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# Art as a ritual and ritual as an art | Kumari Nahappan

Singapore's most expensive artist on why her works are concept-driven and philosophical, rather than religion-driven

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Nahappan says she collects seeds not to exhibit, but to admire the perfection that nature gives.

**Singapore:** Her signature installations and sculptures of seeds, pods and fruits adorn some iconic landmarks in Singapore—from Nutmeg (a two-tonne bronze sculpture that serves as a reminder of Singapore's agricultural roots) on ION Orchard, to the giant chilli pepper at the National Museum

of Singapore, to Pembungaan at OUE Bayfront (the largest bronze mural in Singapore at over 45m) and Saga sculpture at Changi Airport.

**Kumari Nahappan** is perhaps Singapore's most recognized artist, and also the city-state's most expensive artist.

"It is due to one work on Orchard Road and I cannot reveal the price," says the 61-year-old celebrated sculptor and artist when asked about the latter tag.

Nahappan's work space and studio best illustrate the adaptations that artists have to make in Singapore, where open spaces are hard to come by.

Located on the sixth floor of a busy warehouse in Bukit Batok Crescent, her gigantic sculptures stand out in stark contrast to the surroundings, where trucks and cars whiz past. The building is designed to enable trucks, cars and other vehicles to drive into each office or storage slot, across all floors.

"Actually, I can block off all noise—I've trained my ears to block this buzz (of vehicles). Nothing else bothers me—I have that 120% concentration on what I am doing," she said, when asked if the constant sound of vehicles distracted her from work.

"I wanted a place with natural lighting—even though it is dusty, being here is nice. When I first moved here, there was nobody in this warehouse, but now it had been filled up by several industries and car outlets," she explained, adding that there was a second rented unit within the same warehouse for storing paintings.

For her sculptures and installations, only miniature models are made in the studio, and the final products are made in Thailand as there are no foundries in Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia.

Malaysian-born Kumari Nahappan has Indian ancestry. Around 1910, her grandparents migrated to Malaysia after complexities due to their wedding—her grandfather was from Kerala and grandmother from Andhra Pradesh.

"Those days, a marriage between people of two states and communities was difficult, and they moved to Malaysia," she explained.

Nahappan credits her creativity to her family's humble origins, their self-sufficiency, practicality and frugality.

"We grew up with very little—we created our toys mostly from farm materials. We were in touch with the elements, unlike these days (when) everything is provided on a platter. We did not have modern-day facilities in our lives—we were left to seek for ourselves—you discover, you stumble, you fall, you pick (yourselves) up—it was in many ways learning unconsciously without the structured form of learning. All that has helped me see things in different light and even today, I am conscious about wastage of material. I try to recycle and rework things. That was a very enriching period of my life, and it has taken me to where I am today," she said.

After her schooling, she studied interior design at Willesden College of Technology in London, UK, in the mid-1970s.

“At that time, there was a misconception that the course was related to decorating. My interest was planning spaces for functions—going to an art school was not ideal for my family to accept, because survival would be a big problem, as mindsets were very different then,” she said.

On returning to Malaysia, she taught interior design at a local university for seven years. She then perused a successful interior design career in Malaysia for another eight years, working with a Singapore-based American firm that had opened a branch there, and undertook the design of interiors of corporate entities, largely offices and banks.

She quit her corporate job and moved to Singapore in 1989 as her husband, **Ishwar Nahappan**, who then worked for a listed firm, had to shift base to the city-state. After relocating to Singapore, she decided to become a full-time artist, beginning with paintings, as it “required less funding, and it was something that one could work on anywhere and in one’s own time”.

Venturing out on her own, Nahappan quickly realized she did not have the “tools to be an artist”, and it led her back to university at 37, easily the oldest student at the LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

Her second stint at university, beginning 1991-92, came at a critical time—Nahappan, by then a mother of four children aged between two and nine, did not find it easy to be a student all over again, especially connecting with her batchmates, who were not only far younger than her, but also far more relaxed about the course. She got her first break even before she finished her advanced diploma in fine arts as she was selected by **Shell** as a promising artist.

With LASALLE College entering into a tie-up with RMIT University, Melbourne, for a Masters programme, its founder, late Brother Joseph McNally, one of Singapore’s champions of the creative arts and arts education, got Nahappan to be the first student for this course. McNally also gave Nahappan her first real break for a solo exhibition of her paintings. At an event last year, her husband Ishwar recalled his fears over Kumari’s first exhibition, and said he had been concerned she would not find takers for her work. Without informing his wife, Ishwar’s concerns led him to place the “red dot”, a sold-out sign, besides some of her paintings, to create an impression that her works were finding buyers.

“My husband was worried I may take it take it badly if no one bought the paintings—once you hang your soul out there, you’ve got to accept all kinds of criticism and comments—you should not have that fear, but must be prepared for everything. My first solo exhibition was accepted very well,” she said.

During her postgraduate course with LASALLE College and RMIT University, she focused on installations, and her work was inspired by her religious roots and her traditional Hindu upbringing that involved daily rituals and practices.

Nahappan said rituals had been, and continue to be, a part of life to every country in the region, from China and Myanmar to Indonesia.

“When a ritual is performed, it was only for that time and then you clean it up. I wanted to do the same with installations—you come, see, take what you want with you and move on, and I then clean it up... I studied festivals, flowers—I found art is a ritual and ritual is an art—I juggled this together to produce a lot of things that I do even today. So my paintings and sculptures were all offerings—they were offerings back to nature. But you offer it in a much different and larger way,” she said.

