



scream inside your heart  
anurendra jegadeva



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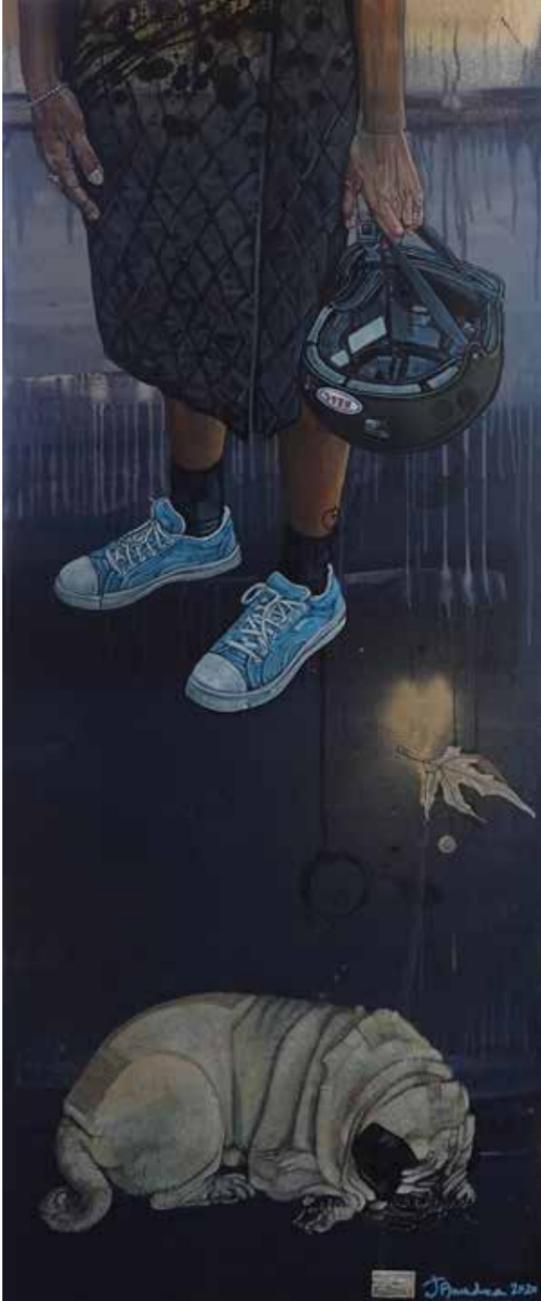
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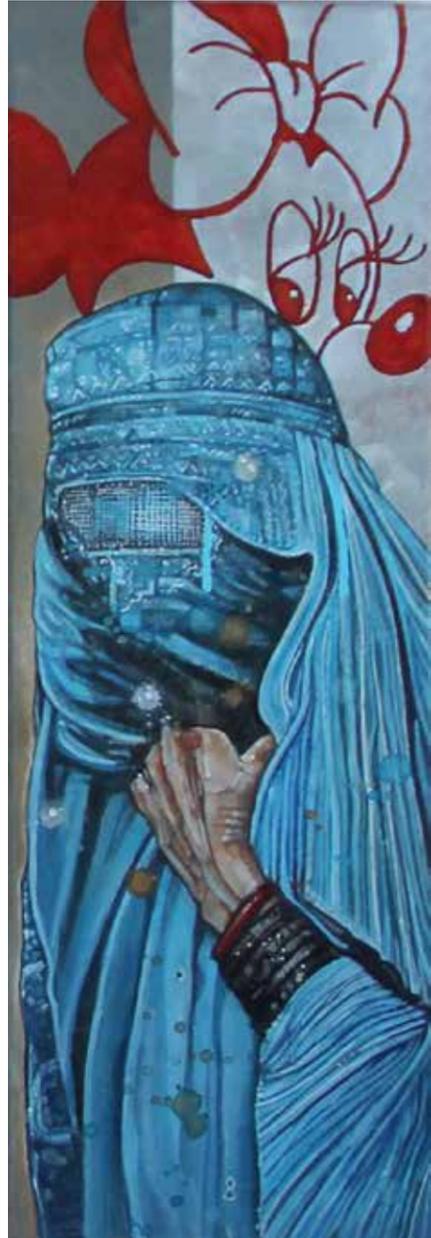
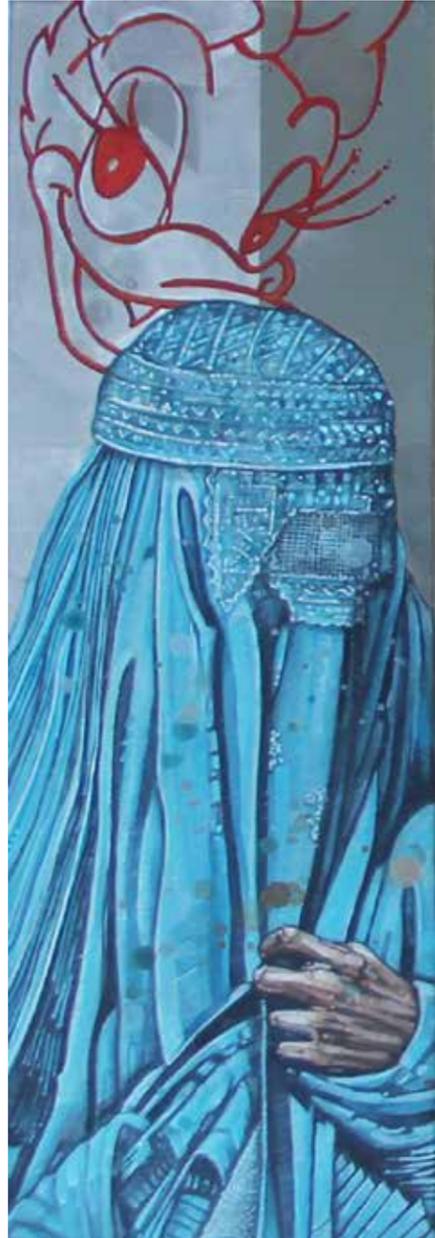
Printed in Malaysia

