

COLOMBO ART BIENNALE

MAKING HISTORY



When a young art biennial in a developing economy is mired in funding issues, logistical problems and resource shortages, it can often redeem itself through its content. In the case of the third Colombo Art Biennale (CAB 14), however, overarching infrastructural issues ended up affecting key aspects of the festival, including artist selection, artwork commissions and curatorial input. Co-founded by local gallerist Annoushka Hempel and artist Jagath Weerasinghe in 2009, the biennial has always been hard-pressed to secure state support or sufficient corporate funding. A week before the opening, rather unexpectedly, the Central Cultural Fund (part of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Culture) contributed LKR 1 million (USD 7,656) toward the event—but by then it was too late to make a significant improvement to proceedings.

Concerns about CAB still being registered as part of a private company and the ongoing predominance of foreign cultural bodies led various advisory board members to resign before the festival. Amit Kumar Jain, a Delhi- and Doha-based arts organizer who was invited to curate CAB 14's regional artists just four months before the event, admitted to *ArtAsiaPacific* that with so much focus on budgets and sponsorship, there was little time left for critical thinking or curatorial rigor.

Nonetheless, in a bid to make CAB 14 reflective of younger voices, Jain chose 30 local artists from an open call. Some of the artworks at the main venue, the JDA Perera Gallery, were thought-provoking takes on the festival's curatorial theme, "Making History." "Herstories" (2012–13) was a yearlong project by Radhika Hettiarachchi and Shanika Perera that chronicled 270 mothers and their narratives of loss, pain, strength and endurance during the 26-year Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009). Pradeep Thalawatta's wall-spanning print *Roadscape* (2012) depicts multiple images of himself positioned throughout areas of construction and destruction on the streets of Jaffna, where much of the political conflict had taken place. Other artists interpreted the theme more literally, with graduation-portrait-style images made from topographical maps (Pala Pothupitiye's "History Makers" series, 2014) and flag-draped statues that reenact the 1837

coronation of Queen Victoria (Manori Jayasinghe's *Crowning*, 2014).

Elsewhere, the Institute of Archeology showed a number of works that did not seem fully resolved but that nonetheless contained the seeds of some engaging ideas. Malaka Dewapriya's three-minute video, *Pristine* (2013), depicts a repeated, blurred image—reminiscent of aerial landscape views—seemingly trying to escape its borders as it crashes into the walls of the video frame. Gihan Karunaratne's diagrams and animated film follow the global movements of protestors and riot police, reflecting on our age of pervasive surveillance and social media. In the rather more up-market location of Park Street Mews, aesthetically pleasing works by established artists, such as TV Santhosh's sculpture of a headless horseman covered in digital clocks, *Effigies of Turbulent Yesterdays* (2011–13), and Rakhi Peswani's pastel-colored sacks of coffee hanging from the ceiling, *Inside the Melancholic Object* (2014), provided the main attraction. Such works, however, were dominated by the many, vaguely conceptual artworks scattered throughout the biennial, including several "live art" performances and dances, many of whose relation with the festival's theme seemed unclear.

With the city of Colombo in a state of flux between postwar beautification and the marginalization of local minorities, CAB 14 could have been an intriguing platform for artists to address contextual issues. The only reference to current power shifts in Sri Lanka, or to other apt propositions such as the use of art as "a silent weapon" or as "a healer," was made during the CAB talks held at the Goethe Insitut, which saw sparse attendance. Artists discussed the speeches that shape the dominant narrative of a nation, calling these "monuments of our time," to which "stories of silence" or "victims' statements" could be potential counter-narratives. They also talked about how, in systems of oppression, it is always the artist's responsibility to show people that "truth lies elsewhere." Looking beyond what was presented, there appears to be a wealth of untapped potential in this biennial—if structured, funded and curated ahead of time—to excavate and generate a host of ideas reflective of the local art community.

JYOTI DHAR

Opposite page

ANGKI PURBANDONO

After Party

2013

Scanographic print, 80 x 150 x 10 cm.

Copyright the artist.

Courtesy Mizuma Gallery, Singapore.

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PRADEEP THALAWATTA

Roadscape

2012

Digital print, 152 x 853 cm.

Courtesy Colombo Art Biennale, Colombo.