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The past in our art: confronting the contemporary in an ancient society

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Abstract: Sri Lanka is an ancient culture that has evolved into a complex post-colonial society with a multitude of identities, hybridities, synchronicities, and paradoxes. The 'idea of the past' is explored by analyzing its iconographic and semiotic representations in contemporary art in work by three Sri Lankan artists. Contemporary artists respond to and re-mold their artistic traditions in depicting their day-to-day lived realities. Is the past a burden or a basis, is it inescapable or unwarranted, in projecting their contemporary truths? Does art become a practice of constant negotiation between the past and the present? How do these artists support or challenge the mainstream historic narratives intrinsic to social conflicts in the island? Ideas and representations of the past play a central role in social discourses. There are competing versions of the past: the 'historic past' and the 'practical past', which is also the past of the 'common man'. While some contemporary artists draw from mainstream historical narratives, one finds a critical and reflective art practice in contemporary visual culture in Sri Lanka. The work of Jagath Weerasinghe and Hanusha Somasundaram illustrates how artists respond to and investigate the past, and their approaches from History, Archaeology, and Art History, the professions most associated with 'the past', are delineated. These artists make valuable contributions to modern historiography through their art that can be read as intricate palimpsests of iconography, narrative, and memory; through visually challenging dichotomies, making their practices signifiers of the ways in which societies understand and express their past in relation to their present and themselves.

Keywords: Practical past, history, memory, art history, archeology, contemporary art, ancient culture, iconography, narrative, post-colonial, Sri Lanka, identity, Jagath Weerasinghe, Hanusha Somasundaram.

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'Every generation gets the Renaissance (or the Upper Paleolithic) it deserves.'
R.H.A Corbey, R. Layton, J. Tanner, 'Archaeology and Art' (2004)

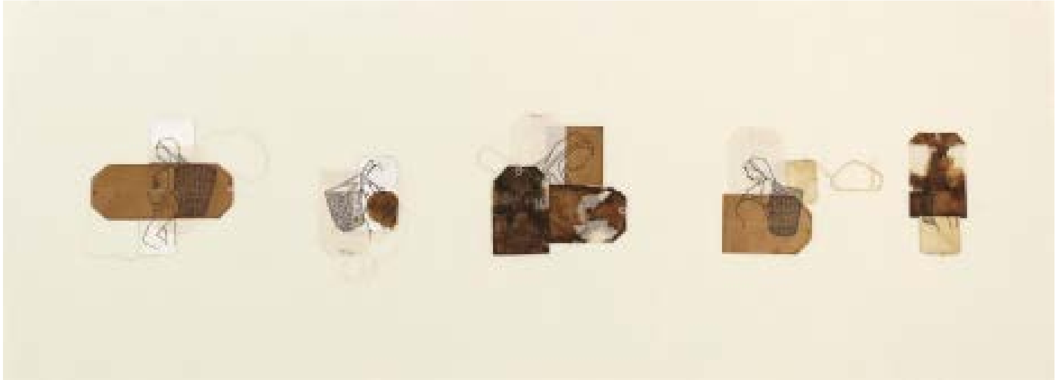

Figure 1. Hanusha Somasundaram, *Untitled III*, 2016, used tea bags and ink on paper, 28 cm × 76 cm (courtesy of the artist).

Prelude

'One of my earliest childhood memories is of my twin brother and I weeping inconsolably as we watched our mother through the grimy window, heading out to pluck tea with a huge cane basket on her back'[1], narrates Hanusha Somasundaram, an artist hailing from the central highlands of Sri Lanka. Her community has been the backbone of the island's economy for over a century, contributing to the most well-known, enduring international brand name the island boasts of—Ceylon Tea. And yet, plantation workers remain one of the most marginalised groups in the island, with their socio-economic indicators and living standards falling way below the national average. Brought over from Southern India to Ceylon as bonded labourers[2] in the 19th and 20th centuries by the colonial British to work in the flourishing tea, coffee, and rubber plantations, Somasundaram's ancestors are yet to garner a place in the history books.[3]

[1] De Alwis & Haputhanthri (2020: 146).
[2] Though the term 'slavery' is not used to refer the indentured labour practices (also referred to as bonded labour) of the British in Ceylon, some of the practices and conditions are similar.
[3] For more details on the upcountry Tamil community in Sri Lanka, read Bass & Skanthakumar (2019).

