

Unresolved Ground

BY JYOTI DHAR

Voices from Jaffna



S. HANUSHA, *Leeches*, 2015, tea bags and ink, 21 x 36.5 cm. Courtesy Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo.

War and postwar, persecutor and persecuted, righteous and corrupt: the binaries of conflict are often more entangled than they first appear. Assembling and excavating hidden documents, reports and images in the wake of war can help complicate and dismantle such bifurcated narratives.

In the case of the 26-year Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009), which primarily took place in the north and northeastern parts of the island, the two opposing camps—the Sri Lankan army and the separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—destroyed and erased many vestiges of record. At the first international seminar hosted by two-year-old nonprofit Sri Lanka Archive of Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design (SLAAD) in April 2015, Sri Lankan academic and author Qadri Ismail described Jaffna—one of the primary sites in northern Sri Lanka embroiled in the civil war—as “a city without [an] archive . . . a city not at peace.” The phrases were taken from his own paper *Notes on the (Tamil) Self* (2015), in which he elaborates that we can

only interpret the residual juxtapositions of post-conflict stories, events and identities as those that form “no coherent picture; no homogenous whole.” On visiting Jaffna for the archive’s inaugural seminar, it was difficult at first to evince any sense of this enduring fragmentation of place and people due to the war. In fact, the eerily empty streets and the buildings devoid of scars seemed to be an extension of the absent historical markers. However, scratching the surface of the human story revealed countless untold and unacknowledged accounts of harrowing pain, displacement and loss.

Personal and professional disruption resulting from the war also marks the story of T. Shanaathanan, an artist and lecturer at the University of Jaffna who has been an instrumental figure in shaping art practice in present-day Jaffna. Sitting in SLAAD’s shaded courtyard last April, he talked of how, for many years, Tamils were not able to study art in Sri Lanka as the government had changed the language of instruction to

“100 percent Sinhala”—the language spoken by the majority of the country. As a result, many Tamil-speaking art students flocked to Madras University in Chennai, India. But by the early 1990s, when Shanaathanan wanted to apply, the option to study at Madras was no longer possible. The chief minister of the Indian state Tamil Nadu, of which Chennai is the capital, canceled all Sri Lankan seats in all universities statewide in response to former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination in 1991 by an LTTE activist. Shanaathanan ultimately went to New Delhi, where he earned a BFA and an MFA in painting at Delhi University (1993–2000), followed by his PhD at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (2007–10), known for its liberal, progressive and rigorous academic culture. He cites this as a pivotal experience, one that inspired him to re-create a similarly free-flowing and collaborative learning space upon his return to Sri Lanka in 2010. Shanaathanan joined the art history department at the University of Jaffna and began a complete overhaul

of its outmoded syllabi and pedagogical structures, in part by regularly inviting influential artists from the region as guest lecturers. As invited instructors, senior and established Sri Lankan artists Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Muhanned Cader and Pradeep Thalawatte all taught what Shanaathanan referred to as “intuitive and experimental courses,” often combining disciplines such as design and local craft with visual art. An atmosphere of questioning, researching and discussing was encouraged—elements missing in similar art schools across Sri Lanka.

Shanaathanan explained that his desire to broaden his students’ education was met with an equal willingness to learn and explore. He noted that he had taken his Jaffna-based students on repeated field trips to the Sapumal Foundation and the National Art Gallery in Colombo, but was surprised to later discover that many Colombo-based students had never been. “In Jaffna there is an active student community, whereas in Colombo there is an artist community,” he said of the difference between the two cities. In a similar vein, when Sharmini Pereira, co-founder and director of SLAAD, was asked why she chose Jaffna for the location of the archive, she replied, “The archive is in Jaffna not just because of what happened there . . . there’s not only an intellectual curiosity [in Jaffna], but also a real commitment to be a part of something.” The cultivation of a mature, dedicated cohort of art students in addition to Jaffna’s social, political and historical positioning make for a compelling combination.

