



Artist's Isolation Cave

COLLECTOR

Artist
Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran

DWELLING

Warehouse apartment

LOCATION

**Chippendale,
New South Wales**

The first few weeks after moving into his new apartment in Sydney’s inner-city Chippendale were disconcerting for artist Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran. ‘It didn’t feel like home because I didn’t have any art on the walls. I never thought I’d say that, but honestly, it felt like the twilight zone.’

This home, with its bespoke furniture, soft furnishings and earthy colour palette is its own kind of artwork, and one that is a collaboration between Nithiyendran and designer Yasmine Ghoniem of YSG Studio. It’s a process he has relished, but it hasn’t been uncomplicated. ‘I grew up in a real migrant context, where home is about square meterage, investment and the number of bedrooms you have. I’ve found this shift in thinking about what makes a home, and celebrating things like comfort and texture, quite hard to come to terms with, culturally.’

Ghoniem’s cultural sensitivities and expertise were a key consideration. ‘It was important for me to work with someone who’s also interested in those non-Western narratives in the context of design, and who has that literacy.’ The brief was pretty high-level: ‘terracotta’, a Sri Lankan vernacular that could draw on Ghoniem’s Middle Eastern heritage to create something contemporary – but not exoticised; and a home that could only be Nithiyendran’s.

From the lime-washed walls in the bedroom and study that have been rendered to look like clay to the handpainted concrete floors with their Tuareg mat-inspired designs, the hand-stitched curtain edgings and the door handles designed by denHolm, every thoughtful detail illuminates the things Nithiyendran loves most – materiality, handmade objects and story-telling. ‘It’s essential for me to live with handmade things. That’s what makes me feel happiest.’

These same principles have informed his art collecting – the enormous Tjanpi Desert Weavers’ goanna skulking in the rafters being a case in point. ‘I love that it almost feels sentient. Most of the works I have are figurative in some capacity. I like to look at things and imagine their character.’

Nithiyendran bought the goanna in Alice Springs on his way to a workshop with Hermannsburg Potters. Many of the other works in his home are also mementos of projects and programs he has supported. While judging the Shepparton Indigenous Ceramic Art Award, he purchased a Bagu by Philip Denham, and he bought the Vincent Namatjira screenprint following a residency with Cicada Press. One of his more recent purchases, a large pot by Rona Rubuntja, followed a workshop with the men’s group at Hermannsburg. ‘I forced them to sell me the biggest one!’

As a child, Nithiyendran didn’t live with a lot of art. ‘We didn’t collect contemporary art, it wasn’t in my vernacular growing up,’ he explains. His art collecting began with fellow artist friends who sometimes gave him things. As his career developed, so did his capacity to start purchasing small works, like the pair of Esme Timbery slippers he bought directly from the acclaimed late Bidjigal artist and shellworker, or the tiny ceramic Nell ghost.

‘At the start it was really just loving the fact that I could afford something small.’ Other tiny gems include works by Mechelle Bounpraseuth, Vipoo Srivilasa, Chris Mason, Penny Evans, Tony Albert and a Karen Cook

ARTIST LIST

Archie Moore
Bronwyn Hack
Chris Mason
Claudia Nicholson
Emil Cañita
Esme Timbery
Glenn Barkley
James Lemon
Jordan Gogos
Karen Cook
Luke Ryan O’Connor
Mabel Juli
Mali Taylor
Mechelle
Bounpraseuth
Naminapu
Maymuru-White
Nell
Penny Evans
Philip Denham
Ramesh Mario
Nithiyendran
Rona Rubuntja
Tjanpi Desert
Weavers
Tom Polo
Tony Albert
Vincent Namatjira
Vipoo Srivilasa

painting from SOUTHEAST Aboriginal Art Market at Carriageworks.

You won’t find many works in his home by Nithiyendran himself. ‘I live with my artwork all day in the studio, I don’t want to come home and live with it there too. I love art but I want to live with other people’s work.’

For Nithiyendran, his home is a sanctuary – a self-described ‘isolation cave’ away from the busyness of his large, industrial studio in Gladesville. ‘I always look at my work as parts of a sentence. If I am staring at my work at home, it’s really hard to have that separation and turn my thinking off.’ He did, though, make the bronze-cast light pendant in the kitchen and the ceramic tiled frame for the large mirror in the living room. ‘There are some subtle Ramesh touches, but that’s it. I wanted to use my skills to elaborate my home in a way that is different from my artwork.’

These functional elements might lack some of the maximalist energy that imbues Nithiyendran’s large-scale ceramic works, but they are absolutely anchored in his personality. ‘In terms of living with art, that’s how I’ve been approaching my clothing as well, with things that are beautiful and handmade and well-made. This will sound ridiculous, but my outfit game, that’s what I like to share and the mirrors are always so shit. So I wanted the *most* mirror that only I could have. I thought, “I will make that mirror.”’

Five years ago, Nithiyendran would not have been able to dress with this in mind, and his everyday studio clothes are still decidedly unglamorous. ‘Ninety per cent of my life is spent in the studio, just covered in absolute literal crap,’ he explains. But the opportunity to curate a small, considered wardrobe of one-off and designer pieces extends his philosophy of surrounding himself with things lovingly handmade.

One of his favourite items is a pair of jeans by the multidisciplinary artist Jordan Gogos. ‘I walked in Jordan’s show at Australian Fashion Week in 2023 and he asked, “What can I give you for it?” I said, “If I give you an old pair of jeans, can you handpaint them?” Everything’s kind of melding into everything else. That’s how I look at all the things that I have, with that kind of porousness.’