Sri Lanka: past and post-war challenges

More than seventy years since it gained independence from British colonial powers (1948) and a decade after the end of the civil war (2009), Sri Lanka is still struggling to address some of the key challenges of creating an inclusive and just state for all its communities. The seven decades that followed independence witnessed multiple conflicts based on class and ethnicity more overtly, as seen is the struggles of the Southern youth rebellions in 1971 and 1988 and the ethnic riots and civil war in the North East, spanning 1983 to 2019. Further to these pronounced fault lines, religion, caste, and gender continue to operate as fragile topics prone to quick inflammation. A plethora of literature indicates that, though the end of the armed conflict has brought important and immediate relief to affected communities, the island 'has not resolved many issues relating to majority–minority relations and power sharing in the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. Despite numerous political proclamations and a major change in government, limited progress has been made in regard to post-war ethnic reconciliation in the country.'[4] Somasundaram's community has experienced these power struggles and endured the worst repercussions, including being stateless and being repatriated to India.

The role of history in shaping these unresolved conflicts of the present has been explored in-depth by South Asian historians, archaeologists, and other social science scholars such as Romila Thapar (India), K.M. de Silva, Sudharshan Senevirathne, Neera Wickramasinghe, and Nirmal Dewasiri (Sri Lanka), to name but a few. Not unlike most fledgling countries in the world emerging from colonial experience, Ceylon/Sri Lanka has struggled to reformulate an inclusive identity for itself, capable of accommodating the historical diversity of its communities.

This article argues that a failure to shift paradigms in history-making/writing/narrating in articulating a modern, inclusive identity, lies at the heart of the biggest challenges the country faces in reconciliation. Furthermore, it promotes an interdisciplinary approach in making/rewriting/narrating the past by looking at visual art practices of contemporary Sri Lanka, that attempt to contribute to reshaping the discourse on Sri Lankan identity. The article will delve into the works of artists from different communities and explore how they narrate their own histories, challenge artistic traditions, and possibly contribute to a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to the past.

[4] Bass & Skanthakumar (2019: xiii–xiv).

Visual art practices in Sri Lanka: a brief overview

Sri Lanka has a long history of visual arts such as painting, sculpture, and murals under a courtly tradition. While painting and sculpture can be traced back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE, some of the murals of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial monarchic eras inscribed from 600 CE onwards can still be found in ruins and archaeological sites around the country. Although religious and monarchic art were the most ubiquitous from the ancient era, Sri Lanka came to welcome many cultures from all over the world, being an important port of call in medieval travel. Hence one may find art styles and relics typically from Arab cultures, Europe, and the Far East, as diverse populations passed through its shores.

After British colonisation in 1815, art practices took a new turn. Whereas the visual arts (painting, sculpture, murals) were previously tied to a personal caste association, the colonial period saw a decoupling and 'art' took on a form of its own, embraced by the middle class. A watershed moment of modern art in Sri Lanka was the establishment of the '43 Group, a group of affluent Sri Lankan men who practised various visual arts: painters, sculptors, photographers, and a cartoonist. They sought to develop an expression of 'Sri Lanka' through their styles and their work can be read as part of the cultural anti-colonial movement of the time. Their social affluence and metropolitan nature created a distance from rural realities that enabled them to idealise the rural, particularly images of the village and women. From the 1960s onwards, this style of painting continued, compounded by the revival of traditional styles, to counter the 'Western' influence from local art.

The next crucial turn in Sri Lankan art came in response to the social and political strife of the 1980s onwards, as class struggles and ethnic warfare broke out. The 90s Art Trend saw the emergence of politically motivated art that commemorated and challenged Sri Lanka's violent realities as well as reacting to rapid globalisation and economic liberalisation. Sri Lanka, currently still dogged by social and political unrest, continues to have a politically engaged visual arts scene, although abstract work and other experimental styles try to push forward as well. Many younger artists have also turned towards digital technologies, experimenting with digital photography, graphic design, and video art.

As mentioned, this article illustrates how contemporary Sri Lankan artists draw from, position, and represent their work in relation to their own past as individuals but also the past of the island. Before discussing these examples, it is necessary to outline some concepts that will facilitate an interpretation of these works.

The theatre of the past: some useful concepts

Under history, memory and forgetting
Under memory and forgetting, life.
But writing a life is another story. Incompletion.[5]

The mantra of modern societies is 'living in the present moment'. And yet, it often seems that people are obsessed and even trapped in their past/s. The present moment exists under the pressure of the past, especially in fragile contexts like Sri Lanka, where the past plays an important role in framing contemporary discourses.

