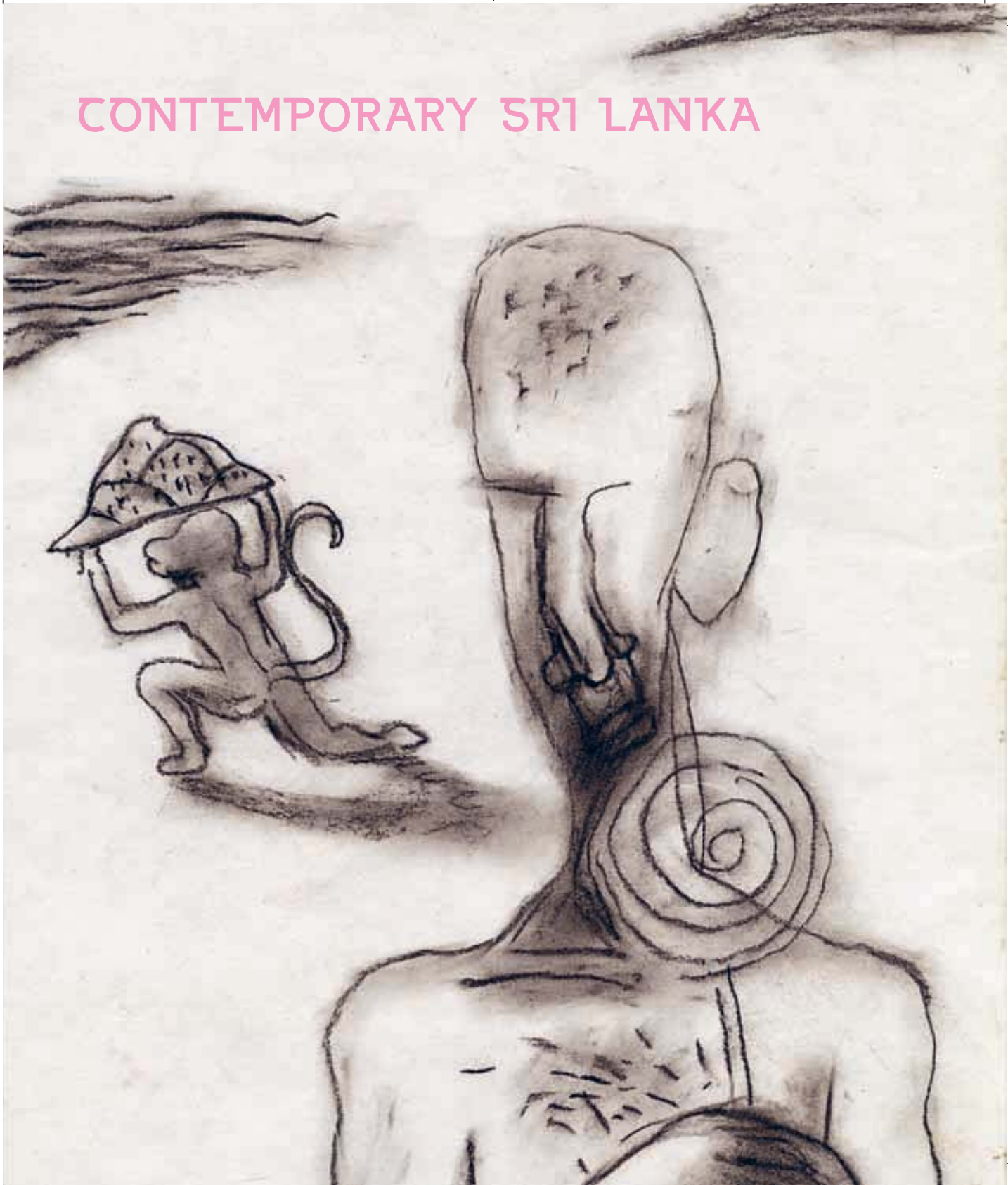


CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKA



CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Surveying the published material about cultural activity in Sri Lanka reveals a significant, if curious, discovery. One finds, books on the country's rich archaeological heritage, usually hard-bound and into third or fourth editions; lavish coffee-table volumes of landscape and wildlife photography; a small but significant handful of photo-journalistic accounts of the war; several scholarly tributes to the eminent architect Geoffrey Bawa; one or two artfully produced books documenting the country's architectural history; a handbook on Sri Lankan style and a lean measure of commemorative monographs on the country's key Modernist painters. The list is telling for what it reveals as much as for what it hides: namely, the absence of contemporary art. Were this trope to include the veritable archive of pamphlets, leaflets, staple-stitched catalogues and newsprint brochures documenting the provocative array of art projects and exhibitions of the last 15 years, Sri Lanka's contemporary art activity would not be questioned. Importantly this ephemera might ultimately signal the strong roots and determined influence of contemporary art outside the mainstream but within the fringes of Sri Lanka's cultural activity.