scream inside your heart



... Nowhere to Go  
Acrylic on canvas  
121.8 x 76 cm  
2020

I made **Scream Inside Your Heart** while my Mother was and still is far away from us, surrounded by family and friends but without my father. Her resilience and vigour tinged with her special brand of insanity inspires me everyday.



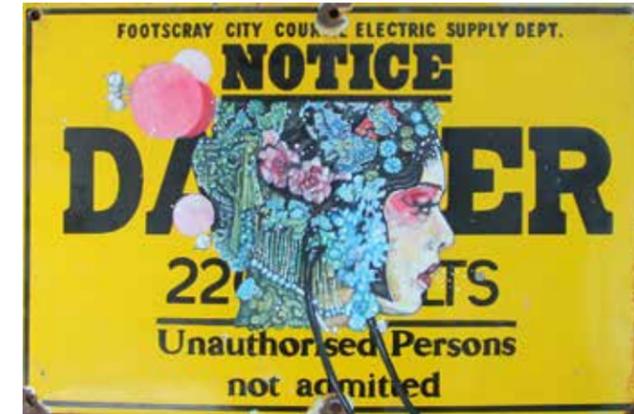
Seperate Together  
Acrylic on canvas  
with gold machineguns  
60 x 140 cm  
2020



**Pet Peeves**  
Acrylic and vintage print on canvas  
50 x 88 cm  
2019



**The Yellow Peril**  
Acrylic on enamel sign  
30 x 45 cm  
2020



## FOREWARD

2020 hasn't even started and it's over....

Can we start again please?

This pandemic that has engulfed the world, has affected each and every person on this planet.

It has been so inclusive that not one of us been left out.

As I write this introduction to Anu's latest body of work, we are still wading our way through it- navigating, adjusting and adapting- trying our best to find our footing, to steady and brace ourselves through unknown territory.

When Anu did a what's app facetime call with Inpa, Yohan and myself (as we all did to stay in touch and to keep ourselves sane over the MCO!!) he excitedly mentioned that the best part of the lockdown for

him, had been the fact that he had been painting like a fiend, 'I've been making lots of work!', he eagerly chimed.

I listened and smiled, but didn't react much as I didn't want to get my expectations up.

I have worked with artists for more than 18 years, and I know that it is no easy task to put a full and resolved show together. And with age it gets even more difficult - you just naturally become harder on yourself.

I knew Anu was working, but I needed to see something solid before reacting.

When he started sending me snippets of what was to come, I started to see that he was really pushing into new territory, both from an aesthetic, as well as technical point of view. In the political climate that we



are living through, not just within Malaysia but on a global level as well, there is no shortage of fodder for artists.

For Anu it is no different as his mind is constantly working on overdrive as he observes and digests then cleverly retorts with a clever answer-as he always has.

But this time he has completely outdone himself.

This Lockdown has been really good for him. I vouch for it.

The title, "Scream inside your Heart" which absolutely and completely encapsulates how we are all feeling, as we put on a brave face and try to go about our every day as though all is A-ok, meanwhile our hearts beat wildly and anxiety engulfs us at every turn.

The pieces are each made up of a kaleidoscope of human stories all interwoven into the quilt of his own life's events.

The uncertain and difficult life of the imagined refugee, juxtaposed against the comfortable life of Frankie, his pet pug to the commanding portrait of his daughter Rupa-all grown up and a young woman In her own right, as she and all young people who are starting out, grapple with what the new norms are.

Then there are the works which hark back to the Chinese Opera Heads and the Bharatnatyam dancers, imagery from another life, but this time all sophisticated and confident, making their 21st century debut- appropriately gas-masked to deal with this crazy world we are living in.

The works are powerful and deeply so. They touch us on so many levels-leaving us with so many questions, but also a quiet acceptance of the way things are.

