

PORTRAITS OF INTERVENTION

WEB REVIEW BY MIMI WONG
AICON GALLERY

SRI LANKA USA



PRADEEP CHANDRASIRI, *Things I Told, Things Not Heard, and Things I Tell Now!*, 2016, acrylic, ash and turmeric on canvas, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.



JAGATH WEERASINGHE, from the "Celestial Fervor" series, 2007, acrylic on paper, 29.2 x 28 cm. Courtesy Aicon Gallery, New York.

From 1983 to 2009, a grisly civil war gripped the island nation of Sri Lanka. In the aftermath, 13 artists unpacked the trauma of war as part of the group exhibition "Portraits of Intervention" at Aicon Gallery in New York. Curator Bansie Vasvani said she was drawn to the organic quality of these artists' responses to the bloodshed, as well as the variation in form found in those reactions.

Jagath Weerasinghe, considered a forefather of Sri Lankan contemporary art in the intergenerational group, co-founded the Theertha International Arts Collective, to which many of the other 12 artists belong. Weerasinghe coined the term "90s Trend" to designate the politically motivated art movement that he and his peers spearheaded. In addition to their activism, according to Vasvani, the 90s Trend represents "an aberration from what was being taught, [which was] the British system of doing landscape and portraits and abstract art." In Weerasinghe's paintings, faceless, shadowy figures embody the often-amorphous nature of fear. On the one hand, loosely painted soldiers, assuming powerful stances in his "Celestial Fervor" series (2007–13), convey a sense of raw power and masculine aggression. On the other, fallen fighters, curled into a fetal position with their jagged guts spilling out in some works in his "Untitled" series (2016), appear exposed and vulnerable.

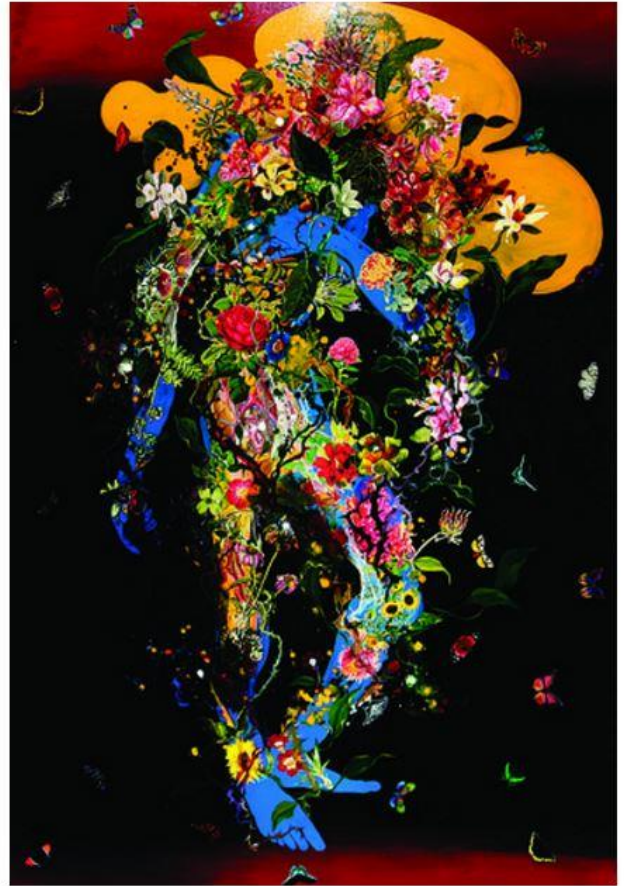
Pradeep Chandrasiri documented his own war wounds in the installation *Things I Told, Things Not Heard, and Things I Tell Now!* (2016), in which an enlarged black-and-white photograph of a scar above his right ear hangs as the backdrop to a makeshift interrogation room and rubble. Building upon the concept of the body as a battle site, Bandu Manamperi walked through the streets of Colombo while covered in Chinese firecrackers for the performance *Highly Explosive* (2010), which was

documented in a video that was shown at Aicon Gallery. In *Golden Barrel Man* (2013), he is painted the same color as the barrels used by the Sri Lankan army to barricade government property and demarcate territories in Colombo and Jaffna from being approached and attacked.

The human form is concealed in Priyantha Udagedara *Wanamali* and *Wanamali I* (both 2016). Each canvas shows a woman's silhouette that has been painted over with colorful, blooming flowers. Although beautiful, the flowers camouflage an ugly reality of comfort women who in wartime were forced into prostitution, and whose suffering remains unacknowledged by the government after the conflict subsided. Likewise, the brightly colored genitalia in Savesan Nalliah's *Flesh I* (2016) contrasts with the work's dark subject matter of sexual assault and rape. Disembodied body parts, like the fiberglass hand with a faucet attached in Thisath Thoradeniya's sculpture *The Last Drop* (2016), further the notion of lost bodily autonomy. Paired with his pencil drawings of floating brains in *Gray Matter III* and *Gray Matter IV* (2016), the works raise questions about who owns and controls these body parts, and subsequently how authoritarian forces can manipulate individuals.