The past comes packaged in many different forms, stages, and mediums: in fairytales absorbed as children; in school textbooks; on television; in literature, art, theatre, dance; in the newspapers; in places of worship; in museums and heritage sites; on the road through statues and memorials; on public walls as graffiti; and on and on. All of this has led to a degree of exoticisation of the past, aptly captured in the opening lines of L.P. Hartley's The Go-Between: 'The Past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.'[6]

What does the past mean to us as individuals, and as collectives? How do we engage with it? Sri Lankan artist and archaeologist Jagath Weerasinghe, whose works will be discussed later on, highlights the need to unpack the idea of the past, arguing that there are many versions of the past.[7] The version that gets highlighted and the others that get dropped reflect the power hierarchies and agendas of those specific societies in specific times; colonial, nationalist, cold-war, or post-capitalist projects present their own histories. These are the official narratives one encounters at national museums or finds in history textbooks. Competing closely with these official narratives are the academic versions—the historic and the archaeological accounts constructed through textual sources and material culture in keeping with empirical and objective epistemologies. As Michael Oakeshott writes, there exists yet another dimension, the 'practical past'—the domain of writers, filmmakers, and artists, which coincides also with the past of the 'common man'. The 'practical past', according to Oakeshott, is the 'version of the past that most of us carry around with us in our minds and draw on in the performing of our daily tasks where we are compelled to judge situations, solve problems, make decisions'. It is made up of 'all those memories and illusions, bits of vagrant information, attitudes and values'.[8]

[5] Ricoeur (2004).
[6] Hartley (1953).
[7] Weerasinghe, interviewed by the author, 15 August 2020.
[8] White (2011).

In this context, it is important to explore memory as another 'source' of the past. Today, memory studies (academic) and memory work (applied practices) have emerged as a notable form of historiography with powerful methodologies such as oral history. Memory work is a process of engaging with the past which has both ethical and historical dimensions.[9] In his evocative essay 'Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire', French historian Pierre Nora makes some poignant observations regarding the distinction between memory and history: 'real memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies—and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past'.[10] Nora points out the widening gap between the two, and how one is eradicated or suppressed by the other, especially by equating the two. Nora's passionate plea was to move away from the idea of monolithic national culture bolstered by chosen historic interpretations to a more nuanced understanding of how people remember themselves.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur mused that, today, people live in a 'memorial culture' where they experience a frenzy of memorialisation on the one hand and a culture of amnesia on the other. One could add a frenzy of historicisation to that as well, especially referring to the popular media where the world seems to escape from the brash and dire realities of the present by revelling in the glories of the past in the form of slick historical dramas and films.

This article acknowledges that all these versions of the past exist in tandem and shape the present moment. The tensions and conflicts within these versions create what this article defines as a 'theatre of the past'. Before turning to some examples from Sri Lanka, it is necessary to unpack not only the different versions of the past, but also its relationship with art.

Visual arts as representations of the past

When an artist creates, the act is shaped, in a way, by the pressure created by the past on the present moment—be it psychological, socio-political, or any other; it is influenced by the past—of the artist, his/her community, or the larger context. Artists turn to their memory in their art, not only as a cathartic act, but also to document and bear witness to the dynamics of the present conditions and their histories. In the same way, artists turn to their art-historical traditions and cultural memory of their contexts for inspiration and technique. Simultaneously, they also respond to the stimuli created by

[9] Gabriel (2004).
[10] Nora (1989: 8).

the contemporary world they live in. Sri Lankan artist and art historian Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan highlights the parallels between art and history in his presentation 'Representing the Past: Art as Method'.[11] He argues that, just as history is not the past per se, but a representation of the past, art is also a representation. In keeping with ideas expressed by David Summers (2003), Shanaathanan points out that:

> The word representation obviously and literally contains the term 'present', and that it also proposes the presentation of something as well as presence of someone by whom and to whom presentation is made. Representations become familiar through constant re-use and come to feel 'natural' and unmediated. A key concern is the way in which representations are made to seem 'natural', despite the fact that they change over time.[12]

There are some key points on the nature of representation that need to be highlighted: representation is unavoidably selective, foregrounding some things and omitting others. Furthermore, representations require interpretation. Meaning is always subject to individual interpretation. Representation always involves the 'construction of reality' from a particular point of view. And, finally, systems of representation are the means by which certain ideologies are formed. These ideologies then create ways of looking at texts, and eventually, such value systems position their subjects, requiring them to be interpreted in accordance with them.