What else can we do?

For once we can say we are all in this together.

No one is going anywhere.

Just come and see the show already.

Also the artist isn't showing up

It's just the works – And they say everything.

### Lim Wei-Ling

Gallery Director

Wei-Ling Galleries



**Same Old Song**  
Acrylic and mixed media on  
found antique cutlery drawer  
30 x 45 cm  
2020

Letter to my Grandmother  
Acrylic on canvas  
101.5 x 152 cm  
2020





The Trials and Tribulations of  
Shanghai Sally and Wuhan Wendy  
Acrylic on canvas  
122 x 122 cm each  
2020

..... dan lain-lain: Of Other People and Other Things  
LOUIS HO

There are various sorts of others in this essay, but we begin with the human variety. The socio-politics of colonization and the cultural contours of alterity, the generational vicissitudes of migration and the lived experience of minority communities, are writ large in Anurendra Jegadeva's paintings. *Merdeka Babies* (2019), for one, is a diptych of the artist's parents on their wedding day in 1957, a date that also, of course, witnessed the birth of modern Malaysia as a sovereign polity. Individual portraits of them are juxtaposed against painted stamps from the 1950s, the era of *merdeka*, or independence, from more than a century of British colonization, which historical turning point is metonymized here by the inclusion of portraits of a young Queen Elizabeth II. Into the pair of tableaux are inserted objects and symbols of some significance to both parents: an icon of

the Virgin Mary and a stylized image of the Hindu goddess of the arts, Saraswati, in the case of Anu's mother (who was born Hindu but educated at convent schools), and a tobacco snuff box and a depiction of Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu deity, in his dad's (the artist relates that the latter was obliged to give up smoking when he wed). Pictorially connecting both halves of the diptych is also the inclusion of a particular item, a memento mori. Depicted across the pair of paintings is a rendering of an old lottery ticket that was discovered in his father's wallet, after his death, that had apparently missed the top prize by two numbers.

As the titular reference to solitary confinement would suggest, most of the works in the present exhibition reflect the effects of the lockdown, prompted by the

COVID-19 pandemic, in the Australian state of Victoria, where Anurendra is presently based (in Melbourne, specifically). The theoretical thrust of this essay is concerned less with the ravages of the coronavirus, but is premised, rather, on the issue of alterity - the politics of ethnic, social and *material* otherness that informs and structures Anu's visual universe. Of import here is the dovetailing of different forms of exclusion. What is signalled, however briefly, is the equivalence between person and thing in Anu's work, between the disenfranchised individual and the marginalized object, between ethnic minority and quotidian commodity, between portrait and still-life, and between two categories of phenomena positioned on the peripheries of the popular imagination, operating beneath the radar screen of everyday priorities. The most salient

representation of difference in his work is, of course, autobiographical; the artist often incorporates figures and objects derived from his own racial and cultural background, that of the Indo-Malaysian diaspora. Born in 1965, the year that Singapore retreated from the Malayan federation, Anu grew up in the formative decades following *merdeka*. That period also witnessed the collective trauma of the May 13 riots in 1969, which was to have a lasting impact on the country's segregationist racial policies. The far-reaching consequences of those historical events, by his own admission, would come home to roost for him as a young adult:

It was in the prosperous period of the 1980s that, along with greed and corruption, factionalism reared its ugly head. My father, who worked in

<sup>1</sup>In an e-mail to the author, dated October 30, 2020

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

government, was my first introduction to the frustrations of affirmative action discussed around the dinner table. The halal/non-halal debate also marked the beginnings of the great divide; when we couldn't eat together around a table, whether in coffee shops or at school canteens, the divisions really began to take hold. As these divisions began to extend to education, from schools to university quotas .... this distance was further amplified<sup>1</sup>.

The racialization of modern Malaysia's politics was manifested in ways that had, and still have, a chilling effect on its ethnic landscape. Racial categorization, as is still practised in the country today, occurs both at the level of the national census and in sectors such as education - as Anu's anecdote illustrates - as well as land distribution, public health and housing, and finance. Malaysian citizens are obliged to categorize their ethnicity, defined patrilineally, within a limited rubric of only four options: Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others.

The latter, unsurprisingly, which in the Malay language is expressed as *"dan lain-lain"*, meaning "and others", is often used as a broad, pejorative term for the race-based discrimination that comes with being non-Malay and non-Muslim in Malaysia. This state of affairs has its roots in the New Economic Policy (NEP) enacted in 1971, when the government implemented affirmative action policies designed to favour *bumiputras*, or "sons of the soil", a label that includes only native-born Malay-Muslims and certain indigenous communities. Insofar as public policy and the development of attendant social hierarchies are concerned, the other-ing of ethnic groups do not end with the *lain-lain*, but encompasses the entire spectrum of the non-*bumiputra*. The reality, in other words, is even more circumscribed than the official designations would indicate, the categories of Chinese and Indian often becoming subsumed in a general disenfranchisement of various minority communities.

