

FORECAST

RAMESH

MARIO

NITHIYENDRAN

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran's phallogocentric ceramics mine Hindu and Catholic symbolism, queer and gender politics, and grunge and minimalism – all with a wonky smile.

By Dan Rule



RAMESH MARIO
NITHIYENDRAN
Idol, 2014
red terracotta
89 x 60 x 46 cm

Photo: Simon Hewson
Courtesy the artist
and Gallery 9, Sydney

Left
RAMESH MARIO
NITHIYENDRAN
Pewter Dickhead, 2014
earthenware and
glaze
49 x 16 x 15 cm

Right
RAMESH MARIO
NITHIYENDRAN
Black And Gold Dickhead,
2014
earthenware, glaze
and gold lustre
45 x 16 x 16 cm

Photo: Simon Hewson
Courtesy the artist
and Gallery 9, Sydney



Dicks have long been a defining feature of the work of young Sri Lankan-born Sydney artist Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran. Having recently completed an MFA at the University of Sydney Art & Design (formerly COFA), which centred on expressions phallogocentrism in both Eastern and Western cultural and religious contexts, his earlier paintings and more recent ceramics have utilised the phallic form as a humorous anchor point for all manner of enquiries, from gender identity and perception, through to colonialist discourses, minimalism and grunge. While early solo shows like *Dickheads* (2013) saw him veering between a hotchpotch of naïve sculptures, drawn and painted forms, more recent bodies of work like *Elephant Island* (2014) – which won the 2014 NSW Visual Arts Fellowship (Emerging) – at Sydney's Artspace, have witnessed Nithiyendran engage with an increasingly complex and nuanced visual language, visiting a range of glazes, treatments and flourishes. *VAULT* spoke with Nithiyendran about the formal and phallic spectrum.

YOUR EARLIER WORK INCLUDED MORE DRAWING AND PAINTING. WHAT IS IT ABOUT CERAMICS THAT MAKES IT SUCH AN INTERESTING PROPOSITION TO YOU?

I started making ceramics in 2011, but they were very small-scale. I spent about two-and-a-half years developing my work before I had my first solo in 2014, which was just ceramics. It's definitely my main thing now. I'm very aware that ceramics are on-trend – I've noticed a lot of younger artists, especially in Sydney, are flirting with the medium. The way I want to respond to that meaningfully is by developing my practical skills. I hate to use the 'C-word' (craft) but I feel that as soon as a ceramic object becomes physical and the relationship to the body changes, that craft sensibility disappears.

WHAT ABOUT THE AESTHETIC AND FORMAL QUALITIES OF YOUR WORK?

I try and have a spectrum, from really grunge to really polished and slick. With the Artspace show in particular, I wanted to have 10 ceramic objects that were different shapes, different sizes, different glazes and different colours, just to showcase my ability to use the medium. Conceptually, I'm really interested in relics and the way that objects are broken and put back together and the way that archaeological sites are preserved within this process of ruin and decay. There's also this idea of an anti-aesthetic, which feeds into the political dimension of the work. And there's humour too. I like that humour has been used, historically, as this incredibly political tool. You draw people in with the humour and then you can make them think about other things.

I'M QUITE INTERESTED BY THE ENVIRONMENTS YOU CREATE FOR YOUR WORKS – THE PLINTHS AND TILING AND SO ON. TO MY MIND, THE ENVIRONMENTS CREATE A KIND OF DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN THIS LATE-MODERNIST FEEL AND YOUR GRUNGE AESTHETIC.

I like the work to be speaking about ceramics as well as embodying it. I'm into using the rigid geometry of modernism and minimalism to counteract the organic, hand-formed stuff. Plinths are like these ubiquitous objects; everyone displays ceramic objects on plinths or shelves. So as soon as you start to play with the display mechanisms and installation aesthetics, you start to create a dialogue with the orthodoxies of ceramics. I'm also really interested in the idea of architecture and the plinth as this vertical phallic object.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR POINTS OF REFERENCE. THERE'S CLEARLY A LINE TO HINDUISM AND THE IDEA OF PHALLUS WORSHIP. I'D LOVE TO GET A CLEARER SENSE OF THAT.

I tend to list five key points of reference: the internet, porn, Hinduism, Catholicism and religion more generally. I always kind of refer back to Rene Magritte's painting *Rape* (1945). That painting really visualises the way patriarchal discourses colonise the female body, highlighting the way that the male gaze equates a woman with her tits and her vagina. Even today, women's bodies are naturalised as commodities in mainstream media – you see tits and crotches and bums – whereas male bodies are venerated but almost always censored. So I've kind of translated this into a gay context, playing with the idea that gay men are defined by their sexuality. That's how the whole idea for my *Dickheads* show came about. It was about taking authority over that and wearing this penis on your face.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE PHALLIC ELEMENTS MORE SPECIFICALLY, AND THE NATURE OF THE PHALLUS IN HINDUISM AND CATHOLICISM.

You could read most images of Jesus crucified on the cross, as incredibly homoerotic. There's the sweatiness, the loincloth, the head rolling back, the languid limbs. This kind of imagery is proliferated within Catholicism. Yet at the core of Catholicism is this patriarchal, homophobic, misogynistic sensibility that inadvertently worships the phallus. Then you look at Hinduism. Here the phallus is worshipped in a completely different context. The main site of phallus worship in Hinduism is the Shiva Linga, which is a phallic stone structure that allegorises Lord Shiva and his wife. The phallus sits in a concave base that represents a vagina, and the idea of union rather than domination.



Above
Installation view
RAMESH MARIO
NITHIYENDRAN
Elephant Island, 2014
Artspace, Sydney

Left
RAMESH MARIO
NITHIYENDRAN
Blowhole 2, 2014
red terracotta, white
64 x 48 x 45 cm
Photo: Simon Hewson
Courtesy the artist
and Gallery 9, Sydney



TELL ME ABOUT WHAT YOU PLAN TO MAKE THIS YEAR?
Everything's going to be a lot bigger. I'm learning how to use different kinds of moulds and different kinds of glazing and I'm making large-scale objects. I'm making a ceramic work that's 1.6 metres tall at the moment. The new sculptures are less 'here are 10 dicks' and will present phalluses more abstractly in the forms and extrusions... I started quite explicitly, but now I'm introducing other metaphors. ▽
Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran is represented by Gallery 9, Sydney.
ramesh-nithiyendran.com
gallery9.com.au

TELL ME MY TRUTH

SIMON FUJIWARA
HELEN GRACE
AMALA GROOM
FX HARSONO
HE XIANGYU
JAMES NEWITT
TONY SCHWENSEN
JOHN VON STURMER



4A CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART
181-187 HAY STREET SYDNEY
WWW.4A.COM.AU

27.03. - 16.05.15
MASS GROUP INCIDENT
17.01. - 31.05.2015

PRODUCED BY



FUNDING SUPPORT



Tell Me My Truth is produced by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body, and supported by the City of Sydney Cultural Grants Program.

Image: He Xiangyu, *The Death of Marat*, 2011, fiberglass, silicone, fabric, human hair and leather. Courtesy the artist and WHITE SPACE BEIJING.