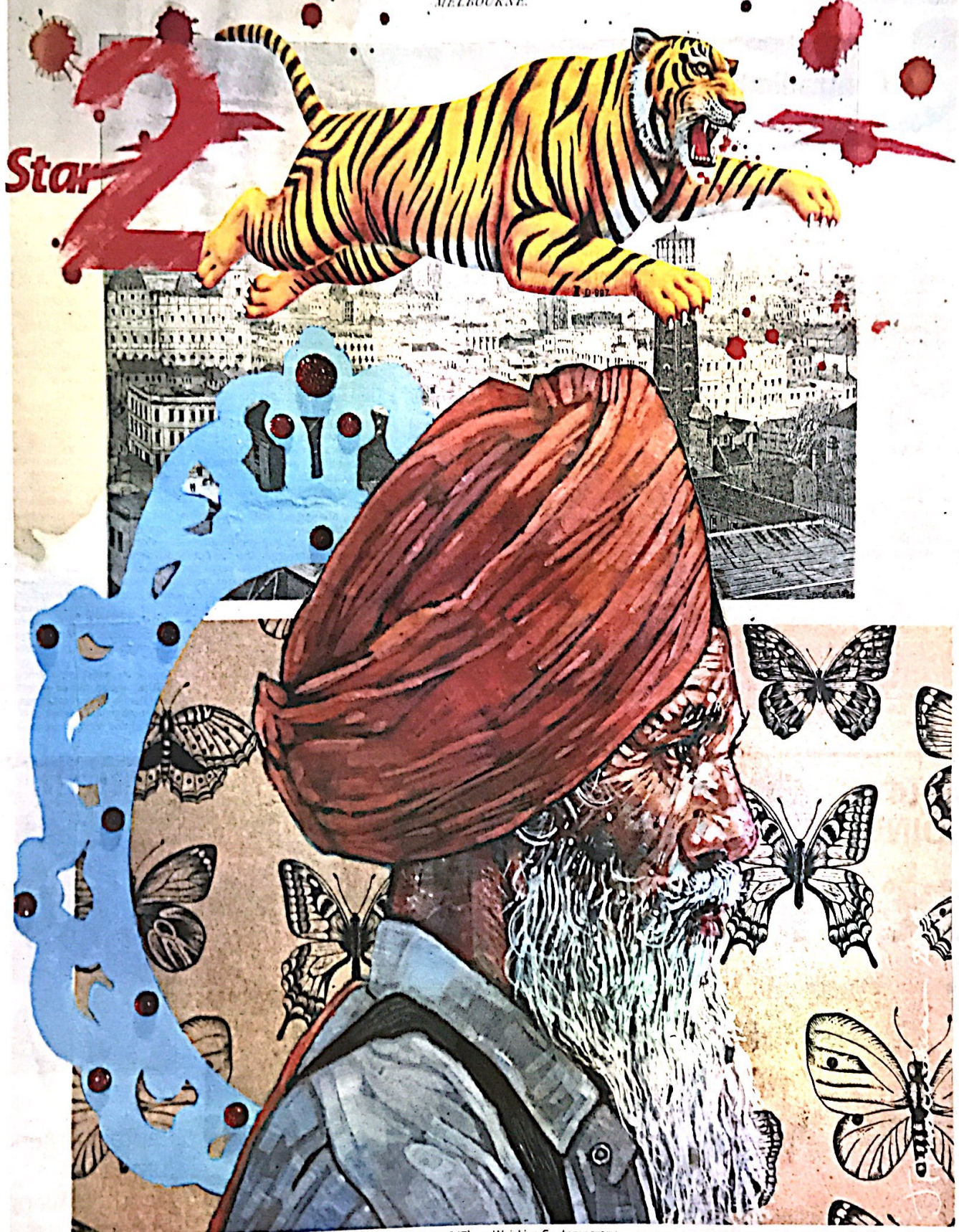


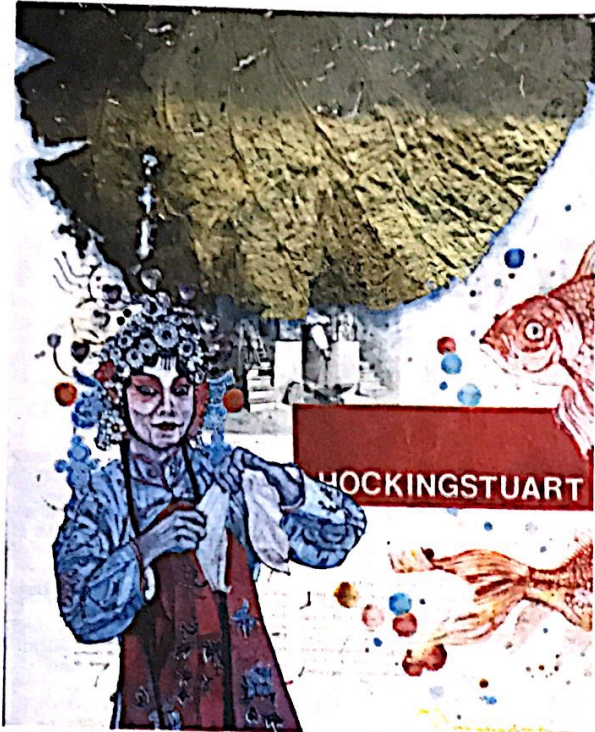
MELBOURNE.



Anurendra Jegadeva's *Father* (mixed media on vintage parchment in wooden box, 2017). — Wei-Ling Contemporary

Poetic and provocative

Anurendra Jegadeva celebrates a new body of work and looks back at his 30-year artistic journey with a monograph. >4



Boom 1 (mixed media on vintage parchment in wooden box, 2017).

Sacred travelogue

Anurendra Jegadeva's search for his place in the world remains unchanged, a thread evident in his latest body of work.

By HARIATI AZIZAN
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THE sense of place has always been present in his works, says Anurendra Jegadeva, one of Malaysia's leading contemporary artists, no matter where he is. "My work has always been about the narrative, mostly autobiographical, but they always refer to the place and times they were made," says the 52-year-old artist, fondly known as J. Anu, at the launch of *Sacred Altars*, his new 300-page monograph documenting his 30-year journey as an artist, at Wei-Ling Contemporary in KL recently.

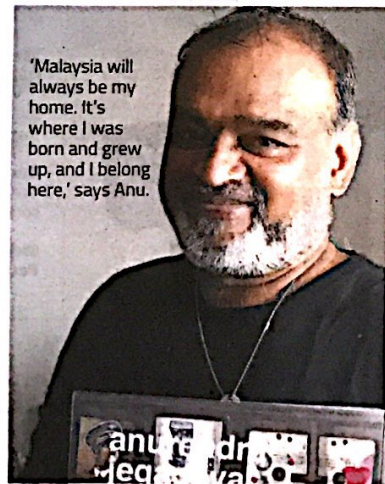
What drives him is his search for how he fits in. "All my art is an examination of how I fit in the world around me. And they are how everyday stories about the place I live in affect my existence," he says.

And Anu's creative trajectory has spanned over oceans in the last three decades, beginning from his time as a student in Britain to when he uprooted to Melbourne with his family in 2000, and back.

"Malaysia will always be my home. It's where I was born and grew up, and I belong here."

When he returned to Kuala Lumpur in 2005, he was baffled to find a homeland transformed politically "yet faced with the same issues that plagued us then".

His art was inspired. He pro-



'Malaysia will always be my home. It's where I was born and grew up, and I belong here,' says Anu.

duced 20 painted stories, described as his "boldest venture into the realm of politics yet" for his eighth solo exhibition, *Conditional Love* (2008). This heralded a period of work that his cousin and "comrade in art" Eddin Khoo described as a "radical shift in subject matter, form and size", with *My God is My Truck* (2010), *Letters to Mr Hitler* (2012) and *MA-NA-VA-REH - Love And Loss In The Age Of The Great Debate* (2014).