Anu remarks, with his usual candour, that "Being Indian within that construct is even more interesting ... at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Malaysia, we wear the badge of the drunken, wife-beating coolie awkwardly when we should be wearing it with the pride of having been a vital part of the economic progress in this country ... That is why my work always begins with an irreverent celebration of the Indian condition."<sup>2</sup> The ethno-political context of minority-hood, then, frameworks the socio-cultural explorations of Indian-ness in Anu's practice, the intertwining of those threads winding its way through his creative imagination. The confluence between the historical baggage of racial politics and its repercussions on personal and communal identity proves particularly salient in *Merdeka Babies*, the symbols of Hindu cosmology and the signifiers of Malaysian history finding, retrospectively, a meeting point in the memory of the year 1957 - a hopeful genesis for both family and state, community and country, the beginning

of a life together for the artist's parents and a new dawn for a fledgling nation. In similar fashion, other works, from the poignant tribute to family members past and future that is *Love's Requiem* (2020), to the conflation of contemporary politics and the colonial past in *Mamak Kool* (2019), to the revealing, surreal self-portrait contained in *Essential Workers* (2016 to 2019), foreground various configurations of South Asian cultural forms as markers of difference, characteristic of the so-dubbed Indian condition - a condition viewed, perhaps, in equal parts sentimentally and critically by the artist.

Elsewhere in the present exhibition, the expression of minority identity extends beyond the personal for Anu. Having relocated to Australia, for the second time in his life, in 2016, he found himself, once more, something of an outsider. The trope of alterity, the signs and signifiers of otherness, take on a distinctly empathetic tone in works such as *Yellow Peril* (2020) and *Pet Peeves* (2019), which reflect the

<sup>3</sup>In a text message to the author.

<sup>4</sup>In an email to the author, dated November 6, 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>See the chapter, "Rhopography", in Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

encroaching sense of xenophobia that operates at both official and everyday levels in Australia, a phenomenon that seems to have worsened during the current pandemic. It is with the mixed-media collage of *Same Old Song* (2020), however, that the ontological alignment between the figure of the ostracised minority and the inanimate object, between the figural portrait and the readymade or still-life, becomes clearly legible as an aesthetic gesture; what is effected is an equivalence between a pair of similarly marginalized entities, a form of commentary on the alien and alienated status of both. The work features two cutlery drawers of a discarded Victorian bureau utilized as frames for portraits of immigrants to Australia. In the first drawer is painted an anonymous woman clad in a *tudung*, the headscarf or veil that forms a crucial part of the Islamic dress code for women. Loosely modelled on Nurul Izzah Anwar, daughter of Malaysia's opposition politician and former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who is

well-regarded as a proponent of human and civil rights, the figure is flanked by two smaller plywood cutouts of a gentleman in traditional Malay *sarong* and *songkok*. These cutouts are a type of teaching aid widely available in Malaysia, as well as Australia, that provide graphic instruction for children with regards to the proper manner of performing prayers at a mosque. The immediate allusion, as Anu puts it, "is to the Muslim community here in Australia"<sup>3</sup>. In the other drawer is a found photograph of an Italian immigrant from the 1930s, posed against painted stalks of the golden wattle, Australia's national flower, with its familiar circlets of feathery, corn-gold blooms. According to the artist, early immigrants would plant the *acacia pycnantha* on their front lawns as a mark of assimilation and Australian identity. Like its counterpart, the chief figure here is accompanied by a secondary one; the painted body of an indigenous man is topped by an amulet containing a diminutive statue of Jesus, an artefact unearthed by the artist in an

antique shop, and that probably once formed part of an altar.

Here, celebrations of the Indian condition has morphed into reflections on the various forms in which the figure of the outsider is embodied in Australia: the "aboriginal", the historical memory of the immigrant "of Mediterranean complexion"<sup>4</sup>, the much-feared Muslim today. Anu observes of these groups that "we often forget that while we complain of being the newest shat-upon migratory group, the First Peoples to this very day are the most marginalised of the Australian community ... and by far, the propagation of the Muslim threat is the most egregious tarring of an entire religious group."<sup>5</sup> The salient point of interest of the piece, beyond the themes familiar to the artist's practice, is the imbrication of the otherness of ethnic minority and everyday object alike, a juxtaposition of two mutually reinforcing instantiations of the existential condition of alterity, one serving as an analogue for another. In much the same manner

that the import of the objects depicted in *Merdeka Babies* derives much from their proximity to the lives and times of the human subjects, the inclusion of the genres of the readymade and the still-life in *Same Old Song* connotes a material register of difference that runs parallel to the contextual significance of the individuals portrayed. The genre of the still-life, according to art historical sources, constitutes a class of paintings that the Romans referred to as *xenia*, turning on a distinction between megalography and rhopography.<sup>6</sup> The former is comprised of the lofty traditions of history painting and portraiture, involving suitably broad themes of mythology, religion, literature and history, and allegories of the great and the good. It invokes the lives and likenesses of celebrated men and women, momentous events and illustrious personages. The second stems from the Greek *rhopos*, referring to trifling things, or small, inconsequential goods: it pictures that which the prescriptions of the previous category systematically

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Stephen Johnstone, "Introduction: Recent Art and the Everyday" in *The Everyday* (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art), ed. Stephen Johnstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 12–23. See p. 12.

omits from its range of subject matter, i.e. the unsung material base of life, the foodstuffs and drink and creature comforts so sensually depicted by painters of centuries past.

