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Singapore's got talent: A national controversy led artist Priyageetha Dia to her calling



Since Covid-19, Priyageetha has built an admirable momentum in her career, lining up exhibitions till 2026. PHOTO: COURTESY OF PRIYAGEETHA DIA



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UPDATED AUG 07, 2024, 06:21 PM ▾



SINGAPORE – A high-profile national art controversy was just what the doctor ordered for Priyageetha Dia, who had up till that point been of two minds about an art career.

For her final-year project in 2017, the Lasalle College of the Arts student covered the staircase on the 20th floor of her Housing Board block in Balestier in gold foil, a reference to the goldsmithing of her forefathers, while reclaiming a patriarchal trade that was passed down from father to son.

The fallout was public and immediate. She was swarmed by the press and forced to field questions from Members of Parliament and lawyers about the legality of a work that was meant to celebrate her ancestral heritage.

She found the courage to lean into the furore, including covering her nude body with the same gold foil for photo shoots and performances in defiance of misogynistic comments.

Somewhat abashedly, the 32-year-old says: “It was when I decided I could do this full time. I feel like I had some sort of awakening. I could make more art from this. What I was saying meant something.”

Since then, Priyageetha’s work has branched out to other modes, in particular CGI video works. In May, [she was one of five Singaporean artists at the Venice Biennale](#), presenting *The Sea Is A Memory* (2022) as part of a group show organised by the Bangkok Art Biennale Foundation.

In it, blue is the predominant colour in a surreal aquatic world, viewed through the eyes of a plodding sea spirit that follows the journey of indentured labourers crossing into Malaya.

Since Covid-19, Priyageetha has built an admirable momentum in her career, lining up exhibitions till 2026. In recent years, she has shown at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kerala, the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale in Saudi Arabia, Frieze Seoul and the Singapore Art Museum.

She has also just completed artist residencies at the Jan van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands – where she has furthered her interest in sound, including adopting a new deejay persona DJ DIA.HRD – and Salzburger Kunstverein in Salzburg, Austria.

Next comes a master’s in artistic research at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, Netherlands. The artist says she finds it easier to think about Singapore from a critical distance.

Priyageetha hopes to do more research into symbols that have popped up repeatedly for her, such as the Malayan tiger, and one day work with CGI professionals to “blow things up” to massive proportions beyond the screen. “I want something theatrical and in your face,” she adds.

She says of her growth in confidence since Lasalle, where she felt she did not stand a chance “because there were certain hierarchies and sensibilities”.

“At a certain point, all the theories that we were talking about felt too Westernised. There was always this distance. I realised I am coming from a certain perspective and can speak from lived experience.”

By extension, her work is almost always politically conscious and engaged, and clearly originating from the region.

She says: “It gives my art a sense of purpose, unpacking dominant narratives. Public spaces are political spaces and whoever is performing within such a space will also be political. I would rather engage my art in that direction.”

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