However, in 2015 when his daughter went away to boarding school in Australia, Anu decided

to return Down Under; a place he describes as "now different, yet very much the same".

Relocation, and being away from Malaysia, raised similar issues of identity, nation, immigration, discrimination, memory and, inevitably, politics.

"I realised it doesn't matter where you live, the world is now so small."

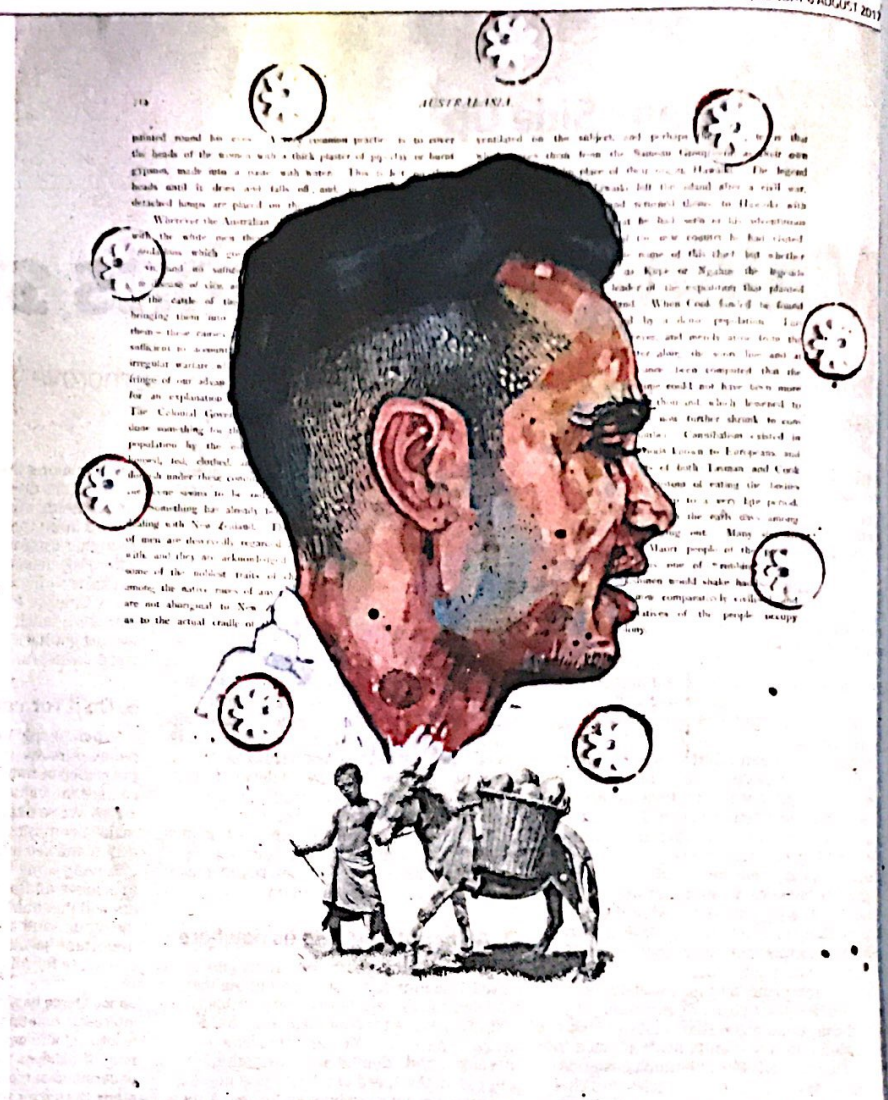
His search for his place in the world continued, a thread that is evident in his body of work, as well as his latest solo exhibition *On The Way To The Airport - New Keepsakes*, now on at Wei-Ling

Contemporary.