The theoretical distinction between megalography and rhopography informs Anu's strategies of re-familiarization here. In bringing together the portrait of the human subject and the inanimate object, in appropriating the trope of *rhopos*, he dislocates both other and thing, raising them to the level of megalography, recuperating those other-ed phenomena occluded by societal hierarchies and the oversights of ordinary existence. In insisting on the presence of the undramatic material base of life in his paintings - the lottery ticket, the drawer, the quotidian article of utility - rendering

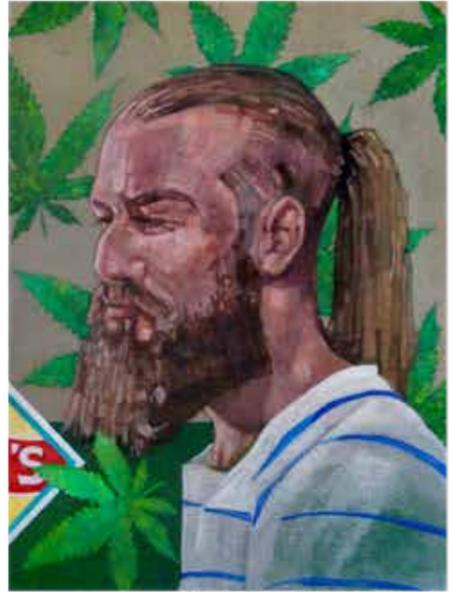
it susceptible to renewed notice, he likewise returns the outsider - the ethnic minority, the immigrant, the foreigner - to critical attention. As the viewer is confronted with the spectacle of a common object emerging from the obscurity of the everyday, so does s/he obliged by the artist to ponder the ontological other-ness of the racialized subject. If both linger on the periphery of cultural memory and the social imagination, here, perhaps, is a repudiation of what Georges Perec posited as the amnesiac condition of our everyday lives - the orchestra of "the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual".<sup>7</sup>

Here is, then, an acknowledgement, much needed, of the *lain-lain*.

*Louis Ho is an independent curator and critic. He was trained in art history, and his research interests include Southeast Asian visual culture and the intersections between art and the social. He has lectured at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, and is a contributor to various journals and publications, such as Modern Chinese Literature and Culture and ArtAsiaPacific. He was previously a curator at the Singapore Art Museum, where his first exhibition was the permanent collection show, 'After Utopia: Revisiting the Ideal in Asia Contemporary Art'; other exhibitions included the 'Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize 2018' show. He was also a co-curator of the Singapore Biennale 2016, 'An Atlas of Mirrors.'*

**The Trials and Tribulations of Shanghai Sally and Wuhan Wendy**  
Acrylic on canvas  
122 x 122 cm each  
2020





Essential Workers  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 120.8 cm  
2016, 2017, 2018



Grey Dancer 1  
Acrylic on canvas  
100 x 107 cm  
2020



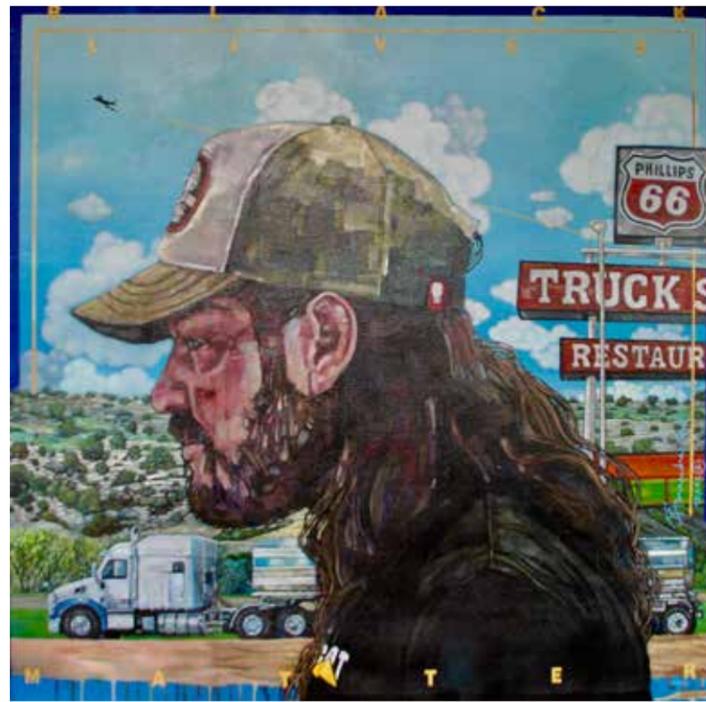
Orange Dancer  
Acrylic on canvas  
100 x 107 cm  
2020