Sri Lanka's fringe culture is economically sustained via the interests served by NGOs, including international foundations¹. Their collective presence, which accounts for the largest source of infrastructural investment, conceals the critical lack of government-sponsored support for contemporary art. This deficiency of cultural policy, and political unwillingness to engage with contemporary art, has resulted in successive governments of the Independence era neglecting to address the role of contemporary art within broader strategies of cultural development. Not surprisingly, this predicament has spawned the creation of a meaningful counter-culture, with roots in the 43 Group, an artists' collective that combined the tenets of Modernism with the idioms of a culturally specific viewpoint, as a reaction to Victorian-style easel painting introduced under British occupation². Since the formation of the group in 1943, however, much has changed. After independence from the British in 1949, hostilities between the new Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the armed Tamil separatists have dominated the country's cultural politics. As the cause of the country's slow demise into war, this civil rift has also created the circumstances for the ascendancy of a new wave of artistic engagement.

Like other capital cities, Colombo hosts the majority of Sri Lanka's contemporary art initiatives, organisations

and artists³. Concentrated mostly in the maze of Colombo's outer suburbs, where lower land prices and rents prevail, the collective presence of this alternative culture, boosted by a number of important architectural practices, forms a burgeoning cultural network. It is here that the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA)⁴, an independent art school founded in 1993, and the Theertha International Artist's Collective⁵, founded in 2001, are located. Led by artists, these ventures have evolved from small, interventionist-based initiatives into medium-scale cultural organisations. Fostering experimental and conceptual-orientated practices, their combined activities are pivotal in promoting critical discourse, curatorial frameworks and the development of a socially engaged practice. VAFA is an art school-cum-gallery founded to readdress the insular offerings of state sponsored art education and has offered training to many of Sri Lanka's progressive contemporary artists. The state-backed Institute of Aesthetic Studies, after years of strikes, departmental politics and apathetic teachers, aspires to emulate VAFA, benefiting the growing student body of artists. Though such changes might reflect VAFA's impact, similar questions of governance, resources and expertise seem likely to challenge VAFA's future. Such problems typify the progress of institutional bodies within a cultural economy, heavily reliant on goodwill, yet hard-pressed to grow beyond project-based initiatives.

The creation of a critical painting language owes much to Jagath Weerasinghe, whose expressionistic, turbulent depictions of broken Buddhist stupas, disenfranchised soldiers, dancing Shivas, political microphones and malevolent serpents embody one of the most provocative studies of political and religious violence in Sri Lanka. Contemporary art has flourished across several directions and spawned what continues to be a growing circle of emerging artists under the ambit of Weerasinghe and the Soviet-trained painter Chandraguptha Thenuwara, VAFA's founder, well-known for his process-based camouflage paintings.

Taking the lead in promoting the younger generation, Theertha's Red Dot Gallery provides a vital exhibition space. Formerly a house, this simple yet functional gallery focuses on showcasing an array of practices examining the malign influence of conflict within society. Anura Krishantha's fabrication of chairs from toy guns, Anoli Perera's crocheted lace installations and Pala Pothupitiya's ornately painted artificial limb sculptures are all examples of works that address the country's violence and social upheaval through materials resonant with form and meaning. Such works combine the sensibilities of a

Dada-esque anti-art aesthetic with the concrete realism of mundane existence. United more by collective association than stylistic similarity, the artists behind Theertha give expressive voice to the challenges of how or if art can engage with the violence of a conflict-ridden culture.

Outside Theertha, several artists have developed independent practices that by contrast acknowledge the presence of politics without recourse to remonstrative strategies or principled undertakings. Chief amongst them, Muhanned Cader, T Shanaathanan, Tissa de Alwis and Arjuna Gunaratne make extensive use of uncanny associations combining mythic and mundane references without visual constraint or illogic. In De Alwis' fantastical installations of miniature plasticine armies, recycled toothpaste caps and coat hangers assume the role of military headgear and futuristic flying machines. The use of appropriation to effect equivocal, often poetic compositions also belies Cader and Shanaathanan's whimsical drawings that frequently employ fragments of an image, such as Cader's collection of graphite doodles, collectively known as *79 Days in Lahore* or Shanaathanan's beguiling combinations of Hindu mythology, torn maps and random incidents. For both artists, the use of collage lends a sense of order to an otherwise disembodied set of elements. The elusive character of much of this work – usually small-scale and/or on paper – shifts from large-scale expressions of violent terror seen in the last decade. Given the prevailing climate of political instability, such changes also give form to the resilient nature of artistic innovation in the face of adversity.

