

Natural Touch

For centuries, sculpture has been an important part of contemporary culture, offering visual links with the past, and enlivening busy public spaces with life and colour

MODERN SCULPTURE TODAY IS AS RELEVANT IN GALLERIES AS IT IS to the business landscape, with iconic installations worldwide celebrating a multitude of talented artists.

One such talent is Kumari Nahappan, whose two-tonne work, *Nutmeg*, stands outside one of the newest and most visited shopping malls in Singapore: ION, part of the shoppers' paradise of Orchard Road. Not merely a whim, this bronze fruit cleverly links the site's past and present – standing at the central crossroads where a nutmeg plantation once sprawled.

"It was a considered link between the old and the new," says Nahappan. "The idea was that it should not just be a nutmeg, but an open nutmeg, which was important as it is the only fruit that contains two spices: mace and nutmeg," she says. "The symbolism also related to the fact that two companies, CapitalLand and Sun Hung Kai Properties, collaborated in the building of ION."

A conceptual artist, Nahappan has developed an extensive body of work, which ranges from paintings and sculptures, through to large-scale



Nahappan's enjoyment of sculpture never wanes: "I wake up every morning and get really excited about working!" Opposite: A vibrant green chili inspired by the Roaring Twenties

KUMARI NAHAPPAN CULTURE

public installations. Born in Malaysia and educated in London and Australia, Singapore has been her home and inspiration for more than two decades.

From Amsterdam to New York, her work has been admired and awarded by many. One of her iconic motifs in recent years has been the humble chilli, which has inspired her work in a number of ways.

"I wanted to explore the metaphor of energy in taste. The chilli has the most amount of energy and it's also connected to our culture. So it was a concept that just grew bigger and bigger," she says.

One of the most eye-catching works in this series is a pair of 6.3-metre chillies dancing the tango, which were exhibited at



the Shanghai Art Fair in 2011 and earned her a nomination as Artist of the Year.

Her latest chilli project is entitled *Song and Dance* – a series linking the distinctive condiments with both life and emotion. Nahappan says that the inspiration for her work typically comes from our reaction to consuming something so immediately hot and fiery. "It's kind of a dance within. The

chilli is one fruit that can make you cry, laugh and make all sorts of expressions, it has so much power and energy – and it creates a lot of impact."

Although art was always Nahappan's first love and she dreamed of being an artist, she was also keen to keep her career options open, and started working in 3D space planning. "I worked with sculpture in design practice, so having 3D work is not new to me. Because I had training in that area, I could see the way things could come together and work together – like paintings and sculpture."

Large-scale sculpture involves unique challenges. When the National Museum of Singapore commissioned a giant bronze chilli pepper, even the foundry in Thailand where she casts her projects didn't have the manpower to make an enlargement of that scale. "It was a bit overwhelming, but I had to get started," she says. "I looked at the image of the small sculpture and I started plotting it out, working in a village in Thailand, cutting the parts and transporting it to the foundry."

While there are foundries in India, Thailand, China and Taiwan, she favours Thailand due to its proximity. "And it's the only place where the quality of bronze I'm looking for is available – silicon bronze with a high copper content."

The logistics of getting sculptures to a destination also requires a team to manage the artwork, which is just one part of the process. As a sculptor, Nahappan's interests lie beyond the mere initial design, and also involves taking a project right through to its casting and on-site installation, both of which are critical to portraying the work's precision and movement.

Following her work through to its completion is also a key to maintaining its quality. "It's very important, particularly in public works where you want the sculptures working with the environment,



From top: Nahappan with one of her sculptures at a recent exhibition at TAdam Gallery in Singapore; a colourful handful of sage seed works; the two-tonne Nutmeg, which welcomes visitors to Singapore's prestigious ION shopping mall



placing them in a way they will connect," she says. "I like working on a large scale; there is such a big impact and it's so exciting," she enthuses. "Bronze ages very gracefully too. I look at bronzes as hand-me-downs – not just for now but to pass down to future generations. So the notion of heritage is very important."

She adds, "I like the idea of time. These are things that are very beautiful and can be enjoyed as part of the environment. At the same time we need to preserve the environment, to keep them going. So when we enjoy, we don't destroy."

A large work can take 12 to 18 months to finish, depending on whether Nahappan already has a mini model. If it's a public work, the speed of approvals can affect timing too. Then it's a matter of scaling the model up, before starting on the long production process of making the mould, casting, welding, chasing, quality check and patination. Finally, the finished version can be packed, crated and shipped to the site for installation.

One of Nahappan's latest installations is at Singapore's OUE Bayfront building, in the city's financial district. She designed a work entitled *Pembungaan*, a giant mural of sliced chillies resembling huge flowers on a wall. At 48 metres by 7.5 metres, she had to consult a civil engineer and the building architect, to establish how best to construct and install the design.

Nahappan says that some of her chilli sculptures have been named after the friends who have inspired her over the years. "People who are positive are very inspiring. We want to do our best in life and I'm always interested in lifting energy and positivity – and the chilli has that uplifting energy."

Passionate about her craft, her enjoyment of sculpture never wanes. "I wake up every morning and get really excited about working." ■