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AFTER APHANTASIAS

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After-Aphantasias

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‘After Aphantasias’ explores the profound and lasting impact of over-lapping conflicts and the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka, through the work of six influential artists active since the 1990s: Muhanned Cader, Kingsley Gunatillake, Anoli Perera, Pala Pothupitiye, Chandraguptha Thenuwara and Jagath Weerasinghe.

The title, After Aphantasias references a collective societal ‘mind-blindness’ – when Sri Lankans struggled to bear witness, unable to fully comprehend the violent changes of a tumultuous period in the country’s history or visualise the shifting realities of their political, territorial and emotional identities. In response to this paralysis of vision, the artists featured in this exhibition, helped create a visual language that gave voice and form to the lived experience of war and violence, unseen or deliberately obscured by the dominant narratives of power. Their work disrupted conventional representations; explored marginalised subjectivities; fostered a critical dialogue by questioning authoritative claims and unjust truths; and aimed to decolonise the mind through reclaimed narratives.

This exhibition explores the afterlives of their pathfinding early work. The artists confront the societal aphantasia that still lingers, as they continue to wrestle with labyrinthian conflict histories and the persistent impact of entrenched violence. The exhibited works reference two registers: landscapes of terror and dominant histories as sites of trauma. They are anguished images that confront not only what is visible, but also what is absent and silenced. They delve into historical traumas, to document, to grieve, to find comfort and to seek justice. They grapple with the potential of an ambiguous future: One burdened with the unsteady foundations of unresolved conflicts and of living without closure.

The exhibition presents diverse approaches to these complex themes. Jagath Weerasinghe’s figurative works directly respond to the social and political violence of Sri Lanka’s conflicts, urging the viewers to look beyond simplified narratives and recognise the politics of nationalism. Kingsley Gunatillake’s sculpture and calligraphy-inspired work, explores the complex relationship between violence as a tool and the elusive peace it seeks to achieve. Pala Pothupitiye’s historical approach challenges the viewer, provoking a new ‘social consciousness’ to problematise power, capital and vested interest in the aftermath of war. Muhanned Cader’s visualsapes depict the land, sea and sky as silent witnesses to the violence inflicted upon them as victims, and not, simply, as landscapes of war. Anoli Perera interrogates the complexities of gender as it intersects with violence, memory and loss through a labour-intensive process of transforming raw materials, exposing the patriarchal structures of violence that marginalises women’s specific traumas and experiences. Finally, Chandraguptha Thenuwara’s work compels the viewer to shed their blindness and confront the ‘every day’, to question power and to seek truth, justice and accountability.

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After Aphantasias invites the viewer to acknowledge the underlying contestations and the complicated legacies of representation. By confronting collective amnesias and selective consciousness that can be exploited in the service of agendas of power, the exhibition centres the importance of counter-narratives in the pursuit of reconciliation, accountability, justice and a more truthful retelling of Sri Lanka’s recent past. Ultimately, it is also a celebration of the enduring spirit of a generation of artists who redefined Sri Lankan art. Their dedication to breaking the mould to create a discursive public space through their art, continues to inspire new generations of artists to build their own movements and create their own narratives.

–Text by Radhika Hettiarachchi

After-Aphantasias: Historical Perspectives and the Emergence of a New Visual Language in 1990s Sri Lanka

–Text. By Radhika Hettiarachchi

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) fought primarily between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and largely concentrated in the north, grew intense. In the south, the second Marxist insurgency of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) reached its boiling point in the late 1980s, reimagining their earlier struggles for regime change from their 1971 insurrection. The public imagination, hitherto lulled into comfort by the new trinkets of an open economy, after a decade of self-depriving experimentation with insularity and protectionism, were reluctant to see their world changing so rapidly.

Politicised meaning-making through the news media or propagandist arts, reframed the public discourse with narratives of isolated ‘incidents’ and ‘anomalies’, unaware that Sri Lanka was, indeed, entering a decades long descent into violence. It was a period marked by seismic shifts in political, economic, social, cultural, emotional and historical realities. During these complex times, the protagonists lived radically different experiences that lead to variegated narrations of armed conflict and search for justice – some flitting between epic glorification and the gritty realism of these new forms of violence.

