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Engaging with Detritus:

On Anoli Perera's Debris Collector

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[Anoli Perera's](#) recent solo show, [Debris Collector](#), presents an elegiac reflection on Sri Lanka's complex socio-political and cultural history. Currently on view at the Shrine Empire Gallery in New Delhi, the body of work weaves together strains of colonial and postcolonial encounters with the violence of modernity. With curatorial advisor [Nancy Adajania's](#) words serving as a potent accompaniment to Perera's layered works, the show encompasses a range of mediums, including textile, painting, prints, sculpture and moving images. Extending the artist's preoccupation with forms of memory and forgetting, the show reflects on the violence of the civil war in Sri Lanka and the Easter Sunday blasts to lay bare the tenuous nature of political stability.



I am Drowning Series I (2023. Acrylic and charcoal pencil, printed image overlays on fabric with stitching. 84 × 96 inches.)

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forest of similar flowers along with a ladder installation. This tapestry too is populated by figures, some of whom are children, sitting hunched over with their knees to their chests or crying out, betraying a sense of fear and anxiety. In an interesting play with shadow, both painted and sculptural ladders loom over the landscape. One can read them as perhaps offering some kind of respite, yet they also appear ominous in their ability to misdirect as the artist plays with space and the possibilities of dimensional experience. The two tapestries speak to one another as alternatives to dealing with violent histories—one side refuses to acknowledge it, while the other seems to be mired in it without the ability to escape.



The Gift Series I -Language wars (2023. Printed image overlays on fabric with stitching, 31 × 30 inches.)

Sri Lanka's chequered colonial history is presented in the series *Wedged* (2023) and *The Gift* (2023). Both works are displayed as diptychs that address questions of power and authority. While *Wedged I* and *II* depict religious control through symbols of Christianity and Buddhism, the similarities between the two are made evident in their display of power through the figures of soldiers and police personnel as the armed wing(s) of the state. The title of the series again foregrounds the impossibility of escape. Other such encounters of culture are presented in *The Gift I: Language Wars* and *The Gift II: Bartered Wars*, through Portuguese, Dutch and British influences on the island country. While Perera deploys handwritten text as a background or additional layer for many pieces, the collision of cultures is presented through different language scripts in these two works. The use of text in general also provokes critiques of the nature of historiography, with the privileging of certain narratives and forms of erasure. In the series *Road Roller*, for instance, red coloured tractors steamroll over a background of letters and words as layers of history are buried to make way for "progress" in the form of buildings and skyscrapers—the façade of modernity.

