



30.03 – 12.05

Casula Powerhouse
Arts Centre

“In *Creator*, the artist’s use of the vitrine – glass cabinets often used for ethnographic displays in the Western museum tradition and commercially in retail environments such as the arcade or the shopping centre – is both ironic and performative.”



Creator

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Power, Politics and Gender in Western Sydney
Sunday 5 May | 1-2pm | Free admission
Panel: Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, Cigdem Aydemir, Jiva Parthipan, Justene Williams
Moderated by Daniel Browning
Presented with Sydney Writers’ Festival

Front:
RAMESH MARIO NITHIYENDRAN
Figure with Phallus Crown, 2019
127 x 75 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

Back:
RAMESH MARIO NITHIYENDRAN
Head with many Snakes, 2017
65 x 33 x 21 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore



FALSE GODS: RAMESH MARIO NITHIYENDRAN

How do we decode the visual language of an artist?

In the case of Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, attempts to decipher the wildly expressive, multivalent and idiosyncratic form of his work often resort to a kind of second-hand autoethnography and sometimes retreat into otherness.

For instance, he is invariably described as “Sri Lankan born”. No matter that he grew up in western Sydney, to a Catholic mother and a Hindu father, but deeply entrenched in the contemporary Australian experience - which is both diasporic and global.

Despite his relatively short career there is a body of critical writing about Nithiyendran’s practice –some of it generated overseas, liberated from the asinine depths of Australian cultural discourse.

Nithiyendran is fairly sanguine despite the obvious limits of that critical understanding, one which dwells on his cultural background and personal biography.

People seem to conflate a few things. Generally, these things are identity based. The most typical scenario involves people linking the work to some projection of ‘Sri Lankanness’ and then unpacking the work as if it comes from an uncritical, religious perspective.

Let’s be upfront: there is no invocation of the sacred in the Nithiyendran’s work.

In this exhibition, suggestively titled *Creator*, he does however subversively invoke the idea of the artist as the omnipotent if not phallogocentric ‘creator’ – tagging the work like graffiti or identifying himself through certain props - if only to dismantle it.

In terms of critical discourse, there is a void around Nithiyendran - although he is often simply defined by his primary medium as a ceramic artist.

As an artist, my primary mode of communication is through materials - I’m not writing an essay. Broadly speaking, studio practice is about handling colour, scale, form and a number of other things. It’s not about my life story.

Best then to describe his work in *Creator* and more broadly as an exploration of the limits of figurative sculpture and materiality, and a reckoning with secular idolatry in popular visual culture – from the Willendorf Venus to Pornhub.

The omnipresent phallus - in clay, bronze or neon - is for Nithiyendran a mere rhetorical device, an object of ridicule deprived of its power.

Generally speaking, the phallus stands for misogyny, patriarchy and heteronormativity. When we think about places where it is worshipped, it helps to consider the contexts as quite flat. There are forms of it in pop culture, billboards, magazines, on your phone, in temples and churches.

While the female body is represented as a site of erotic and visual consumption, the sexualised male body is consciously edited out of Western visual culture, deepening its power and obscenity.

In this way Nithiyendran’s use of the phallus is political and subversive because it challenges the power of heteronormativity and the implied heterosexual male gaze.

You don’t have to penetrate the surface to observe that Nithiyendran’s

work is replete with the signs of contemporary popular culture which are either literally embedded in the work or implied discursively.

The transnational visual language of the emoji is apparent if not immediately obvious in works such as *Bronze Figure* 2016 or *Head with many piercings* 2017.

My works often have fairly crude facial expressions. They’re kind of like emojis. It’s either the big smile, the big frown, the confused or the startled. I’m interested in ideas of the face and human expressions in ways that traverse material and digital culture.

Human hair wigs trafficked on EBay, discarded false teeth, rubber snakes, chicken wire, cement, polystyrene, spray paint and neon are visual cues to disposability and impermanence. Nithiyendran’s anti-aesthetic ruptures the idea of monumental, phallogocentric or sacred sculpture.

In *Creator*, the artist’s use of the vitrine – glass cabinets often used for ethnographic displays in the Western museum tradition and commercially in retail environments such as the arcade or the shopping centre – is both ironic and performative.

These vitrines or *wunderkammer*, which during the Victorian era contained assemblages of non-Western cultural objects ranging from the spiritual to the everyday, are culturally loaded. The vitrine sets up a certain way of seeing.

Just as the plinth in effect deifies the idol by raising it on a platform or altar above the line of sight, the vitrine interrupts the spatial relationship between viewer and object. In Western museum aesthetics, the vitrine connotes historical value rather than spiritual meaning.

Even today, museums and art galleries frame Asian faith-based objects as ethnographic curios, sealed under glass and suffused with light.

The vitrine has also been a dramatic, ostentatious stage for the consumer fetish object – luxury goods and high-end fashion, or sex toys for that matter – are held under lock and key, tantalisingly visible but unreachable.

Christianity defines itself as non-idolatrous yet in the hagiography of Catholic saints there are baroque narratives of Freudian symbolism, eye-fluttering ecstasies and hallucinatory dreams. However complex, these beautiful visions always end on a pyre, a spiked wheel or in a hail of arrows.

I prefer a metaphysical universe where polymorphous gods transcend gender binaries, possess supernatural powers and assume forms unlike anything in Christian iconography - with its obsession with the torture of the human body, on self-flagellation and martyrdom.

Idolatry is no artefact; it is as much a contemporary as historical phenomenon. How is the object of mass worship functionally different to a Kardashian or an oversubscribed Instagram influencer?

In the digital age, we do devotion differently.

Rather than seek out the hidden, sacred or devotional aspects of the iconography Nithiyendran uses, the work in *Creator* riffs darkly and humorously on power, gender, sexuality, racial identity and global diasporas.

ESSAY BY DANIEL BROWNING

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