History, according to Sanathanan, is a representation of the past mediated by evidence (textual, material, etc.), methodology as well as ideology and subjectivity. Art represents history as it is both a product of historical discourse and also produces and disseminates historical discourses. The works of the artists will be discussed to illustrate these points in the following segment, illustrating how these tensions of history and memory, the grand narratives and alternative and marginal stories, mythic and practical pasts, exist simultaneously. In order to properly contextualise the works of the artists presented, a few examples of how mainstream art deals with the past will be presented first.

The grand narratives: art and myth

Consider, for instance, the artist Prasanna Weerakkody, whose works are popular representations based on mainstream historical narratives of the island (Figures 2, 3).[13]

[11] Sanaathanan (webinar presentation 2020).
[12] Summers (2003).
[13] See https://prasannaweerakkody.com/

Figure 2. Prasanna Weerakkody, *Fall of Elara*, undated, acrylic on multi canvas, 6 ft × 11 ft × 3 canvases. Private collection of Bandula Weera-Wardane, London (accessed at https://prasannaweerakkody.com/).

Nirmal Dewasiri argues that representations of ancient history play an important role in the articulation of modern Sinhala Buddhist identity.[14] Based mainly on the historical text Mahavamsa, the grand historic narrative focusses mainly on selective mythic events such as the arrival of the Sinhalese in the island, the arrival of Buddhism, and the legendary battle of King Dutuegemunu and Elara which is central to the understanding of Sinhalese and Tamil identities today.[15] Dewasiri contends that these myths provide the framework for the grand narrative that the ordinary person finds it easy to relate to, and that a certain level of mythification is unavoidable when representing ancient history. Weerakkody's works are fascinating illustrations based on these mythic events and his works are on public display in several state institutions as

[14] Dewasiri (webinar presentation 2020).
[15] The importance of this 1st century CE event should be understood, especially when one notes how it continues to influence current politics. For more details, see a paper done by the students of Strategic and Defense Studies at General Sir John Kotalawela Defence Academy, 'The First War of Unification in Sri Lanka: A Critical Analysis' accessible at http://192.248.104.6/bitstream/handle/345/2821/200.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Figure 3. Prasanna Weerakkody, *Desecration of Kelaniya Viharaya by the Portuguese*, 2011, oil on canvas, 12.5 × 6.5 ft. Private collection of Bandula Weera-Wardane, London (accessed at https://prasannaweerakkody.com/).

well as being included in notable private collections. In fact, it can be safely assumed that this type of art is what the common person relates to the most, as they would already have the reference frame to understand these works. Their own knowledge of mythic events, school textbooks and school graffiti projects, popular media representations—all add to the accessibility and readability of Weerakkody's work. More of his works can be easily accessed online, and while the article will not go into Weerakkody in-depth, his works provide a backdrop to start understanding the works of the other artists presented.

Countering grand narratives: Hanusha Somasunderam and Jagath Weerasinghe

The works of Hanusha Somasundaram and Jagath Weerasinghe represent visual practices from two communities in Sri Lanka. Weerasinghe and Somasundaram also represent two generations and Somasunderam's focus on gender also adds another layer of intricacy as she works through her community's experience. Weerasinghe illustrates an alternative perspective that exists within the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist community, while Somasundaram illustrates a minority group in the island.

Hanusha Somasundaram explores her society and her own existence through unorthodox mediums, confronting the struggles of her community in the last hundred years. As mentioned earlier, her community has not made it into mainstream historiography and her work has immense potential to contribute, if we engage with art as a form of historiography along the lines of a practical past. Somasunderam uses materials associated with the everyday practice of drinking tea, such as tea strainers, tea cups, and tea bags, as well as the pay slips received by tea pluckers that calculate their daily wages according to the weight of tea leaves plucked. Describing how she came to work with used tea bags, the artist explains:

> When I became pregnant, I kept wondering how my mother had managed to continue plucking tea on the slippery hill slopes with a 20kg basket of tea leaves on her back and twins in her belly. Up to that point, I had been working on a series of installations with tea cups and strainers. I wanted to highlight how the suffering of tea pluckers seeps into every aspect of their lives and leaves an indelible stain on them and their offspring.[16]

For Somasundaram, used tea bags are not an unusual choice of material for an artwork. They are symbolic of the stain she carries; illustrative of her experience and physical habitus. As seen in her artwork *Untitled III* at the beginning of this article (Figure 1), her ability to draw evocative objects from her daily existence and memory that are deeply personal and, at the same time, collectively representative of the history of her community is what gives 'voice' and 'impetus' to her work.