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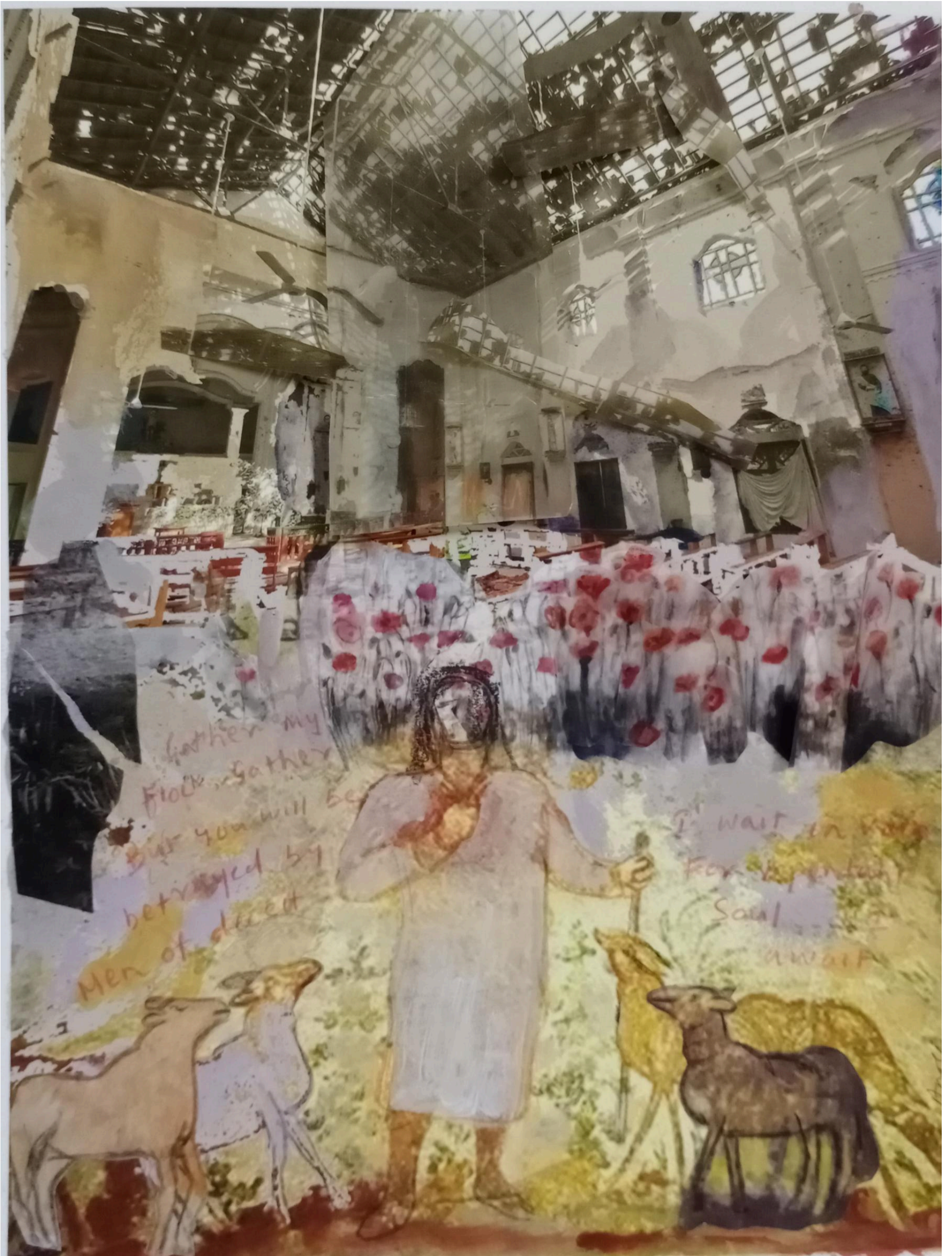
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ultimately Sisyphean task. The artist draws connections between the fort as a colonial symbol of “unconquerability” and the form of crochet lacemaking, which was traditionally the leisure activity of colonial upper-class women, to trace the ways in which their legacies have transmuted in order to adapt to the commercial world of the present.



Poppy Fields I - page 4 (2023. Acrylic, Ink, pencil and collaged paper overlays and paper construction on printed image, 11 × 8.5 × 0.20 inches.)


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redness of the flowers reminds one of fresh blood. This use of colour stands in contrast to other flowers present in the show, which tended to be in shades of ochre or pale white, as if dried and preserved. In describing the negotiation between the past and the present in her [curatorial essay](#), Adajania refers to the stench of "*fleurs du mal*" (flowers of evil) that permeates the artist's vision of her country.

The sculptural series *Objects of Interest* serves as an interesting contrast to the rest of the works in the show. Displayed on shelves affixed to the wall, a severed head of a statue, loudspeakers, a crown and lotuses find echoes in the other works as details. Yet the author initially missed the connection because the materiality of the objects makes them appear as perhaps a more literal representation of debris as detritus, while the idea of debris has been incorporated in more symbolic ways in the rest of the show. But this initial lack of immediate recognition raised interesting questions about what we see and how we see it. [Errol Morris](#), in his book *Believing is Seeing*, points to the ways in which we receive the meaning in photographs depending on what we believe. Perhaps the disjunct arose because of the way in which the sculptural forms as debris act as more immediate associations with the aftermath of a violent event.

Working with bricolage, Perera engages with the notion of debris to remediate cultural memory around historical events in the recent past. Debris becomes a mnemonic device that allows one to constantly return to the past in order to question its meanings and representations. When confronted with the term debris, one cannot help but draw parallels with what is happening in the Occupied Palestine. What remains in the aftermath of the complete decimation of the landscape and of entire genealogical trees in Palestine? How can one respond to this turbulent present? *Debris Collector* reminds us that violent histories demand acknowledgement.



I am Drowning Series II (2023. Acrylic and charcoal pencil, printed image overlays on fabric with stitching, 84 × 96 inches.)

To learn more about Anoli Perera's practice, read Ketaki Varma's reflection on the series [I Let My Hair Loose](#) and Pramodha Weerasekara's commentary on [Civilizing Serendib](#).

All works from *Debris Collector* (2023) by Anoli Perera. Images courtesy of the artist and Shrine Empire Gallery.