**Grey Dancer 2**  
Acrylic on canvas  
100 x 107 cm  
2020

Another Day in Paradise...  
Port Authority, NYC  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 60 cm  
2019





Conversation from the  
Heartland I, II, III, IV  
Acrylic on canvas  
90 x 90 cm each  
2019





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 video 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, they don't make a squeak. At the end of the ride, they look in the camera and whisper 'scream inside your heart'.



NEW PAINTINGS FROM  
SOLITARY CONFINEMENT  
by ANURENDRA JEGADEVA



**I Heart Mushu**  
Acrylic on canvas  
46 x 107 cm  
2020

There are two distinct series of works in SCREAM INSIDE YOUR HEART.

BC and PC - before and post 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 openly in public. In a world unthinkable today, 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 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 losses - 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*, Facebook..

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 squandered 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 the steady pull and wipe of toilet paper.

For someone like me, a homogenous blend of Biggles, Bowie and the Queen, it has been uncomfortably revealing. As the beneficiary of that so-called superior Western styled value system that has shaped literally everything we understand and feel about freedom, politics, civilisation, history, language, place, race, culture, music and of course art, that oasis of enlightened Truth promised to us in the so-called 3rd world continues to elude me.

Instead, we fail each other yet again, along age-old tribal lines of class, geography, religion, race and most importantly, according to our financial means.

And all the while stock markets happily chug along. Speaks volumes 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, like a jig saw, we all fit together.

In the process, I hope that, the autobiographical, balanced with aesthetics, humour and our common experience of the world, evokes a response in the viewer.

I have also tried (not always successfully) to inject both this humour laced with an added irreverence to test the bounds of broader sensitivities 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 keep the work from being precious or self important. Humour and satire are tools i use repeatedly 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. It 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 whether they are just a few suburbs away, or in 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, the new compositions in most part, are occupied by a solitary sitter,

often quite 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 our feelings of self-imposed exile as home and family become 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 towards the end of Melbourne's second lock down. Having our daughter home for the duration of the lockdown while parentally fulfilling, really brings to

the fore the challenges for young people, not only because of the immediacy of isolation and separation but their dread of very real, 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 speak of a pragmatic acceptance of things we cannot control and the resolve to face the challenges of this brave new world to come. The scale of the painting is the taunt of open skies at odds with the strict travel restriction imposed on us for



**Merdeka Babies**  
Acrylic and collage on canvas  
35 x 84 cm  
2020

**Heart in Hand**  
Mixed Media  
size variable  
2019  
Commissioned by the  
Indian Heritage Centre

half a year now. Personally, it also serves as a warning to us parents, that even the current closing of ranks of the nuclear family unit, perhaps the only positive effect of the pandemic, is forced and 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 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 that 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.



**Mamak Kool**  
Acrylic and archival print  
on canvas  
55 x 75 cm  
2019



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 Javanese warrior 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 is alive and well and does alleviate the loneliness of isolation and the desperation born of a

24-hour news cycle that spews division, contradiction and hate.