Another work by Somasundaram, aptly named *Mother tongue* (Figure 4), delves into the language politics that define the existence of her community, with tongue-like tea strainers embossed with lettering from Sinhala, Tamil scripts, and the English alphabet. The language one speaks acts as a 'strainer' of one's life experiences. It is not only the tensions between the three official languages, but also the variants within a particular language: for example, the Tamils spoken in the North and the East of Sri Lanka are different from the Tamil spoken by the plantation communities in the central highlands as they are a community with a unique historical trajectory. Thus language becomes an identity marker, denoting one's provenance: in Somasunderam's case, that they were the descendants of the indentured labour brought to the island in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus language is not merely a tool of communication, but also a negotiator of one's origin and status (caste) in this particular case.

[16] De Alwis & Haputhanthri (2020: 146)

Figure 4. Hanusha Somasundaram, *Mother tongue*, 2016, mixed media on tea strainers, dimensions vary (courtesy of the artist).

In *Untitled II* (Figure 5), she combines her personal memory—the image of her mother with tea baskets—with one of the most epitomic historical images of Sri Lankan art canon—the *Sigiri Apsara* from 5th century AD (Figure 6)—leading to one of her most challengingly intertextual works.

The Sigiriya frescos have long been heralded as the most sublime classical painting in the Sri Lankan art canon for, quite literally, centuries. Believed to be built by Kasyapa I (477–495 CE) as a fortified palace complex with pleasure and water gardens, Sigiriya remains one of the most sophisticated examples of urban planning in the first millennium. Abandoned after his fall, it went back to being a rock shelter monastery once again, albeit this time with an elevated sky gallery full of *Apsara* paintings. As colonial antiquarian turned archaeologist John Still observes, 'The whole face of the hill appears to have been a gigantic picture gallery.'[17] Unlike the women who arrived centuries later to work in the hill-country plantations that Somasundaram paints, the women of Sigiriya have held a central place in the

[17] Still (1907: 43).

Figure 5. Hanusha Somasundaram, *Untitled II*, 2016, used tea bags and ink on paper, 55 cm × 37 cm (courtesy of the artist).

island's imagination. Not only do they appeal to 'modern' senses, we are aware that they have been the centre of attention throughout the centuries, simply from the visitors' feedback recorded on the 'Mirror Wall', containing graffiti starting from the 6th century onwards. Here is a selection of sentiments expressed for the *Apsaras*:

I am Lord Sangapala
I wrote this song
We spoke
But they did not answer
Those ladies of the Mountain
They did not give us
The twitch of an eye-lid.

Figure 6. Unnamed artist/s, *Sigiri Apsara* (figure B10), 477–495 CE, fresco/natural paint on lime plaster on Sigiriya rock, Sri Lanka (Bernard Gagnonm 18 January 2006, *Sigiri apsara*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sigiriya_ladies_01.jpg).

The song of Lord Kital
Sweet girl
Standing on the Mountain
Your teeth are like jewel
Lighting the lotus of your eyes
Talk to me gently of your heart.
Ladies like you
Make men pour out their hearts.

Archaeologists have deciphered nearly seven hundred such graffiti poems, dated between the 6th and the 13th centuries, enough to indicate that it was not just a courtly minority who responded to these works. Bandaranayake notes that 'the poems are not only revealing comments on the paintings themselves but also an insight into the cultivated sensibilities of the time and its appreciation of art and beauty'.[18]

[18] Bandaranayake (1986: 27).

Modern discourse on *Sigiri Apsaras* revolves around the interpretation of the figures. They are described as goddesses, courtly ladies, cloud maidens symbolising thunder and lightning, and so on. The limitations of our answers and our understanding indicate the problem with art from our past: without the systems of localised and temporal knowledge, we cannot know for certain who they really are or what they meant to their creators, patrons, and original audiences, even when we know the sentiments and impact on ancient audiences though Sigiriya graffiti. This has not reduced the power of the image, however; in fact, mystery usually leads to a heightened appeal, and the *Apsaras* are today mass produced as souvenirs, used in tourism promotion, and found in national art curricula, establishing the iconography as a popular and potent symbol of visual culture.

