

Creating an impact with everyday things

M'sian-born S'pore artist Kumari Nahappan's solo show is the curtain raiser with an exhibition of abstract sculptures and paintings, reports **CHEAH UI-HOON**

SINGAPORE artist Kumari Nahappan hasn't had a solo exhibition or been part of a group exhibition here for the past four to five years, but there hasn't been any real need to – not when several public and private spaces on the island itself have been her galleries.

The gigantic nutmeg at Ion Orchard – installed almost exactly a year ago – is her work, as is the giant saga seed inside Terminal Three's arrival hall; then there's the red chilli in front of the Singapore National Museum, facing Fort Canning, and the pod outside The Arts House.

Monumental reproductions of chillies and other plant life have become Kumari's most recognisable body of work – but there's really more to the artist than just giant organic forms. Which is why an upcoming solo exhibition at a new gallery, Chan and Hampe Galleries, at Raffles Hotel Arcade is a must-visit for those who've been following her artistic journey.

Sense of the sacred

Kumari's solo is the curtain raiser with an exhibition of abstract sculptures and paintings. Conceived in tandem, they've been arranged so that the two mediums inform and reflect on each other like a "conversation" about light and shadows. Visually, it's quite a departure from her giant sculptures, but as Kumari explains, this exhibition is still a continuation of the themes she's explored in the past.

Malaysian-born Kumari first taught design and art at institutes such as Mara in Malaysia and La-Salle College of the Arts in Singapore before she became a full-time artist about 10 years ago.

Her work in the 1990s featured detailed, careful, meditative installations of red saga seeds and other organic material on the ground, in patterns punctuated with brass bells and lamps. With the roots in Indian tradition, there was a sense of the sacred in the creation of this series. Making art is like a ritual to her, she acknowledges.

One of the first galleries that carried her work here was Wetterling Teo, and it's through the encouragement of Swedish art curator Bjorn Wetterling that Kumari got her strongest encouragement to become a full-time artist.

From there, it's almost as if the pendulum swung the other way, as Kumari went from little to huge, and started developing her monumental sculptures in early 2000s.



TERENCE TAN

Going big: One of Kumari's works to be exhibited at Chan and Hampe Galleries. Such monumental reproductions of plant life are her most recognisable body of work

"The theme I was exploring before was impermanence and the state of flux," explains the soft-spoken artist. "That then opened another window, to one of permanence."

The idea was to use the smallest, most ordinary plant life often taken for granted and enlarge them exponentially. "To make it so big that it creates an impact. I was looking for something to act as a metaphor for potential energy," she explains, adding that she started to work with bronze for the first time about eight years ago.

She's always loved nature and once wanted to be a gardener, she quips. For this series, it was also another level of reading into environmental issues: to make people think about the beauty in everyday things. "Ordinary things can be appreciated for their beauty too, not

just the esoteric," she adds.

A whole thesis can be written on how she creates these sculptures from sketches, makes wax moulds and then ceramic ones before the final bronze pieces are welded together – all at a foundry in Thailand; and then fires layers of colour into them, to create amazingly lifelike replicas.

Spirit and matter

The previous work has provided inspiration for her present work, which is about positive and negative, yin and yang – based on the idea of juxtaposing spirit and matter. Sculptures for this series are abstract shapes and lines, and the focus is shared equally with paintings. Again, reality and perception are altered as Kumari leads the

viewer to another perspective of seeing. Works in the past 10 years will also be exhibited; and prices will range from about \$3,000 to \$50,000.

Benjamin Hampe, Australian-trained curator, says that the gallery aims to showcase Singapore's artists to support the local emerging market, besides also representing foreign artists. His co-owner is Angeline Chan, who used to run Fill Your Walls in Tanjong Pagar, but that gallery is now Chan Hampe's second site. Fill Your Walls is now a Web portal for the art community.

Kumari Nahappan's solo show will run from today until Oct 20 at Raffles Hotel Arcade, Unit #01-04, 328 North Bridge Road. Tel: 9768 8186