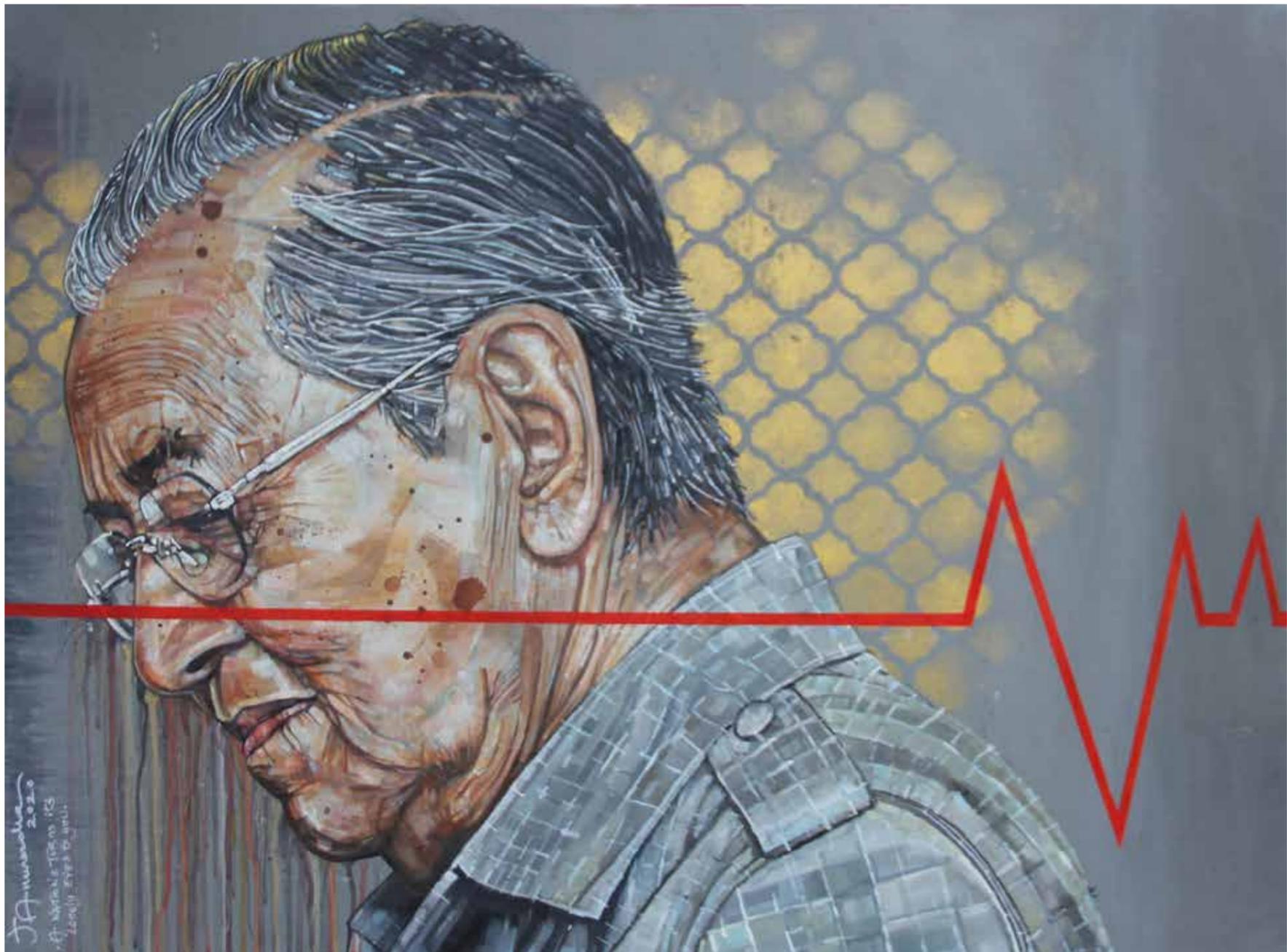
Forget about the climate and my carbon footprint, how other people are going it tough, whether my wife loses her job or not, how lonely my mother may be - I can make it all bearable with presents to myself... t-shirts, books, comics, toy cars, LEGO, a chair, a stone Ganesh, a rice cooker, a soda stream 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.

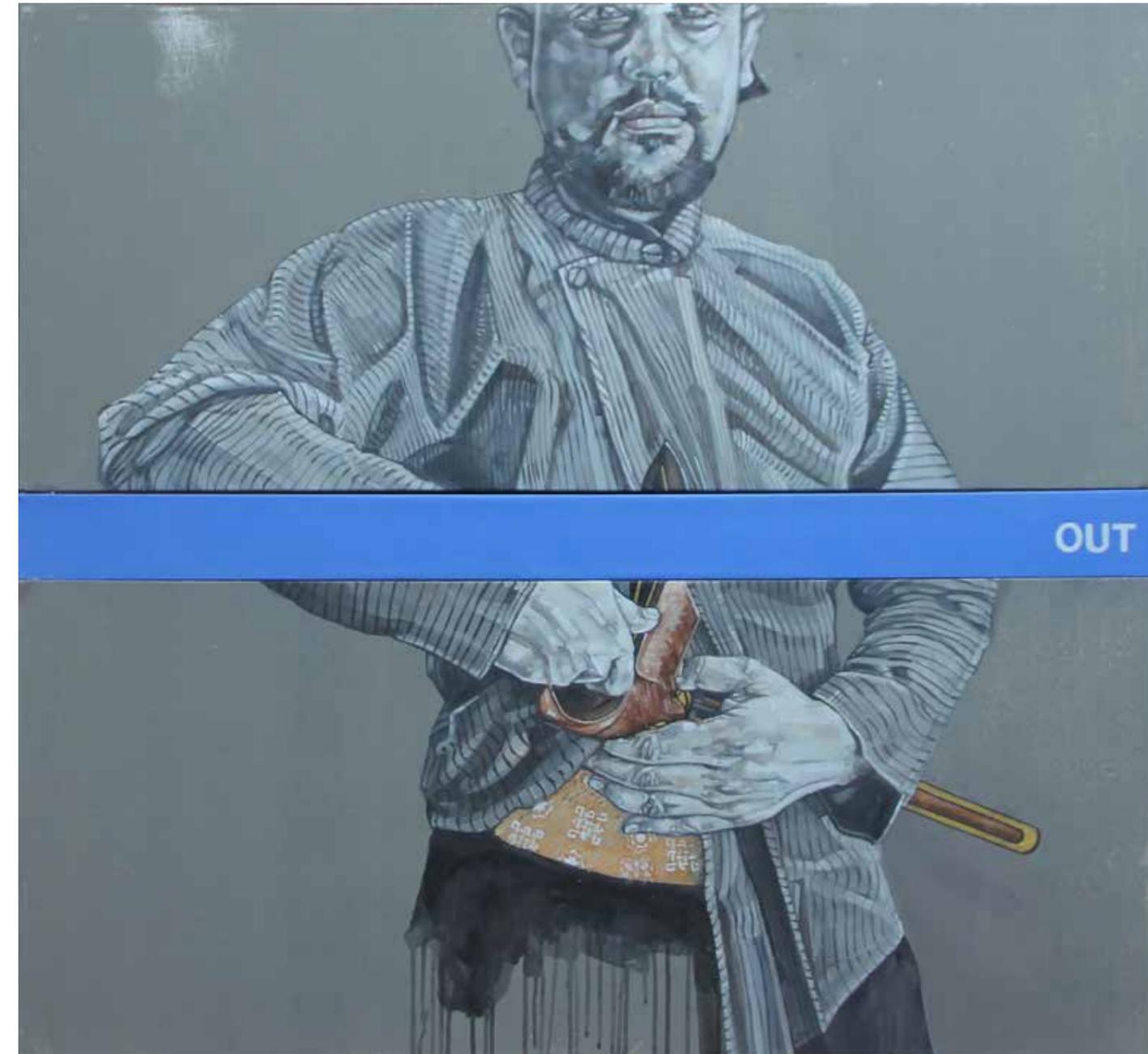
*What I Bought During Lockdown*, my still life of the Batman is the final work in my Coronavirus diary.