By taking the definitive figure of a *Sigiri Apsara* and juxtaposing it with the image of a tea plucker, perhaps her own mother, Somasundaram transcends the bridge between personal memory and public history. 'Much attention is paid to a group of inanimate women on a rock face while living, breathing women whose sweat and tears prop up our economy, are ignored', she observes, demarcating a critical space for dialogue with her 'other', namely those who are not plantation workers. The British, though currently absent from the scene, are nevertheless implicated in her own history, the story of tea; they are also implicated in the way the mainstream art discourses view the *Apsaras*. It is this intertextuality that gives Somasundaram's work the power to illustrate the conceptual tension Nora highlighted between history and memory. While the use of ancient iconography in modern and contemporary art is a fairly common approach among artists, not much attention has been paid to understanding how local artists make choices between tradition and modernity, history and memory, negotiating past and the present in personal and communal spheres.

The works of Jagath Weerasinghe offer another opportunity to explore layers of the past in contemporary art in Sri Lanka. Born in 1954, Jagath is not only senior to Somasundaram in age, he is both an artist and an archaeologist, an art historian and a teacher, and remains one of the most influential figures in the development of a new generation of artists who were more attuned to and bravely addressed contemporary issues in Sri Lanka. Weerasinghe himself coined the term '90s Art Trend', describing the politically conscious work of his peer group.

Weerasinghe belongs to the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist community, which plays an important role in his art practice. In an interview with Sabine Grosser, Weerasinghe describes his situation as 'highly influenced by the Buddhist traditions and destabilized by the postcolonial context as well as the long lasting political violence'. Grosser further notes 'Among other things, he was appalled by the attitude of the Buddhist clergy that supported the ongoing civil war—contrary to the

Figure 7. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Broken Stupa*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 54 × 40 cm (courtesy of the artist).

Buddhist philosophy. In his paintings he combines his examination of the virulent topic of war and violence in his country with his personal positioning as a Buddhist.'[19]

The *Broken Stupa* is one of Weerasinghe's earlier works, completed right after he returned to the island after studying in the USA (Figure 7). The socio-political disarray the island experienced in the 1990s possibly accentuated his reverse culture shock. Sri Lanka was recovering from an insurgency in the so-called 'Sinhala Buddhist South', and still fighting protracted civil war in the 'Tamil Hindu North'. The idea of continuity of the ethno-religious identity categories is a central historical narrative in Sri Lanka. This is captured in the '*wewa – dagaba – gama – pansala*' idiom, which

[19] Grosser (2015).

directly translates into pairings of 'tank/reservoir – stupa and village – temple' signifying the nexus of agrarian economy, community, religion and the overarching omnipresence of religion in the physical architectural form of the stupa (*dagaba*).

The stupas of Sri Lanka can be seen as a parallel to, for instance, the Pyramids of Egypt, not merely in their structural synonymity of precision, scale, and geometric simplicity, but also in terms of giving symbolic architectural form to national identity of the post-colonial state. Originating in India, the stupas were constructed across the dry zone tank civilisation that flourished in the island from around the 3rd century BCE to the 13th century CE by the ruling monarchs. It is hardly an overstatement to say that it is the dominant architectural form that defined a millennium and continues to do so today, where the island's religious majority is still Buddhist.

Weerasinghe, as a Buddhist, depicts this perfect, sacred architecture as broken and scattered, indicating a civilisation undone at its core despite its clinging to past glory. This depiction is almost sacrilegious. Instead of projecting its serene perfection—signifying the subliminal state of *nirvana*—Weerasinghe projects the chaos that he witnesses in his contemporary society, through the shattering of the stupa. In fact, he is projecting the lack of that subliminal state, the core Buddhist values that the majoritarian Buddhist polity no longer possesses. His rhetorical question 'And why do I think that I can make a perfect painting when everything else in the world is totally screwed up and collapsed …?'[20] sums up these sentiments perfectly.

Broken Stupa is not the only work of Weerasinghe in which he projects the disorientations of the present he lives in, through the past—through archaeological, architectural, and art-historical forms provided to him through his past—which certainly influence his sense of identity. *Celestial Violence* is a series of paintings produced in response to the rising nationalistic fervour Weerasinghe experienced in the country (Figures 8, 9). For him, the island with a so-called 'Buddhist' majority had experienced cycles of violence, which sat at odds with the philosophy of non-violence. Weerasinghe also notes that people try to justify and rationalise this paradox by always invoking narratives of a grand past, heavenly intervention, etc. So the violence, symbolised by the knives that were often used as weapons in communal riots, became a means to an end—a way of making a heavenly paradise on the island.