Who had the power and privilege to narrate, and to reshape the memory of political violence? Who had the claim to authority and authenticity to create a singular reality or the one truth about a war? How were our bodies – corporeal and institutional – regulated and our space governed to aid erasure, often with the embedded logics of entrenched patriarchy? The complexity and connectedness of the Sri Lankan conflicts, the lived experiences of violence, and the societal malaise of ‘aphantasia’ – the ‘ways of not seeing’ or ‘mind-blindness’ – to which Sri Lankans had grown accustomed, also needed a violent shift in narrative voice.

The institutionalised art practice and proverbial ‘academy’ coming into the turbulence of the 1980s owed much of its conceptual and practical output to the vernacular modernism of the ’43 group and its later exponents. The nostalgia for its bucolic landscapes was primarily a conservative materialisation of painting and sculpture in canonical veneration of their sensibilities. Many of these works, particularly those of socio-economically privileged artists, were closer to the cosmopolitanisms of global movements than to the anti-colonial struggles of the subaltern masses that characterised the post-independence era.

The violent shifts in the socio-economic and political ideologies of the 1970s leading to the 1980s relocated art from elite spaces and sensibilities to engage with the ‘everyday consciousness’ – inviting a response to the emerging landscapes of terror more broadly. As the realities of war and insurrection began permeating the public consciousness, propagandist murals and public art that married myth and nationalisms began to take hold in both ideological frames of the north and the south of Sri Lanka. They cannot be seen in a vacuum but as contemporaneous movements developing uniquely, yet drifting in and out of connectedness and collaborations - at once responsive and specific.

In the north and east, where these everyday challenges were tangible as lived experience, the arts was responding critically, and with urgency, to its contextual realities. Since the 1980s, it was forced to contest both the romanticism of the dominant aesthetic and the co-optation of arts as a radical propagandist tool, to a more contemporaneous public discourse of resistance and activism, social justice and Tamil identity politics. This was a period of revitalisation for Tamil theatre and literature, finding its voice in the expression of a new Sri Lankan Tamil identity and intellectualism, breaking free of traditional South Indian influence. The 1980s art followed suit, taken out of schools to the streets – artists such as Mark Master (with his explorations of modernisms), Arundhathi Sabanathan (and her interrogations of power) and a younger group of feminist artists who absorbed these confrontations, such as Kamala Vasuki, gave a visual language to the changing landscape. Northern artists, poets, academics and activists began to explore themes of violence, identity, ideology and the loss of pluralism, in some cases, at risk of death.

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The activism and intellectual discourse of Chitralega Maunuguru and Rajini Thiranagama influenced an emerging political consciousness and resistance within the university spaces. Sivaramani, a female poet from Jaffna, self-immolated on a pyre of her own poetry in 1991. Thus, she subverted the ultimate symbol of patriotism of the LTTE – suicide – to challenge the growing authoritarianism that was stamping out the space for voice. T. Shanathanan, whose formative years saw these ideological discourses evolve, the violence of the 1980s and the changing political dynamics during his studies in India, engaged in themes of trauma, home and loss, upon his return to Sri Lanka. He continued to challenge entrenched one-sided narratives of resistance and the glorification of militancy devoid of its impact on the lived realities of ordinary people in Jaffna. The authenticity of his work and lived experience, presented in Colombo – ‘Missing (1995) – also brought these timely considerations to a southern audience.

In the south, the revitalisation of a nostalgic reverence of Sri Lanka’s glorious past and its Sinhala preeminence began to take hold in song, theatre and film. A counterpoint and resistance took shape in response: Nanda Malini’s *Pawana* album became the voice of a generation that lived through the atrocities of state violence; Richard de Zoysa’s play ‘Who is he? What is he doing’ interrogated the unseen hand of state terror; Anomaa Rajakaruna’s short film *Sonduriya* (1983) explored a woman’s search for her disappeared husband. Yet, while brief moments of resistance and political commentary in artistic interventions punctuated the public awareness in the 1970-80s – in the work of several artists such as S.H. Sarath, Rohan Amarasinghe, Sarath Chandrajeewa and H.A. Karunaratne – it was not until the 1990s when a truly avant-guard exploration of art as consistent and provocative public discourse began to emerge. One that finally freed a new generation of artists from the institutionalised modernisms of the ‘academy’.