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.

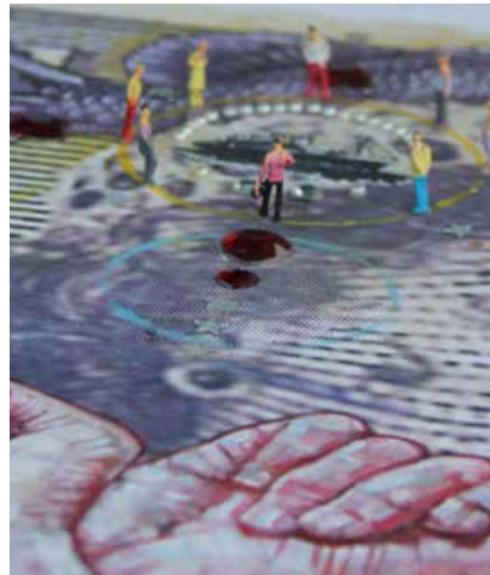
Painting him made me happy.



A Nation Turns its Lonely Eyes to You  
Acrylic on canvas  
75.8 x 101.9 cm  
2020



**IN n' OUT**  
(Based on a photograph by my friend Rizal of our friend Wandi)  
Acrylic on canvas  
100 x 214 cm  
2020



**Saturday Afternoon Activist**  
Acrylic, vintage print and collage on canvas  
64 x 55 cm  
2019







Trouble at the Border  
Acrylic on canvas  
82 x 221 cm  
2020



What I Bought During Lockdown  
Acrylic on canvas  
111 x 122 cm  
2020



**One Day I'll Fly Away**  
Acrylic on canvas  
76 x 152.5 cm  
2020



**Love's Requiem**  
Acrylic and archival print on canvas  
55 x 75 cm  
2020



**Ismail**  
Acrylic on hand tinted Ismail Hashim photograph  
51 x 51 cm  
2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I would like to thank Wei-Ling for always being a positive driving force in my practise. In the light of the global shutdown, I am especially grateful that she had the ambition, endurance and some kind of foresight to realise that 2019 was THE year for a Malaysian pavilion in Venice and that I was one of the artists she chose to represent my country.

Inpa for being my anchor for more than 30 years, who has reined me in when needed yet always encouraged bad behaviour in the name of my art and for fun. I wouldn't want to spend this six-month, lock-down sentence with anyone else.

Our daughter Rupa, my constant critic, frequent sitter, in-house designer and sometime marriage counselor who always keeps us connected to the *neu*. She has come home for the duration but will go away as soon as she possibly can!

Nalina Gopal and the Indian Heritage Centre. The timely IHC commission was, on the one hand - a culmination of 30 years of issues that have driven my work - and on the other, was the beginning of a return to painting for its own sake.

Louis Ho for his essay and support for my work.

Rizal Johan for his generosity and constant friendship.

Viji for her editorial input!

As always, the expert crew at the gallery, Siew Boon, Amanda and Noel who always prioritise my work, managing every exhibition with a grace and efficiency at odds with my own general state of barely organised disarray.



**A Garland for my Father**  
Acrylic on canvas and perspex lightbox  
110 x 110 cm  
2020