Weerasinghe is not the only artist in Sri Lanka who traces the historical trajectories through their contemporary compositions. Artists like Bandu Manamperi, Pala Pothupitiya, Anoli Perera, and Koralagedara Pushpakumara all showcase portfolios that are rich in material drawn from the past and in dialogue with historical narratives

[20] Grosser (2015).

Figure 8. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Knives in Heaven*, 2007, acrylic on canvas (courtesy of the atist).

of the past.[21] While these artists come from Southern Sri Lanka, mainly from a Sinhala Buddhist community, they do challenge the ways in which other contemporary artists like Weerakkody represent the past. Other artists such as Thamotharampillai Sanathanan and Jasmine Nilani Joseph have worked on their experiences of living through the armed conflict in Northern Sri Lanka. Abdul Halik Azeez and Firi Rahman capture the experience of their urban communities, sandwiched between the dominant Sinhala–Tamil identity dichotomy. The corpus of their work deserves proper attention, especially in understanding how their work can contribute to contemporary discourses on the past.

[21] The word count does not allow the author to delve into this array of works, but this corpus warrants an in-depth study into the topic.

Figure 9. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Celestial fervor*, 2007, acrylic on canvas (courtesy of the artist).

Conclusion: visual practices and the practical past

One of the first questions to emerge from the analyses developed here relates the nature of the past we encounter in the works of Somasumdaram and Weerasinghe. By reflecting on these artworks, one arrives at a nuanced understanding of the past—that is, that there are many versions of it, written, dug up, narrated, taught, recreated, represented, repressed, and forgotten. As observed in Sri Lanka, though most certainly not limited to it, the versions that get highlighted and the others that get dropped reflect the power hierarchies and agendas of those specific societies in specific times; These are the official narratives one encounters at national museums or find in history textbooks. The illustrations provided through the work of Prasanna Weerakkody indicate that the works of Somasundaram and Weerasinghe do not exist in a vacuum and in fact are responding to these grand and exclusive narratives. Weerasinghe attempts this by questioning his own identity and portraying traditional iconography in a critical light and Somasundaram highlights the missing voices and perspectives of her community in mainstream discourses.

The past encountered in the works of Somasundaram and Weerasinghe comes close to the notion of 'practical past', where the past is presently functional and fulfils certain needs for their creators and their audiences. To this effect Michel de Certeau observes that 'fiction is the repressed other of history'.[22] We see elements of this in Somasundaram's work: by bringing a group of people ignored by mainstream historical narratives, and by putting the focus on women, Somasundaram is reclaiming and filling a gap in history through her art. This functionalist interpretation can also be extended to Weerasinghe's work, but a semiotic reading can reveal the way in which the ideas and patterns present in their work refer beyond themselves through repeated, re-moulded, transformed, and appropriated iconography and forms. The works of these two artists provide a critical counterpoint to the official and even academic versions of the past, and the power relations present in contemporary Sri Lankan society.

However, this does not suggest that the grander and mythic representations of the past as seen in the works of Weerakkody are not functional for the Sinhala Buddhist majority. The opposite might actually be true. The overriding focus on an ancient/mythic past, the popularity of such representations as well as continued state patronage offered to these works, indicates the need to treat these works seriously, and bring them into a dialogue with the works of other contemporary artists from different communities.

Weerasinghe is both an artist and an archaeologist but considers himself as contributing to a critical understanding of archaeology, and through his visual practice, provide critical counterpoints to works such as those of Weerakkody. For instance, Weerasinghe notes that archaeological evidence is often inconclusive and ambiguous and are subjected to double hermeneutics. As we have lost certain contextual knowledges, we have to use our own modern frames of reference to interpret these material cultural objects of the past. Thus archaeological claims to the past can only be at best tentative. As in his visual practice, Weerasinghe counters some of the fundamental methodologies used in Sri Lankan archaeology in constructing the past.

While Weerakkody identifies himself as a historical painter,[23] Weearasinghe and Somasunderam do not necessarily call themselves so. Weerakkody depicts the stupas under siege from colonial powers; in other words, Sinhala Buddhist identity under external threat, while Weerasinghe depicts stupas broken with no visible external attack, symbolising the shattering of Sinhala Buddhist identity from within. While the former artist's work is easily considered historical by the common person, feeding into official narratives, the latter artist's works do not.

[22] de Certeau (1986: 29).

[23] See https://prasannaweerakkody.com/

But are the works of artists like Weearasinghe and Somasunderam, also history? Perhaps the more accurate formulation of the question is a more general and perennial one and is not to be limited to the work of the above artists. Is art, more generally, history?