There were three broad strands to this evolution. The first was ‘disruptions’: New subject matter that conceptually pulled away from and challenged the institutionalised formalism that preceded the 1990s, with contemporary struggles embodied by these articulations. The disruptions too were multiple. New articulations and new forms emerged; some of the primarily provocateurs of the period, were returning after their studies in the West, bringing with them renewed practices and connectivity to global epistemologies. These include experiential and conceptual forms of expression - from installation to performance art. The creation of a discursive space of societal engagement was, for the first time, multi-directional; ‘a conversation’ that began to sustain a public interest, provoking engagement in questions of politics, identity, culture, religion, violence, and gender as lived experience.

Second, collaborations and synergies featured more and more. The new disruptions encouraged important relationships and collaborations, founding the backbone of a ‘socio-political movement’. These were intersectional – connecting to and finding synergies with contemporary struggles for social and economic justice, political thought, civil society activism and new epistemologies of violence. These movements and loose correlations didn’t flatten or coalesce this new visual language being birthed around art as documentation or historical objectivity, but worked to decolonise the social mind by provoking a new culture of un-silencing.

Third, they began to explore new subjectivities. There was a self-awareness of subjectivity as someone experiencing the change, reacting to it, and commenting on it, which became the new *raison d’être* of art in this period. The subjectivities of the contested geography and the changing landscape of the present became its key conversations. The artist of the south performed a dual role. One that pushed the visual inertia and aphantasias of a primarily southern polity to ‘see’ and therefore acknowledge the violence of the intensifying war that was felt by the people of the north. The other was to force awareness of and provoke an unsilencing of the many forms of violence happening in the south - the families of victims of the 1983 riots and insurrection of the late 1980s, and the unsettled grief of soldiers’ families. Jagath Weerasinghe’s “Anxiety” (1992), Stephen Champion’s book of photography ‘Lanka 1986–1992’ (1993), the group exhibition curated by Sharmini Perera, “New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art” (1994) and Chandragupta Thenuwara’s “Barrellism” (1997) are key moments in this journey. Anoli Perera’s installation “The Vehicle Named Woman” (1998), and a group show curated by Anoli Perera, “Reclaiming Histories: Retrospective Exhibition of Women’s Art (2000)”, and Anomaa Rajakaruna’s photographic exhibition of survivors of the violence of the 1983 Tamil pogrom ‘July’ (1983) were its feminist counterpoint, exploring the systemic gendered violence at the intersections of patriarchy and its proxies – such as the state.

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The disruptions of the old world order taking hold, needed new institutional approaches to ensure its sustainability. A movement that was truly anti-establishment required, new pedagogies and epistemologies. The first of these attempts was Vibhavi – a short-lived discursive space and cultural library, engaging in dialogue and initiating critical cultural engagement across Sinhala and Tamil students through film and the arts. It involved Prof. Sunil Wijesiriwardena, young artists from the south, east and north such as Kamala Vasuki and T. Shanathanan and many other cultural practitioners of the early 1990s. This space gave way to what would become the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (1993). Chandraguptha Thenuwara initiated a studio which became a new academy for a new era in 1996. It challenged the institutional practices of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies built on the modernisms of yesteryear. It became a more inclusive and progressive space with practitioner-teachers proposing a new visual language. Along with Chandraguptha Thenuwara (who continues to spearhead it), Jagath Weerasinghe, Leo Pasquale, Muhanned Cader, and Karunasiri Wijesinghe were some of the key artists that shaped the early days of the academy. The institutionalisation of practice also needed peer groups to establish the new movement. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, artist collectives – loosely associative or formalised – began to emerge. J. Weerasinghe, A. Perera, Pradeep Chandrasiri and Pala Pothupitiya, along with other contemporaries such as Bandu Manamperi, and Sarath Kumarasiri, started Theertha International Artists' Collective (and Red Dot Gallery), that sought to align with new discourses in the global south while creating platforms for a consciousness interrogation of what the new socio-political evolution of Sri Lanka means.

All of these avenues were supported by a progressive eco-system for the arts. This period marked the emergence of an art market, art spaces (galleries such as the Heritage Gallery, the Barefoot Gallery or Gallery 706 at the time), private collections such as the collections of Shanth Fernando that became galleries (Paradise Road Gallery) and critical commentary (the work of Sasanka Perera, Sunil Wijesiriwardena and Sharmini Perera). It was a cautious engagement positioning Sri Lankan art against the backdrop of a growing global interest in the art emerging from the global south. This push towards the arts as an interactive and discursive space, that valued curation, commentary, collections and art space, provided the foundations for an art practice that was able to mature and evolve through the 2000s and beyond.