And Anu is quick to deny that he is a political painter, preferring instead the label "painter of politics" anointed to him by Khoo.

"I have never seen my work as political - I think I simply respond to the world I live in and try to make sense of it truthfully. I think whatever we think or how we live is inevitably shaped by forces much larger than us, be it political, social or geographical, and the meanings in my work simply attempt to examine - often on a very personal familial level - how I or we fit into that scheme

Anu's *Golden Boy* (mixed media on vintage parchment in wooden box, 2017). It is part of his *On The Way To The Airport - New Keepsakes* exhibition, now on at Wei-Ling Contemporary in KL. — Photos: ROHAIZAT MD DARUS/The Star



☆ Golden Boy - 2017 ☆



U Is For Unity, from Anu's *An Alphabet Book For The Middle Aged, Middle Classes*, which the artist said he published with two friends, but "it failed to launch". This work is featured in his monograph *Sacred Altars*.

of things," he reiterates. Anu insists his work revolves around simple ways of telling a story, which he says comes from his background in writing and the very basic need of wanting to tell a story.

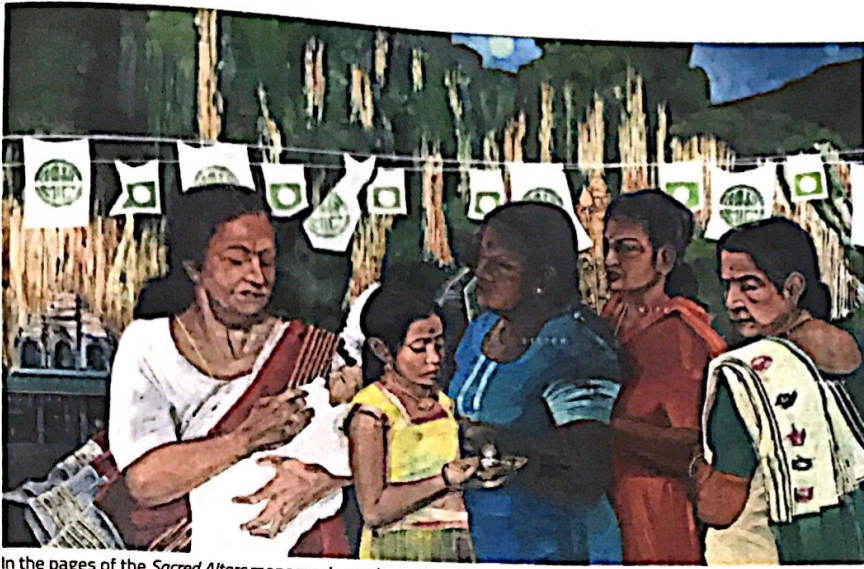
But as historian and social commentator Dr Farish Noor in his speech at the launch of Anu's *My God Is My Truck* show had said, the artist's works have been a long-drawn, thought-out, sensitive and exhausting effort at self-questioning and self-representation that shows how the Malaysian story, with its myriad of entanglements and complications, is "too dense, complex and difficult to be told with one telling".

On The Way To The Airport - New Keepsakes shows that Anu's Australian story is not that simple either.

It is presented in a diary of 35 portraits - each painted on an actual page taken from *The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, a vintage London-based publication from the 1880s.

The Victorian sensibilities of the antiquated lettering and illustrations on the original pages provide an interesting backdrop to Anu's contemporary Australian life, as affected by the current geopolitical and social panorama.

Locked in mini glass cabinets reminiscent of our *sekolah kebangsaan* (national school) notice boards, each diary entry evokes a yearning for the way things used to be, albeit with a



In the pages of the *Sacred Altars* monograph, readers will realise Anu's art remains deeply Malaysian at heart. The title of this work is *We Dance Alone*, taken from his *Conditional Love* exhibition in 2008.