At the same time, rituals also continue to be a very important part of her life, and Nahappan has ensured she passed this on to her children, too. While rituals have had a great influence on her work, her art, sculptures and installations continue to be concept-driven and philosophical, rather than religion-driven.

Nahappan’s art has three signature components that allow viewers to distinctly identify her works. She has made both red and green chillies into an appealing art form; the colour red plays a significant role in both her paintings and sculptures, and she has also worked extensively with saga seeds, including her iconic work with 4,000kg of these seeds brought together to form a cone-like shape in the centre of the exhibition room in the Singapore Art Museum.

In 2012, Singapore’s minister of foreign affairs **K. Shanmugam**, during a trip to the US, had presented then secretary of state **Hillary Clinton**, a red chilli pepper sculpture—one of Nahappan’s works.

“My inspiration comes a lot from architecture—maybe because of my earlier training from design and space work. It has made me think outside the box,” she added.

After winning Shell’s “Discovery of the Year” award in 1992 in Singapore, Nahappan has gone on to win several prestigious awards, including being the first foreigner and woman to be conferred the Ksatria Seni Award (2004) by the Museum Rudana in Bali.

Kumari has received commendations in the Philip Morris Asean Art Awards and UOB Painting of the Year, and in 2011, she won the Artist of the Year Award in the 15th edition of the Shanghai Art Fair and was identified as a notable female artist in the book *Women Artists in Singapore* (2011). Last year, she was awarded Singapore-Indian Icon of the Year 2014 by Act for Hope organization.

Many of her works have also been installed abroad, including the Wild Chilli Couple in Gtower, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and the award-winning Tango at the Zhongshan Park Entrance, in Changning District Collection, in Shanghai. Nahappan, who now lives and works in Singapore, has held numerous solo and group exhibitions across Indonesia, Japan, China, the US, India, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain and Germany.

She pointed out that some of her works had been copied by Chinese artists.

“They (Chinese) replicate my work, but is so different—they still can’t get the colour and the form right—it is very crudely done. It does not bother me—if you know my work you can identify if it is

Nahappan has also penned a book titled *Fluxion*, a collection of her art and thoughts over the last two decades.

Edited excerpts from an interview:

### **When did your fascination with chillies start? Again, what about your fascination with red?**

Chillies only came as a metaphor for high energy. With my paintings, what I was exploring was everything to do with time, space and energy. I was trying to find something that could work with taste. For sound, I could work to convey it with my paintings, and I could do a lot of other emotions, too, with my paintings. But for taste, I stumbled upon chillies—the high uplifting energy symbol. A chilli holds power and energy that belie its humble size—the smaller the chilli, the hotter it is. Yes, I've chosen red as my signature colour. It is a very basic colour and we are all joined by that colour, that of blood—it is, therefore, common to all of us, and it is a bond that connects people. When you are in the womb, you are protected by it. Red brings out the idea of protection, the idea of passion—you can make it say everything from anger, love and power. When you see men with red ties, they are actually trying to say that they are powerful and they dare to wear it. It is the one colour that says the maximum in the whole spectrum of colours. I've worked on it for many years.

### **What about your fascination with saga seeds?**

The seeds and pods are a big part of my work, and it so happens that you will see a lot more chillies than the seeds because they (chillies) have a huge family and variety, they are fun, they are all different, they have their own movement, and I find that fascinating. So the chillies ended up growing larger than my seeds and pods. I use all kinds of seeds that are in this region. To me, understanding the texture and the feel of the seeds is so important—they could be so tiny, but could say a lot. What is fascinating is that nature is perfect—it gives you such perfection when you do study the seeds, you feel that there is someone up there that has made it all so perfect, that He has given each seed its own character, its own gravity and texture. I love to capture seeds and keep—not to exhibit, but to admire the perfection that nature gives.

### **You've been in Singapore for 25 years. How appreciative as a society has it been towards art. Across Asia, for the past couple of generations, the focus was on development, better quality of living, education and healthcare, not really about appreciating art.**

We cannot be judgemental, In our initial years, because we did not have expectations, we were able to grow naturally. We were not grafted. Today, there is a lot of grafting—artists are pushed to take this angle or that, there is a lot of help around, but our generation did not have any hand-outs. For us, it was just plodding on—so we learnt that our foundations had to be very strong, so that when you fall, you can pick yourself up. We built our foundations layer by layer, and then you have options if you want to grow horizontally or vertically.

**Adding on to this question, can the government push towards art, as in the case of Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai, among other Asian cities, create artists. Governments across Asia are subsidizing galleries, creating space for artists' villages, setting up new museums and also buying up a lot of art. Can you churn out artists by providing them with facilities like art schools, mentors, spaces to work in?**

I think it is possible. Whether it is sustainable is the question. And, do we have the kind of audience to sustain this artificial growth? It could happen for a short period of time, but sustainability is something we have to think about. You can produce artists through these steps, but those coming out under these systems are also quite different—some work with video, technology aided installations, photography and other materials. But if you are looking at easel painting—the kind of work that has been produced in the past, that requires a lot of time and patience. That is just not about technique, but you have to marry technique with methodology, with your feelings, with your emotions, with your heart and your mind—all should come together. These all have to come together to create something that is holistic and is sustainable. If you try and create this artificially, there will be cracks that may open up. What the younger generation should understand is they are in it for a long time—it is a life time journey that one has to sustain.

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