The exhibition 'After Aphantasias' explores the work of six artists from the south of Sri Lanka, who helped create a new visual vocabulary to describe the violence unfolding around them in response to the societal aphantasias towards this new reality. Aphantasia is mind-blindness - an inability to visualise. The Sri Lankan public living through the politically turbulent 1980s-90s, were only awakening gradually from their Aphantasia or the 'many ways of not seeing' the changing realities and the conflicts around them. The current work of the six artists represented in this exhibition, celebrates their achievements and positions them within the art movement they helped create in the 1990s.

It also situates their work within the historical context of Sri Lanka's conflict and political timeline, positioning it within the broader, multi-generational discourse on the arts as a space for public engagement, activism and dialogue

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Anoli Perera, interrogates the complexity of gender at the intersection of memory, loss, violence and the yearning to be made whole. She situates her practice in the labour intensive process of transforming the materiality of raw materials – textiles, mesh, thread, metals – mirroring the intense emotional labour of engaging her socio-cultural presence as a woman to challenge hidden narratives. In the show, her intensely personal work examines the bodyscapes of motherhood as she grapples with separation, connectedness and intimacy. Softness of the fabrics, layered over and over, stuffed, stitched and stretched contradicted with metal and mesh sculptured and moulded and the narrative visual of a book, demands a deeper engagement with notion of the political, social and material female body and women’s relationships. Placed in context with her contemporaries, she mediates a different narrative and demands that her audience asks a different question – when motherhood, meaning-making and memory are subverted by nationalisms, is it not gendered and systemic violence? It is a poignant reminder that violence against women’s bodies, in many forms, are not random. They do not occur in a vacuum but as an expression of a patriarchal and hegemonic state that positions the woman at the border, out of place, out of frame and disposable. Violence, becomes the social and political capital for masculinities. In placing her work, at the centre of this show – on societal aphantasias – it presents the audience with a proposition to see behind the veil. To recognise that identity politics and the absence and marginalisations of women’s spaces, activisms, and relationships to each other is inherently violent.

Chandraguptha Thenuwara’s work speaks to his long and consistent interrogation of the camouflaged truths and manufactured lies of the state – breaking through the fantasies that keep its polity blind. Like the long shadow of conflict, his work is also a longitudinal documentation of the politics of governing and the governed. But it is also a proposition to his audience to engage with the everyday, move beyond fatalism and ask itself the questions that they fear to ask, should it rapture a state of wilful ignorance. In this exhibition, the delicate, stark and decorative lines of black and white ink, the tools of oppression and power lie in two-dimensional simplicity. Hiding beneath its flowery motifs and beautiful curves are the barbed wire and thorns that control access and limit spaces of dissent; religious symbolism bleeds into its destructive alliance with nationalisms; and politicians promise transformations as they clothe themselves in the voice of the change-hungry masses, who are blindly locked in a dance of power and powerlessness, yearning and disappointment. In the momentary glitches of colourful claustrophobia lie faintly remembered landscapes of terror, threatening to break its audience free from the tamed emotions of the deliberately blinded. Thenuwara’s work here are reminders of concepts – truth, justice, accountability – that the sub-conscience knows all too well as it calls its audience for a layered reading of ‘normalised’ realities, to give it voice.

Jagath Weerasinghe’s work is a direct response to the social and political violence of Sri Lanka’s conflicts. His figurative work expresses the brutality of war and violence carrying the emotional burden of Sinhalese guilt, shame and consciousness of the destruction and death wrought by its short-sighted identity politics. In this show, the works are heavy with visceral and emotional intensity. In his compulsion to challenge notions of identity, nationhood and religious purity he taps into a multi-generational Sri Lankan anxiety. They unsettle the audience, intentionally. The thick, vibrant colours and determined brushstrokes depict imposing male bodies and human figures in frenzied contortions. They occupy barren landscapes after the desolation of war, shocking his audience into removing their blinkers and their blindness to the tragedy of humanity. He provokes the audience to see beyond the screen, and hear what the camouflaged boots and the snakes have to say about the altruism of the state, in a war billed as a ‘humanitarian rescue’. He challenges the politics of nationalism and its convenient marriage to religiosity, in the narrativisations and justifications for war.