In an article aptly titled 'Is art, history?', Svetlana Alpers discusses the history of history and art history as separate academic disciplines in the Western context, and the consequences thereof.[24] Griselda Pollock argues that 'crucial questions have not been posed about how art history works to exclude from its fields of discourse, history, class, ideology, to produce an ideologically "pure" space for something called "art", sealed off from and impenetrable to locate art practice within a history of production and social relations'[25]. Similar claims can be made regarding the historians, on the other end of the spectrum. In a moving reflection of his own experience of being a student of history, W.M.Meister claims that 'At the time at Harvard, "History" as a discipline depended on written sources: then common categorizations of "pre-history" (before written sources) and "proto-history" (with undecipherable sources), were left to the discipline of Archaeology.'[26] Fields of art and literature were entrapped within a 'pure' space, as Svetlana Alpers points out, and Meister observes the common clichés of the time as being 'the better the literature, the less it might offer as "historical" substance'. In a Sri Lankan context, the works of art by Weearasinghe and Somasunderam could be less recognised as historical representations as they challenge and provide counterpoints to the grand narrative, as well as providing an alternative methodology to mainstream historiography. As admitted by Weerasinghe himself, the past they talk about is far from being accepted in school history books, and their art from art-history curricula.[27]

These pertinent observations by a host of scholars, albeit from different disciplines, indicate the limitations of interpreting and understanding the work of contemporary artists, especially in non-Western contexts, and also explain to some degree the reasons for failing to assess and acknowledge their impact—for not considering art as significant historiographic contributions. Even the limited analyses of two artists presented in this article, clearly indicate the need for a more inclusive, fluid, holistic perspectives which are less rigid and categorical. Transcending disciplinary cleavages of history, archaeology, art history, literature, and memory studies as well as anthropology to the embodied practices such as art and performance can support researchers in finding better cultural models to understand our pasts.

[24] Alpers (1977).

[25] Pollock (1980).

[26] Meister (2019: 428–9)

[27] Weerasinghe, notes taken during artist interviews, 2020–1.

Furthermore, the artworks discussed above challenge temporal and spatial dichotomies: past–present, East–West, among others. In his practice Weerasinghe raises the bar by outright rejecting the ideas imposed by the West, such as a ‘perfect composition’. One can perhaps argue that this is what makes the Weerasinghe’s work exceptional, despite his training and extended exposure to Western models. The practices these works exhibit find their own localised, culturally specific visual languages to express truths, while effectively remaining accessible to audiences universally. When discussing other dichotomies, the history–memory tension one often finds in contemporary discourses resolves itself on these canvases. Fact and fiction, ancient and modern, myth and reality, sacred and profane, merge in the works presented.

Finally, through the iconographic, formal, and aesthetic reading of the works one can clearly detect the continuity of the past—in the forms of *Apsara*, as well as the stupas. However, they are also transformed on the canvases of these artists—an *Apsara* mesomorphs into a tea-plucker, and sacred, perfectly spherical stupas sink into formless chaos. Yet, one continues to recognise the stupa, the *Apsara*. By this I do not suggest an unbroken seamless continuity from the earliest depictions to the contemporary; nor do I suggest the opposite—a clean break or departure from the traditions. An attempt to do so leads to a reductionist and linear understanding of the past, which this article has tried to avoid from the outset. Instead of continuity or discontinuity, a more appropriate perspective, especially in terms of art practice can be said to rest on continuity and change. In use, language or art is constantly used to refer to, and comment on, real-life situations familiar to the performer and his or her audience. Even when one can observe cultural continuity through ancient creators and their present-day descendants, as seen in the iconography of the works of these artists, this in no way suggests that their meanings are the same as in the past.

Perhaps a fitting conclusion is to note that we may never conclusively understand our past, nor the art from our past, as we have lost those meanings and thus lack the temporally and culturally specific knowledge to do so. Similarly, understanding the works of the artists discussed in this article also requires temporally and culturally specific knowledge, which one must not take for granted. These artists make valuable contributions to modern historiography through their art, which are intricate palimpsests of the historic and mnemonic stratums; they do that through visually challenging ideas of reductionism and dichotomies taken for granted, thereby making their practices signifiers of the ways in which societies understand and express their past in relation to their present and themselves. The reason why we must enrich our forms of creating our past–present–future is that these exceed a mere attempt at understanding the past in our art—they are in fact, a most creative way in which we could gift the best of our contemporary selves, for our future.

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