Anu's installation *Yesterday In A Padded Room* at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2015. This work is featured in his monograph *Sacred Altars*. — Wei-Ling Contemporary

dose of irreverent cynicism.

Please don't call him nostalgic, says Anu.

"I would hate to think that my work was about a longing for the past. I would like to think it more a contemplation of alternative future – how things could have been – though that still hinges on the past.

Aesthetically, antiquity has greater appeal, and artists I think are innately drawn towards nostalgia, because we all have a longing for the past and a sense that things were more pristine than they actually were," he said in an excerpt from "Conversation with Eddin Khoo" from the monograph *Sacred Altars*.

If anything, his yearning is more for heroes, he concedes, which is rooted in his sociopolitically-imposed "migrant community" identity in the Malaysian context.

"My work has always been in the search of heroes, from Obama (*My God Is My Truck*, 2010) to Elvis (*Finding Graceland*, 2011).

"I feel that we are bankrupt of heroes, but I am still searching," he says, sharing that his heroic search has brought him closer to home.

"While we may disagree on various things, I think my parents are heroic in a strange and manic way. So is my wife. I have a friend whose eight year old son has a serious medical condition ... he is heroic every day."

And to more women, he quips.

"More and more I find that women – as leaders, activists, journalists, mothers and partners – are honest and compassionate and correct and committed and self-less in a way that men have failed so miserably. I think Datuk Ambiga (Sreenevasan) is heroic. And Angela Merkel."

He dedicates *Sacred Altars* to the memory of artist Redza Piyadasa, another personal hero.

"He was my friend and teacher ... and I am still amazed at how little recognition there is of Piya's contributions to Malaysian and South-East Asian art movements and how little we recognise this huge hole in our art movement left by his passing. Or that he is so missed."

The monograph was five years in the making, and fittingly, Anu feels he had embarked on some of the most significant bodies of his work as an artist during that time.

"Having 30 years worth of work, the one thing you don't want to do is to look back and say 'Hey, I wish I was doing work like that before.'

"I feel good that in the last five years I made two major installations that has extended my practice both conceptually as well as from the point of view of materiality and technique – these works necessitated extending my painting practice beyond the canvas to look at negotiating my painted objects within a larger space and context.

"*Yesterday In A Padded Room* ... and *MA-NA-VA-REH* also placed the works in international venues that have given me a profile I perhaps didn't enjoy as much before."

MA-NA-VA-REH – Love, Loss And Pre-Nuptials In The Age Of The Great Debate was acquired by the Singapore Art Museum for its permanent collection and exhibited at its SG50 show *After Utopia: Revisiting The Ideal In Asian Contemporary Art*.

The *Yesterday In A Padded Room* ... installation featured at Art Basel Hong Kong 2015, followed by the Asian Art Biennial 2015 at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts.

So will we be seeing a retrospective or survey show soon? Anu shrugs off that idea, almost embarrassed.

"Maybe some day ... Now, that I see the work in its entirety spread out over 30 years in *Sacred Altars*, I certainly think that I have made a significant contribution as an artist and a writer to – at the very least – Malaysian contemporary art, but honestly, I don't know if anyone cares."

Anurendra Jegadeva's *On The Way To The Airport – New Keepsakes* is showing at Wei-Ling Contemporary, RT01 Sixth Floor, The Gardens Mall in Kuala Lumpur till Aug 22. Open: Tuesday-Sunday, 11am-7pm. For details, call 03-2282 8323. Anu's monograph *Sacred Altars* is available at the gallery.



Mother (mixed media on vintage parchment in wooden box, 2017).



A visitor listens to the description of one of the works from the *On The Way To The Airport* series on headphones.



Anu's *Running Indians And The History Of Malaysian Indians In 25 Cliches* (2001) at the *Era Mahathir* exhibition at Ilham Gallery in KL last year. In his 30 years, Anu's works have been collected by art institutions and private collectors at home and abroad.