The momentum to innovate is restricted by resources and skills. In contrast to painting and drawing, work in new media and video is rarely explored. Photography has imaginatively been used to explore themes of memory in a photo-journalistic manner, as seen in the work of

Menike van der Porten or the photo-documents that record Pradeep Chandrasiri's 1997 *Broken Hand* installation. With the exception of T P G Amarajeeva's haunting photographic study of male conscription *Don't Measure Me*, 2001, experimental photography remains quietly absent. A situation that, at least unconsciously, might have arisen in consequence to the medium's own conscription by the state-controlled media and the instinctive preference by artists to work outside visual frameworks closely associated with the war effort. The relationship between art and the media is also characterised by a lack of informed art journalism in English, Tamil or Sinhala. Until independent initiatives in curatorship and scholarship expand further, art audiences will remain limited to a coterie of passionate yet dedicated individuals.

Affecting these developments is the inevitable challenge of the encroaching art market. Apart from important commercial galleries such as Barefoot Gallery⁶ and Paradise Road⁷, opportunities to view and buy contemporary art are mainly served through direct contact with artists. Theertha's Red Dot Gallery is exemplary as the first attempt to merge an artist's commercial and career interests. It is an impetus, likewise, explored by several local private collectors who have converted homes and offices to display contemporary art. Importantly both these precedents reveal an acute need for professional assistance to manage artists' careers and nurture collectors, to protect and value local interests competing with international markets. If such a transition can manage to overturn the adverse circumstances of the country's ongoing ethnic conflict in a manner that does not exploit it, the passage of contemporary art from the fringes to the foreground of contemporary culture promises to be a cause worth struggling for.

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¹ For example: Hivos, Ford Foundation, Lunuganga Trust, Goethe Institute, British Council, Neelan Tiruchelvan Trust and Colombo Institute for the Advanced Study of Society and Culture.

² The development of modern art in Sri Lanka is marked by the formation of the 43 Group in 1943, a collective of Sri Lankan middle-class, English-speaking artists who were opposed to the academic and culturally removed outlook propagated by the Ceylon Society of Arts (established in 1891 under British rule). The group was comprised of: Geoffrey Beling, George Claessen, Aubrey Collette, Justin Deraniyagala, Richard Gabriel, George Keyt, L.T.P Manjusri, Harry Pieris, Ivan Pieris and Lionel Wendt. The Sapumal Foundation, formerly the home of Harry Pieris, was established in 1974 to house a permanent collection of the 43 Group.

³ The historic fort-city of Galle, located 119 km south of Colombo, plays host to the Galle Literary Festival.

⁴ Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA) was founded by the artist Chandraguptha Thenuwara in 1993 upon his return from studies at the Moscow State Institute between 1985–1992. VAFA was originally started as the Vibhavi Fine Arts Studio, offering weekend classes in Fine Art to students unable to gain admittance to the Institute of Aesthetic Studies

(IAS). In 1995 it evolved into a non-government and non-profit institution under the auspices and funding from Hivos.

⁵ Theertha was established in 2001 as an independent, artist-led, non-profit initiative aimed at promoting opportunities for contemporary artists across a broad program of activity. It is affiliated to the Triangle Arts Trust and the South Asian Network of KHOJ (India), Britto Arts Trust (Bangladesh), Sutra (Nepal) and Vasl (Pakistan). It was founded by the following artists: Jagath Weerasinghe, Anoli Perera, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, G R Constantine, Bandu Manamperi, Pradeep Chandrasiri, Koralegedera Pushpakumara, T P G Amarajeeva, Sarah Kumarasiri, Pala Pothupitiya and Anura Krishantha.

⁶ The Barefoot Gallery is a commercial exhibition space located in the centre of Colombo. It exhibits artists from Sri Lanka and overseas and hosts a variety of live art events. It is attached to the retail outlet of the well-known handloom designer and artist Barbara Sansoni.

⁷ Paradise Road Gallery holds solo exhibitions of upcoming and mid-career artists. It is housed in the former offices of the architect Geoffery Bawa, which was converted into a fashionable restaurant and retail design studio in the mid-1990s.