Studio

Inside the Studio of Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran

Vicki Grima: When did you first use clay and what did you make?
Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: I remember doing a weekend course at a community college in when I was about nine years old. I’m pretty sure it was called Clay for Kids. My memory of that is hazy, though I remember making three things: a pretty weird small bust of a male, a bowl with chicken feet attached to the sides, and a really ugly blue vessel with an offensive yellow glaze adorning the interior. I loved clay at the time because I got to work with and get my hands in something wet.

VG: Where is your current studio?
RMN: I’m currently an artist in residence at the William Street Creative Live/Work Spaces in Darlinghurst. This is a City of Sydney initiative managed by Gaffa. It means I get to live and create work in the inner city. While there are no kiln facilities in this studio, UNSW Art and Design is incredibly supportive of my practice. I get great support from their ceramics department and have my work fired there.

VG: What are the essential features your studio needs to have?
RMN: Space and natural light are essential for me. I make sizable, physical work, often in large quantities. This means my studio gets populated very quickly with all the creatures and deities I produce. Additionally, I often work with the colours and pigments present within the raw clay, so natural light is best to consider the tonal qualities of the work. It’s also pretty great to see a super glossy and colourful glazed object in stark daylight.

VG: Describe your work pattern.
RMN: I typically spend three days a week in my studio. Studio tasks range from making work and writing grant applications to formatting images for publications and promotional material. My creative processes are both intuitive and structured. I spend time drawing and scribbling, and then I start coiling. I am usually working on two or three large works at a time. I get bored pretty quickly so working on multiples allows me to take risks in the hand building process. I also invite peers to provide me with critical feedback. I don’t like working in isolation.

VG: What do you listen to while working?
RMN: William Street is pretty noisy and my studio windows are street facing, so by default I listen to ambulances, police sirens, drunk people and general traffic. It’s always entertaining. Though, I’ve got some pretty good speakers and usually just put my iPod on shuffle. I’m naughty and often don’t wash my hands when choosing the music. I usually have to spend some time with a needle picking the dried clay out of the nooks in my iPod at the end of a studio session.

VG: What is your favourite tool?
RMN: I don’t really use conventional tools associated with ceramics. While my hands are the most important tools for me, anything that can make a mark in the clay is fair game. I love sharp objects. But if I had to decide, I can’t live without the wire clay-cutting tool. It’s such a simple, yet useful invention.
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1 Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran in his studio; photo: Joanna Frank
2 & 3 Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran's studio; photo: courtesy of the artist and Gallery 9, Sydney
Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran
_Idol_, 2014, red terracotta
handbuilt, electric kiln, 1000°C
h.89cm, w.60cm, d.46cm
Photo: Simon Hewson; image
courtesy of the artist and
Gallery 9, Sydney
VG: What is your favourite part of the ceramic process?
RMN: Opening the kiln door and seeing that my one metre tall beasts have been bisqued successfully without structural flaws, large cracks or moisture-related explosions always produces a slight euphoria. Though I never get too attached to the works, I try to be fluid and work practically with whatever the process throws at me. It seems that Post-Modernism, as well as my (anti) aesthetic really allows me to work with cracks and surprises.

VG: Which single piece of ceramics would you most like to own?
RMN: Anything by Vipoo Srivilasa. His work has everything for me – heart, beauty, humour, joy and immense technical skill, as well as a deep and complex engagement with cultural heritage and Eastern ceramic and design traditions. His visibility and engagement with community also adds to my desire to acquire one of his works.

VG: How do you identify your work?
RMN: I don’t have an identifying mark. Gallery 9, who I’m represented by in Sydney, are great as they document and archive my work as it is made. This means there will always be a digital record of my studio outputs.

VG: Clay can so beautifully record the mark of the hand. Is this the reason you’ve moved into using clay?
RMN: The shift towards new media in contemporary art and flippant declarations like ‘painting is dead’ creates a hierarchy between mediums. This means ‘contemporary art’ forms like ceramics, glass, printmaking and textiles are often placed at the bottom of the food chain. However, I’m a strong advocate for hand-based practices. Maybe I’m daggy and old fashioned, but I’m not a fan of dry art made with computers. I think clay is powerful as it really traces the humanity of the artist.
VG: Your work is described by others as vulgar, erotic, brave, deeply personal, pornographic, political … do you agree with these descriptions? What words do you use?
RMN: I think those descriptions are pretty spot on! I feel quite privileged that I have a platform and freedom to communicate my views about the world in a relatively uncensored manner and that the content is coming through the way I intend.

VG: Can you elaborate on the influences on your work?
RMN: There are numerous influences that impact the creation of my work. While my work proceeds from a secular, atheist perspective, religion (particularly Christianity and Hinduism) are major points of reference. I’m interested in the ways Western imperialism impacted India and other once sexually liberal societies. I’m also interested (and critical of) the ways religious creation discourses marginalise individuals. Pre-colonial, devotional Hindu sculpture is a formal influence. I also look to porn, the Internet, the animal kingdom, art history and Australia’s colonial history to create my work.

VG: Congratulations on your recent success winning various fellowships and prizes. What is your advice to others?
RMN: As an artist, personal and business administration skills are very important. I always make sure my works are professionally documented. This means I have both studio and installation views to strengthen applications and have high quality promotional material. I also factor in rigorous studio time, and I actively seek critical feedback and make sure I’m engaged with the arts community. I think it’s really important to go to events and exhibition openings, ask questions as well as be informed and interested.

VG: What are your plans for the next 12 months?
RMN: I was fortunate enough to recently be awarded the NSW Visual Arts Fellowship (Emerging). This fellowship of $30,000, administrated by Arts NSW, is going towards a self-directed program of professional development over the next 18 months. This will involve residencies in Europe and Asia as well as the creation of a body of new work. I also have some exhibitions coming up in 2015. I will be showing some works in Canberra alongside the Australian Ceramics Triennale; I have an exhibition at Gallery 9, and will also show some works in Sydney Contemporary. I’m pretty excited to research and produce a new body of ceramic work that really takes me out of my comfort zone!

http://ramesh-nithiyendran.com

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, Elephant Island, installation, 2014, earthenware, red terracotta, glaze, gold and platinum lustre, perspex, marble, chains, cardboard, styrofoam, raw earth, concrete, ceramic tiles and enamel
Photo: Zan Wimberley; Artspace, Sydney