

Monumental. Immersive. Phallic. Over the past three years Ramesh Nithiyendran's work has become synonymous with these encompassing descriptors. Inclusion in the Adelaide Biennale in 2016, Sydney's 2017 mega-blockbuster *The National* and solo exhibitions at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne has seen him rise to national acclaim. Further afield his inclusion in the 2016 Taiwanese Kuandu Biennale and the upcoming 2018 Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh marks him as one of Australia's most promising emerging artists. His towering sculptures have loomed into our consciousness taunting us with an indulgence of texture and a conflation of semiotics.

*R@MESH* marks a turning point in his practice. It signals that his work will not be constrained by expectations of scale and that his practice is only just beginning to unfurl. For his first showing with Sullivan+Strumpf his sculptures soften a little, where the bold proclamations of his institutional shows become more self-reflexive. There is a sense of self-presentation within these works that were imperceptible previously. Quirks of Nithiyendran's character and his immersion in screen culture appear as emojis and a lavishness of colour but there is also, more critically, a growing consideration of relationships and power.

Teetering atop plinths Nithiyendran's investigation of idols develops in *R@MESH* where there are clear and discernable links between each figure. Some appear as pairs in a precarious balancing act of dialogue where the viewer, unsure if they are twins or adversaries, becomes witness to a continuing debate and, for the first time, some of his sculptures feature two figures.

This investigation of relations shifts Nithiyendran's work into a significantly more politicised realm. No longer is the relationship between viewer and idol of primary focus rather we see, in an explosion of discordant colour, a reflection of the world at odds. The restrained palette of *White Hairy Head* requires the flamboyant teeth grin of *Orange Hairy Head* who together appear as foils to each other, as if two aspects of a single figure. This exploration is further apparent in *3 Legged Deity #1* where two seemingly disparate figures are fused to the same torso. The diminished, blackened head is downcast and, unlike Nithiyendran's other figures, refuses eye contact. Shrunken in scale it appears sapped by the hungry apparition housed in its abdomen whose toothy grin drips rivers of glaze hinting of gluttony. It's 'twin', *3 Legged Deity #2*, is inverted with an oversized head that appears to have mined the wounded figure in its torso hinting at an oscillation of power and control. These investigations of the split-self are as much commentary of the post-truth era as they are an exploration of self-portraiture.

The central commanding piece, *Creator*, pushes this examination further appearing clumsy with its smirk as if unaware of the runt of a baby it nurses. Approaching a more formal torso Nithiyendran strips the figure of agency questioning the power and ability of the creator himself. It is here that the artist really addresses political power structures. Undermined by a smattering of poo emojis, missing limbs, gaping wounds in the chest and mocked by a multiplicity of penises for a nose Nithiyendran's *Creator* is little more than a feeble shell of a being tethered by a dog collar. The figure's posturing of power is a clear and unmitigated comment on leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This unflinching commentary is accompanied by Nithiyendran's intrepid approach to ceramics. The more narrative content of this series of work is complemented by his increasingly experimental practice. Investigating new forms of artistry Nithiyendran pushes the boundaries of ceramics as he probes ideas of self and the political. There is a deliberate aesthetic of the handmade in his work that is instantly familiar; they entice the viewer closer, to walk around them, to peer closer. Working with smaller, more approachable sized forms supports this sense of visual familiarity where Nithiyendran is less interested in the viewer being overawed by a sea of idols and instead dares them to come closer.

This shift in practice – in size, in focus and in technicality – signals an increasingly apparent conceptual underpinning of Nithiyendran's work. Until now he has been lauded for his immerse sensorial sculptural installations but this series allows him to demonstrate a keen exploration of the personal and the political.

- Mikayla Tai