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Meet Kumari Nahappan, The Singaporean Artist Who Likes Her Art Hot And Spicy

By Mayo Martin/CNA Luxury | May 07, 2019



From her nutmeg sculpture at Ion Orchard to a pair of intertwined chilli peppers at next month's Venice Biennale, Kumari Nahappan gives us a taste of the possibilities in art

Somewhere in the open seas, at this very moment, a pair of gigantic chilli peppers are in the midst of an epic six-week voyage from Asia to Europe.

It's Singaporean artist Kumari Nahappan's latest creation, a 2m-high, 850kg sculpture of two intertwined chillies that will be making its debut next month in Venice, Italy.

"It crosses more than 20 seas to get there you know? I hope everything is in order when I go there," the 66-year-old said, with a slight tinge of anxiety. "Hopefully it will arrive next week, then get to the garden where it will be grounded."

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ABOVE Kumari Nahappan's Chanting Rosary installation in Venice in 2017; Image: Courtesy of Kumari Nahappan

The massive sculpture, titled Talktime, will be part of an exhibition organised by the European Cultural Centre, which runs parallel to next month's prestigious Venice Biennale, which takes place from May 11 to Nov 24, 2019.

It's her second time there—in 2017, she brought a bunch of giant red saga seeds for another exhibition during the Biennale, and even floated them along the city's canals.

Nahappan has a knack for "planting" her giant artworks of chillies, fruits and seeds in unusual places.



ABOVE Nutmeg And Mace at Ion Orchard; Image: Courtesy of Kumari Nahappan

From the iconic nutmeg and mace sculpture at Ion Orchard to a single saga seed at Changi International Airport to a pudgy chilli pepper at the National Museum of Singapore, her public sculptures have a way of being mundanely familiar yet elegant and imposing at the same time.

"I just love the idea of nature," she explained. "And at the end of the day, nature is far bigger than man."



ABOVE At Kumari Nahappan's studio in Bukit Batok;Image: Courtesy of Mark Lee

A ROOM FULL OF CHILLIES

Nahappan's affinity with nature could be seen at her studio on the sixth floor of an industrial building at Bukit Batok.

It is here—squeezed between car workshops and the odd makeshift Chinese temple—where the magic starts.

Inside her space are all sorts of fruit and plant sculptures—from giant grains of rice, a durian and tomato or two, more saga seeds and yes, chillies of all shapes and sizes—some literally dancing, others with trumpets sprouting out of them.

These are her smaller works and many serve as models of her bigger creations, which are created in a foundry in Ayutthaya, Thailand. Her paintings—including abstract meditations on the colour red—are also found hanging on the walls. (“Some people don't even know I paint!” she quipped.)

Next to the entrance and arranged on a low table are an assortment of dried husks, pods and seeds of all sorts that Nahappan would've picked up off the ground.

In fact, the artworks that she's known for today began that same way years ago—growing up in Klang, Selangor in Malaysia, Nahappan loved collecting saga seeds.

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"They were something I had an affinity to as a kid, something I was drawn to, and I also liked the idea of red. Then I started thinking about these far more deeply," she said.

A relative late-bloomer as an artist, Nahappan had a career in interior design, before leaving the corporate world to follow her husband to Singapore in the late 80s, where she decided to pursue art at the age of 37.

FASCINATION WITH ENERGIES

By the mid-90s, Nahappan began exploring themes we now see in her works today—what she calls "natural found objects" that have a lot to do with food. In her early years as an artist, she did installations using ingredients and spices such as rock salt and turmeric.

Her fascination with seeds would also continue. "I did my postgrad in '94, '95 and I did a lot of studies on Hindi rituals and rituals in the region—and a number of them involved seeds and pods and the chilli was very much used as well. I started building a lot around that," said Nahappan.

She continued: "Seeds are a mysterious thing. They have potential energy, and I'm always keen on exploring different types of energy. And when I was trying to show what would give one a kind of high energy—that's when I discovered the chilli. In the spectrum of taste, the chilli is top. It became a metaphor for high energy."

Her artworks have also become a way of making sense of the world around her. When asked if her heritage played a strong part in her choice of what art to create, Nahappan said: "The heritage is through the exposure I've had, but at the same time, I always try to connect with my surroundings—Asia and Southeast Asia."

She added: "There is that thread that connects all of us—the philosophies, the rituals and all these things. For me, I want to see the trail of how found materials and objects become important to individuals in different parts of the region. All of these has a soul and to me, you're connecting with that the soul of Asia."

ANOTHER DIMENSION OF SINGAPORE

While Nahappan's public artworks are what many in Singapore are familiar with, her creations have also been critically lauded and exhibited in venues here and overseas, such as Tokyo, Seoul, Australia, China, Germany, London and New York.

One of her most critically lauded pieces was shown at the Singapore Biennale in 2013, a monumental-yet-meditative installation titled Anahata, which comprised 4,000kg worth of the seeds. And even former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has one of her chillies, which was given as an official gift from Singapore.



ABOVE Some of Kumari Nahappan's sculptures; Image: Courtesy of Mark Lee

And this year, her huge chillies will be at Venice for six months. Nahappan is one of two Singaporean artists whose works will be seen during what's arguably the hottest art event in the world this year.

While her sculpture will be found at the Marinaressa Gardens, Singapore's official representative, artist Song-Ming Ang, will be exhibiting at the country's official pavilion at the Arsenale.

"I think it's a very good thing—we need to be on an international platform to actually say there is another dimension of Singapore," she said. "And it's also quite important for the artists to go abroad and have a different audience—if we expose ourselves, we grow."

As Nahappan's giant chillies slowly make their way by sea to be planted on the other side of the world, she's keeping busy with plans right here in Singapore. One of her projects, slated for the latter part of the year, is a kind of "spice garden" installation at the Indian Heritage Centre.

For her, art-making is a continuous process. "As a contemporary artist, you live in the now and what inspires you for that period of time and where it takes you. Every now and then, a new window will open and you explore what you see beyond that window."

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