ON BUILDING A COLLECTION AS AN ARTIST

‘When you’re an artist, building a collection seems like an ironically foreign thing to do. There’s a bizarre feeling – especially when you’re “successful” – that you can’t afford your own work.’

PREVIOUS SPREAD Ceramic pot by Rona Rubuntja from Hermannsburg Potters in the dining room.

OPPOSITE Ceramic on the side table by Luke Ryan O’Connor, skull on the sideboard by Bronwyn Hack, ceramics in the shelving by James Lemon and Claudia Nicholson. Wall sculpture by Philip Denham, pot by Rona Rubuntja from Hermannsburg Potters (far right). View in the custom mirror by Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran of goanna by Tjanpi Desert Weavers and painting by Mabel Juli.



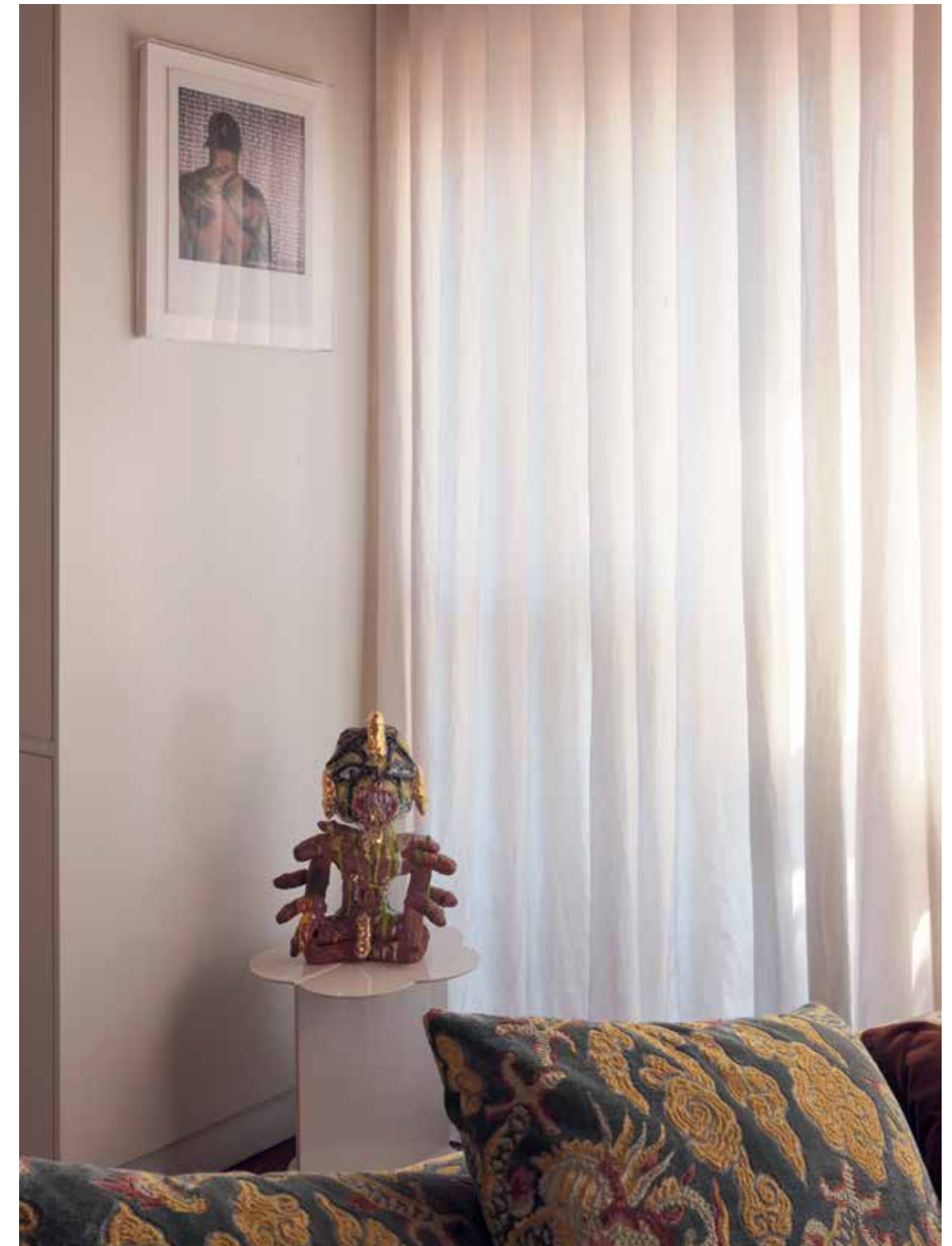


ABOVE Wall sculpture by Philip Denham, painting by Tom Polo (leaning against the wall) and sculptures on the shelves (top to bottom) by Glenn Barkley, Mali Taylor, Mechelle Bounpraseuth and Nell. Metal pendant on the lower shelf by Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran.

OPPOSITE Traditional Sri Lankan mask on the living room wall and ceramic by Luke Ryan O'Connor on the side table.



‘I would much rather have something that looked like a turd than something pretty. I think from a taste perspective, “aesthetically pleasing” means something different to me than it does for most people. For me, it needs to have ideas that are actually engaging. And when I say ideas, it doesn’t have to be something highfalutin. It can be a memory, a story, a narrative.’ **Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran**



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Framed work by Naminapu Maymuru-White in the bedroom. | Goanna on the ceiling by Tjanpi Desert Weavers and painting by Mabel Juli in the entrance. | Framed work by Tony Albert in the study. | Ceramics on shelving (top to bottom) by Chris Mason, James Lemon and Claudia Nicholson. Custom ceramic edged-mirror by Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran.

ABOVE Framed work by Emil Cañita and sculpture by Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran in the living room.