BANDU MANAMPERI. *Golden Barrel Man*, 2013, performance still, C-print on archival paper, 76.2 × 51 cm. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.



PRIYANTHA UDAGEDARA. *Wanamali I*, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 160 × 109 cm. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.

Meanwhile, other works gaze not upon bodies but objects. Anoli Perera's sweeping *Second Skin: Elastic Dress II* (2010–12) pays homage to womanhood, down to the detail of bra straps dyed various shades of red serving as the installation's key material. Her "Sewing Book Series" (2013) explores dressmaking, this time through a collage of instructional material, handwritten notes, and archival photographs. Nostalgia suffuses Liz Fernando's work as well. *Passage of Time* (2016) features faded archival photoprints on delicate Japanese mulberry paper to address the destruction of Sri Lanka's photographic history by its humid climate. Clipboards listing compounds and formulas underscore the scientific explanation behind the chemical breakdown. Fernando's parents escaped the civil war, so the German-born artist was the only diasporic creator represented in the exhibition. The inclusion of her work speaks to yet another consequence of war—a failure to recover one's cultural past in lost memories.

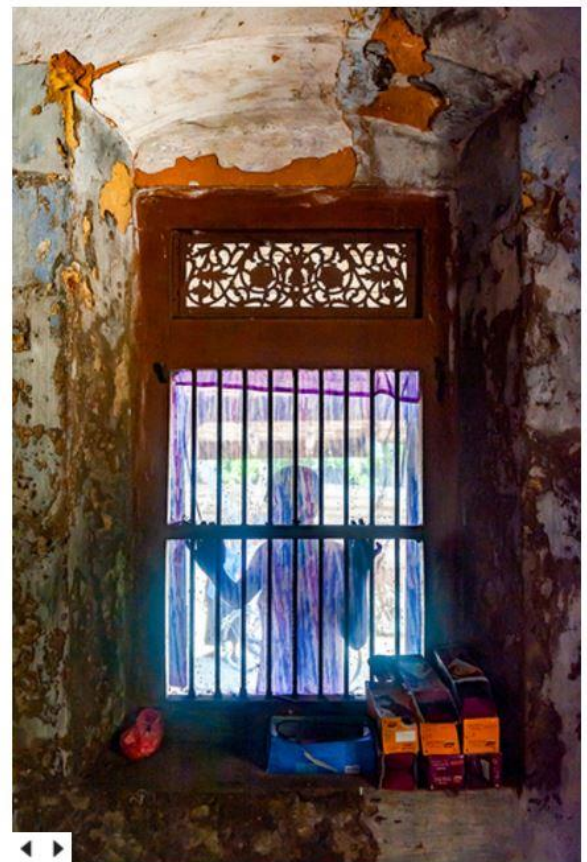


ANOLI PERERA, *Second Skin: Elastic Dress II*, 2010–12, bra straps, elastic loops and iron brackets, dimensions variable. Photo by Aaron Burton. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.

This longing can be easily understood when considering just how much was taken from people who survived the war. “Twenty-six years is a long time,” Vasvani said regarding the conflict’s duration. “It’s a lifetime.” It nearly was for M. Vijitharan, now in his 30s, who was one of two Tamil artists among a roster that was predominantly Sinhalese—the ethnic majority of Sri Lanka. His dizzying line drawings recall the chaos of fleeing Jaffna, where much of the fighting took place. Photographer Dominic Sansoni also revisited the city for his “Jaffna Homes” series (2011), pointing his lens at formerly abandoned houses, to which residents have slowly begun re-inhabiting. Similarly, Danushka Marasinghe retraces the journey back to the northern provincial capital for his short film *At a Distance* (2013), yet the eerie score by Shiri Malckin suggests an unease in this return trip.

Much of what the artists wrestle with in “Portraits of Intervention” concerns not only historical events, but also how people cope when the world around them falls apart. In sifting through the wreckage, these artists did not necessarily aim to extrapolate meaning; their intent was to bear witness. The sheer number of works on display, from so many voices, demonstrates the necessity for Sri Lankans to make sense of this dark period of their homeland’s history.

“Portraits of Intervention” is on view at Aicon Gallery, New York, until April 29, 2017.



DOMINIC SANSONI, *Jaffna Homes VIII*, 2011, C-print on archival paper, 58 × 42 cm. Courtesy the artist and Aicon Gallery, New York.