Kinsgley Gunatillake’s mediums of sculpture and calligraphy engage with found objects like old books and copper soldiers, and the deliberate movement and lyricism of ink on washi paper. The rhythm of the calligraphy brush is matched in equal measure with the vibrancy of his colours, layering a meditative landscape with narratives of peace, energy, and dynamism with sweeping moments of luminous thought, breaking free and lifting itself from the paper. His sculpture appropriates old books, stripping them of their purpose and transforming them into landscapes of terror and violence. He plays with the idea that the written word, now subverted, is irrelevant as historically objective truth. Within its trenches and territorialities marked by its edges and its folds, are placed the figures of copper soldiers. They contradict themselves – small and insignificant, yet serious in their intent to wage war, violence and mayhem. In this show, his work takes a philosophical approach. It speaks to the complexities of war and the inherent violence of humans at war – fractured and torn between the peace for which they yearn and the means with which to achieve it. He asks his audience to shed their fantasies and turn instead to view a world at war for what it is – a place of turmoil rather than resolution.

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Muhanned Cader's work often engages visualsapes – seascapes, landscapes, skyscapes – that the artist subverts and contorts to speak to the cost of human impact. He deliberately composes a visual narrative that is simultaneously paradoxical – real and imagined, an intimate experience and a distant memory. His practice investigates the socio-political landscape of boundaries and territories that sit at the intersection of the policies, practices, use and abuse of humans. He twists, places upside-down and fragments these images, leaving them islanded within its frame. His work in the context of this show, reminds the audience that the violent upheavals of the Sri Lankan conflict, affected the environment and created left-behind places of desolation and loss. It is a silent testament of the humanscapes made bereft – devoid of people, without history and without memory. And yet, they are tethered in place in irregular shapes, calling out the impact of human hands, human neglect and human lust. Cader's work placed here with his peers challenges the casual disregard and disconnect of place, space and environment from wartime narratives of violence. With its starkly bordered and unpredictably misshapen windows into lush, beautiful vistas, he provokes the audience to sit with their discomfort. And to awaken their consciousness to question the inherent violence of land stolen, violated and occupied as a victim, and not simply as a backdrop against which humans wage their wars.

Pala Pothupitiye's work underpins a more historical approach to looking at and through familiar visuals such as maps and traditional crafts. He problematises post-colonial art by confronting neo-colonialisms and its gaze. Simultaneously, he challenges the situated realities of the colonial 'subject' by questioning vernacular extremism in religiosity, nationalism and militarism. Some of his earliest works on show, speaks to his invocation of territoriality, superiority of a majoritarian (Sinhala) cultural identity symbolically represented in lions and upside-down maps to challenge notions of wartime politics and nationalisms. His later works continue to build on historical narratives of power and capital – colonial and neo-colonial, global and local – as he focuses on two themes: the glorified supremacy of a war hero and landscapes of terror. The 'rana-viruwa' – meaning war hero in Sinhala, but directly translated, read as 'golden hero' – represents the carefully constructed public image versus the hidden truths of post-war realities. The golden figure of a colonial soldier, reviled by the anti-colonial rhetoric of nationalism, now represents a vehicle of majoritarian imperialism. Pothupitiya coopts the familiar outlines of superheroes – at times parachuting them, and at times inserting a faded, erased silhouette onto captured territories. In echoing his earlier preoccupation with cartography, he places these soldiers fading and blending into each other as symbolic representations of power, capital and vested interest, to confront the neo-colonialism in the aftermath of war. In this show his work provokes a new 'social consciousness' in the audience, inviting them to decolonise their mind that imagines a 'just' war without cost.

After Aphantasias calls its audience to acknowledge the underlying contestations and the complicated legacies of representation. It demands recognition that society's collective blindness, amnesias and selective consciousness lie at the heart of harmful narrativisations and historical revisionisms. And, when exploited in the service of agendas of power, they marginalise counter-narratives of reconciliation, accountability, justice and truth.

Ultimately, it is also an invitation to revisit the spirit of a period of history that was driven to change and create its own narratives. Its impact and evolution continues, as younger generations of artists are influenced and mentored by the pathfinders of the 1990s, who defined a new era of Sri Lankan art.

–text by Radhika Hettiarachchi