While on our visit, photographer and curator Menika van der Poorten and I met with several young artists who had studied at the University of Jaffna, to learn more about their artistic practice and lives. “Each image [of mine] contains such long stories, full of complexities . . . violence, fear and pain,” said 30-year-old M. Vijitharan. As he showed us his portfolio of prints and drawings depicting headless palmyrah trees and the Kilinochchi water tower—the latter especially haunting

for its connection to the conflict due to being repeatedly attacked from 1995 to 2009—the young artist explained why he focuses on landscape: “People were displaced, but the land remains witness.” With the events still raw in his mind, Vijitharan drew a map of his family’s escape route during the Mullivaikkal massacre in 2009, the final stand of the war. Not all of his family made it—a shell fell on his aunt while she was making *roti* (flatbread), the supposedly safe and easy food choice during this time. Vijitharan later made an installation using four hot *roti* plates as a reminder of the moment. “The year 2009 may have been the end of the war, but it was the beginning of another problem,” he said solemnly.

Artists, such as 28-year-old S. Hanusha, concur that though the war may be over, many of the inherent divides, issues and prejudices persist. Hanusha’s intricate installations, often made up of delicately juxtaposed inanimate objects, such as teabags, strainers and tea-stained paper, explore the lives of *pettikaran* (Tamils who work in tea plantations for a minimal daily wage), a minority that suffers discrimination from both the Sinhala Buddhists and the Jaffna Tamils. In the midst of these ongoing tensions, Hanusha’s practice helps her stay buoyant. “I didn’t know what art was, what it could do,” she said. “Shanaathanan changed all that.” Like many of the students who trained under Shanaathanan, Hanusha returned to her home, in this case Hatton, to introduce elements of generosity and interactivity into the school’s curriculum as an art teacher.

The couple Sundramoorthy and V. Thujiba—both also practicing artists and art teachers—divulged larger psychological and social challenges that have resulted from the conflict. Working in the northeastern province of Mullaitivu, they described how a fractured societal structure has prompted rape, alcoholism and unemployment to dominate in certain parts of the landscape. Large-scale drawings of aggressive-looking, intertwining phalluses

snake across Sundramoorthy’s work, whereas Thujiba predominantly creates chaotically scrawled lines on paper, dotted with crows and foliage.

Some of these artists have found commercial success, showing and selling in exhibitions in Colombo, which remains the center for gallery activity and international visibility. Recent exhibitions, including “Seven Conversations” (2015) at Saskia Fernando Gallery, highlighted the work and issues faced by some of these young artists once they graduate and go on to live in several of Sri Lanka’s peripheral provinces. Both Hanusha and Vijitharan took part in the show, while 13 of their peers dropped out due to a lack of funds or familial pressures, such as securing supposedly stable careers and getting married. Mentors such as Pereira and Shanaathanan, who co-curated the show, continue to work on a number of initiatives to cultivate these young artists’ careers, address issues such as these, including the establishment of SLAAD—“a post-production discussion space,” as Shanaathanan calls it—and actively encourage individuals to go on residencies when opportunities arise.

Of course, for many of these young artists, simply being able to produce and exhibit critical work while supporting themselves through teaching is already a great step forward. “Most people just want to get on with their lives, but they want a better life,” says van der Poorten, who worked with artists such as Vijitharan, Hanusha and Thujiba during the noncommercial arts festival Cinnamon Colomscope in August last year. For now, it is evident that the work being made by many of these young artists not only references the conflict but is directly shaped by it. The ongoing consequences of the war, along with the lack of acknowledgement and record, mean that currently much of the art comes from the perspective of a living trauma, rather than a state of grieving, acceptance or post-trauma. Aman Mojadidi, an Afghan-American artist who has spent time with many Jaffna-based artists, said that in the past if artists of Tamil origin made work with overt sociopolitical messages, they may have been seen as supportive of the LTTE. Now that Sri Lanka is six years “postwar” and one year into the new, relatively liberal government, at least some of the stories and nuances of the conflict can begin to be revealed and explored, without being curtailed, judged or censored. In fact, the new administration recently talked about launching a “Truth and Reconciliation” commission in Sri Lanka to try and fill in some of the archival, documentary gaps from this unrecorded, unresolved war. “We’re never going to have the full story,” Pereira told us. “The notion of incompleteness is one we’re going to have to come to terms with.”



M. VIJITHARAN, (left to right) *Motherland II, III and IV*, found ammunition and wood, dimensions variable. Courtesy Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo.