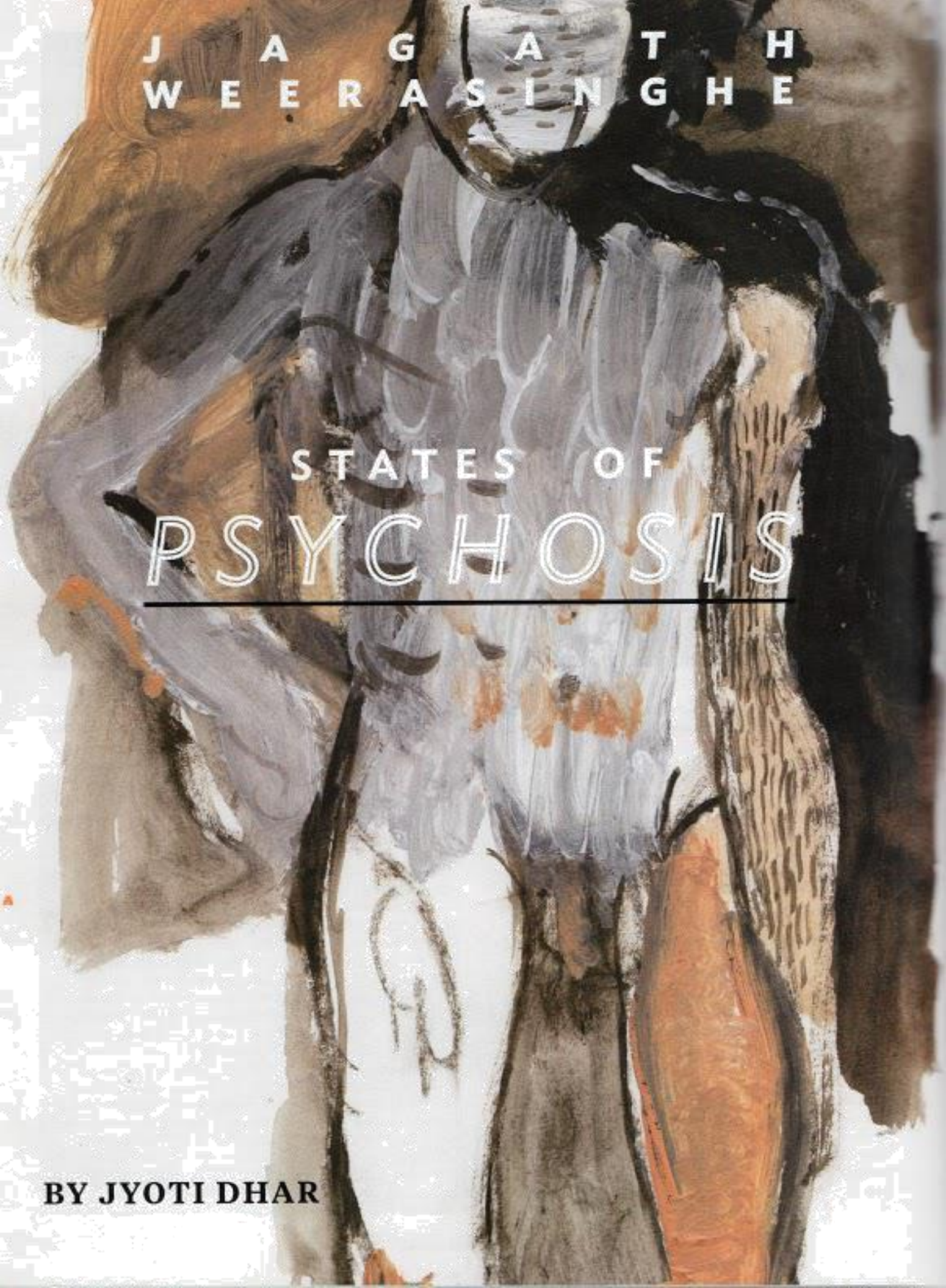
JAGATH WEERASINGHE
STATES OF
PSYCHOSIS
BY JYOTI DHAR

(Opposite page)
A work from the series, "**THE ONE YEAR DRAWING PROJECT: MAY 2005–OCTOBER 2007,**" 2005–07, watercolor and pen on paper, made in collaboration with Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Muhanned Cader and Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan. Courtesy the artists and Raking Leaves, London.

(This page)
Nimal Mendis breaking a coffin as part of an untitled performance staged at the opening of the exhibition "Anxiety" at the National Art Gallery, Colombo, 1992. Courtesy the artists.

Anxiety, Guilt and Productive Shame

Anxiety is often characterized by its pathological effects: its paralysis of the mind, its interference in our daily lives, its potential "to choke" the body, as per its etymological meaning. In philosophical terms, anxiety—alongside its compatriots, guilt and shame—is a concept that has been described very differently, as the beginning of consciousness and subjectivity, or as an unexpected gift, and even as a possible form of freedom. As theorist and curator Suzana Milevska has written, "In his seminal book *Postcolonial Melancholia* [2005], Paul Gilroy made a distinction between 'paralyzing guilt' and 'productive shame,' thus entrusting shame with certain affirmative features, as potential for overcoming the collective affect of guilt . . . however . . . there is still very little written about the positive potentialities of shame as a movement of a certain epistemic agency that may prompt the overcoming of the initial traumatic experience of facing and looking at truth." As part of an attempt to redress this, a number of analytical texts in a volume edited by Milevska, entitled *On Productive Shame, Reconciliation, and Agency* (2016), extrapolates from the idea that such psychological states can actually be generative, suggesting that they may help uncover wider social truths and alter our relationship to them. The author's critical writings—drawing upon a range of post-conflict situations from the aftermath of the Holocaust and the Bosnian war to Apartheid crimes and the Rwandan genocide—outline how artistic practices may be able to mobilize these residual traumatic states in empowering and enabling ways.

That potentially productive relationship between the traumatic past and artistic practice has underpinned the trajectory of artist and archaeologist Jagath Weerasinghe, ever since he mounted his first solo exhibition, in 1992, in the midst of Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war. Staged at the National Art Gallery (NAG) in Colombo, the show was not titled "Anxiety" ("Kaaansaava," in Sinhala) on a whim. Rather, the young graduate's showcase of disturbing, gestural paintings was informed by his readings of modern German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, and nearly a decade's worth of guilt and angst-ridden reflections on a seminal moment in the country's history, and in the artist's own life—the Black July Riots of 1983. Considered by many to be a trigger point in the ensuing conflict, the riots followed an attack on 13 Sri Lankan soldiers by Tamil separatists, leading to Sinhalese groups killing hundreds, if not thousands, of Tamils in response. Weerasinghe can still recall that calamitous day on July 23, 1983, when he was returning home from Dambulla to Colombo by bus—and suddenly saw scenes of chaos and violence unfold in front of him on the arterial Galle Road, where mobs had set fire to scores of shops, homes, vehicles and people. In the years that followed, he continued to record, and rerecord, his reflexive feelings of confusion and terror in his sketchbook.

"My mind that raced across the Galle Road was gripped by an unknown fear . . . Hideous beastly figures emerged in the street in the distance. I saw them burning away at will, and sucking human flesh and blood. Those magnificent creative monuments of man's age-old annals broke into bits within my being." This extract from Weerasinghe's sketchbook-diary, translated from Sinhala into English and Tamil, was shown as a framed excerpt in "Anxiety," alongside several canvases, drawings, an especially composed musical soundtrack by Senaka Batagoda and the first-known work of performance art to take place in Sri Lanka. The untitled performance included fellow artist-friends: Anna Puff painted her face white, wore a long cape and gave out flowers to the audience, while Nimal Mendis, dressed in black, broke coffins in the middle of the gallery with the help of Sarath Kumarasiri and Wijitha Bandara. "It was something crazy, and people loved it," Weerasinghe recalled when we spoke in March.

What garnered critical acclaim at the time, however, were Weerasinghe's markedly provocative paintings of decapitated heads,

broken *stupas* (dome-shaped Buddhist shrines), dead bodies and birds. "The immediately striking aspect of his work is its frenzied, passionate expressiveness and a pervasive sense of horror and tragedy, displaying an urgent concern with the human condition," the revered professor Senake Bandaranayake wrote in a review in the *Sunday Observer* on November 22, 1992. While the painting *Broken Stupa* (1992) was overt in its symbolic reference to Buddhist iconography, other works retained references to national heritage, such as those with text along their borders in a nod to a motif employed in paintings from the 18th- and 19th-century Kandyan period. In one, the line "My heart burnt like a fire when the April moon came" masquerades as a love song, though it also refers to a political uprising by the Marxist-Leninist group Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in April 1971. In another, *I Have Got Enough Guilt To Start My Own Religion, Crucify Me* (1992), Weerasinghe circumscribed the words on a series of drawings with the same title—inspired by a Tori Amos song—around the drawing of a vigorously hatched, monochromatic nude figure hunched over on the floor. The appropriation and amalgamation from art history and current culture, as well as the deployment of multidisciplinary and experimental components, signified that "Anxiety" was a decidedly different exhibition—"contemporary," even. Recognizing a shift in artistic approach and subject matter, some commentators have suggested that the exhibition, along with Chandraguptha Thenuwara's solo show "Moscow Paintings" in 1992 at the NAG shortly after Weerasinghe's, was the beginning of the "political turn" that was to define contemporary art produced in Sri Lanka in the 1990s.

Though such seminal exhibitions were primarily a response to the wider conflicts simmering across the island, Weerasinghe's artworks also stemmed from an internal one—set in motion by his particular response to, and sense of complicity after, witnessing the events of July 1983. "My first thought when I saw what was happening was, 'This was inevitable. You started it,' and then I thought, 'No! How can I think that? I'm supposed to be a Buddhist,'" he now explains. "Hence my diary note implied that there was also racism within me." In light of this, the guilt and shame that drove Weerasinghe's original depictions of the events in "Anxiety" are brought into context. As Suzana Milevska suggests in her introductory essay for *On Productive Shame*: "The role of the third person—the witness—brings in the societal aspect of shame and thus shame is particularly linked to a sense of anxiety." In that way, Weerasinghe's exhibition "Anxiety" had addressed a crucial need: the production of a political consciousness in art that allowed for a critique of both self and society.

Suffering and Shrines

We are told that the rational mind often has trouble processing the atrocities of war. Weerasinghe was only 29 when he wrote that note in his diary, but his struggle to come to terms with the identity-based violence that underpinned the conflict—at times he alternately labels himself as a Buddhist, a Marxist or a romantic nationalist—has remained central to his practice. Mapping the 62-year-old's life as an art practitioner in Sri Lanka's capital city in many ways traces the parallel histories of the country's cultural and political movements. Weerasinghe was born in Moratuwa, a suburb of Colombo, in 1954, just as tensions between the island's Sinhalese majority and Tamil minorities were escalating from a simmer to a boil. Spurred on by a surge in nationalist sentiment following Ceylon's independence from the British in 1948, parliament enforced the controversial Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which made Sinhalese the sole official language of the country, at the exclusion of Tamil. Alienating minority ethnic groups, the law polarized people across Sri Lanka and led to ethnic riots in 1956 and 1958. As Milevska writes, "Shame and pride are reciprocally and undoubtedly connected with belonging or not belonging to a certain state and its politics."

Set against this tense backdrop, Weerasinghe grew up in a household where ideas of civil rights and social justice were nurtured. His father was an avid Marxist and acting registrar of the Supreme Court. The artist recalled that his first experience with injustice and "helplessness at the hands of organized violence" was in his first year at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, University of Kelaniya, in 1977, when he was "abducted by parliamentary thugs, given a good beating, and dumped on the beach." This was a volatile year for students; a new prime minister had introduced fiscal reforms that left state universities underfunded. Weerasinghe was a student union leader at a time when the "universities began to boil."

(Opposite page)
BROKEN STUPA, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 51 x 64 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page)
A work from the series "**I HAVE GOT ENOUGH GUILT TO START MY OWN RELIGION, CRUCIFY ME,**" 1992, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 43 x 35.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo.

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Weerasinghe's own work continued to probe the concept of the lonely or anxious individual, often "aligning [his] personal pain with social pain.

At art school, Weerasinghe was immediately drawn to his peers Kingsley Gunatillake and Chandraguptha Thenuwara, although the artists were not always politically aligned. He remembers how one of the most influential teachers to all three students was abstractionist HA Karunaratne, who taught them the importance of intuition and personal conviction. Another professor, Stanley Abeysinghe, emphasized art as an intellectual practice and as a body of knowledge, and was the first to incorporate the Ceylonese modernist '43 Group into the art-history curriculum. Professor Senake Bandaranayake was instrumental in theorizing the "proto-modern" style—a term later coined by Weerasinghe, building on Bandaranayake's research—of artists such as early 20th-century Buddhist-temple muralist M. Sarlis, and presciently described art history as multi-linear and multi-centered in his book *The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka* (1986).

After graduating, Weerasinghe decided to join Bandaranayake in the town of Dambulla and train under him as a mural conservator. In pursuit of this field, the artist later went to study in Rome and Los Angeles—where he recalls being equally fascinated by the paintings of Michelangelo and Caravaggio as he was by those of Francis Bacon and Anselm Kiefer. In particular, he related to Kiefer's depictions of human suffering, a subject that consumed him even while abroad. After studying, apprenticing and traveling overseas, Weerasinghe was not ready to come home just yet. In another life-changing moment, he walked into American University in Washington, DC, with his portfolio of drawings, and was remarkably granted a scholarship for the MFA program. He spent four years in Washington, broadening his readings on religion, feminism and art history, and laying the foundation for his own committed approach to teaching.

In many ways, however, Weerasinghe's story has never been simply his own. Just as he returned to Sri Lanka from the United States in 1993, his friend Thenuwara arrived from Moscow. While they had been away, reports of horrific violence during a second JVP uprising in southern Sri Lanka from 1987 until 1989, had deeply disturbed them both. Curator Sharmini Pereira, who had also returned after finishing her first master's degree, describes how the three of them met around this time and became "inseparable," spending days together in Thenuwara's studio discussing "work, politics, personal circumstances and burning questions around the lack of spaces for contemporary art and how to change things." As a result of this extended engagement, Pereira curated the critically significant exhibition "New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art" in 1994 at the NAG.

For this exhibition, Pereira transformed the "aircraft-hangar-like" space, along with several volunteers—including two architects from Geoffrey Bawa's firm—into a more stimulating setting, painting walls and constructing a dark tunnel at the entrance out of borrowed plywood. Into this experiential setup, Pereira placed flying-machine and army-figurine sculptures by Tissa de Alwis, a 1971 film of a Sinhala folktale by Tilak Samarawickrema and figurative paintings by Thenuwara about the death of journalist Richard Manik de Zoysa in 1990. For his contribution, Weerasinghe presented three semiabstract paintings—where the central panel resembled both a distorted body and the national heritage site of Sigiriya rock, next to a white cloth on the floor adorned with lit candles and seven pillows with sculptural heads on them. While some audience members judged the piece, entitled *Shrine II (Of Innocent Saints)* (1994), as "not real art," it was essentially one of the first installation works produced in Sri Lanka.

Though other artists in South Asia were similarly moving from painting to installation, partially in response to the political currents of the time, Thenuwara reminded me when we spoke that there was "little awareness and dialogue" between the region's practitioners back then. What made these artworks significant for Sri Lanka is that although there had been some "protest artworks" before (including those by artist SH Sarath and Nayananda Vijayakulatilake, in response to the uprising of 1971), this was the first time, as Pereira explained to me, that contemporary artists were working with "a language addressing political instability." Also, as part of reflecting on an "unresolved political moment," these practitioners consciously chose to stage the exhibition at the NAG and to invite as their chief guest the country's former president, JR Jayewardene, who was believed by some to be responsible for the civil unrest in Sri Lanka. Five years on, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who came into power just after the NAG exhibition, would commission Weerasinghe to memorialize one of the worst massacres of the JVP uprising, in which 33 children from the village of Embilipitiya were abducted and murdered. Developed from *Shrine II*, the public

(Opposite page)
CELESTIAL VIOLENCE, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 89 cm. Courtesy the artist and Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo.

(This page)
Installation view of the public peace memorial, **SHRINE OF THE INNOCENTS**, at Kotte, Sri Lanka, 1999. The monument was later destroyed in 2012. Courtesy the artist.

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A work from the series, "**THE ONE YEAR DRAWING PROJECT: MAY 2005–OCTOBER 2007,**" 2005–07, watercolor and pen on paper, made in collaboration with Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Muhanned Cader and Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan. Courtesy the artists and Raking Leaves, London.

(Opposite page)
MAN WITH KITCHEN KNIFE,
2009, lightbox with running lights, 133 x 123 x 10 cm. Courtesy the artist.

monument *Shrine of the Innocents* (1999) was later erected near the parliament building. While Weerasinghe says that the first shrine was "a way of looking at the whole massacre," referring to the widespread violence of the JVP uprisings, the second was not only a far more specific reflection on trauma, but also an official and public recognition of some of the worst violence that took place during those years.

The Collective, Embodiment and Reconciliation

In his book *Artists Remember; Artists Narrate: Memory and Representation in Sri Lankan Visual Arts* (2012), sociologist Sasanka Perera suggests that the politically conscious art of "the '90s trend" (also a term that Weerasinghe coined) was not entirely without precedent, as art in Sri Lanka has never been completely delinked from the discourse of power and politics. While this may be true, theorists do recognize that the 1990s marked an "epistemic break" from the previous generations, such as the '43 Group—who were an elite group of artists combining European approaches with local subject matter to create contextual and hybrid forms of modernism—due to the fact that these were artists from a distinctly middle-class, Sinhala-speaking background. When we spoke in March, Thenuwara recalled that many of the artists of their time grew up surrounded by tragedy and poverty, and that such hardships served to strengthen their ideas and solidarity. Partly in response to artists asking for Weerasinghe's and Thenuwara's mentorship upon seeing their NAG exhibitions, and partly in response to the need for an alternative and informal space for art, Thenuwara set up the Vaibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA) in 1996.

Weerasinghe, Gunatillake and others came to teach at VAFA and "to share their knowledge and experience with those who had no chance of going to university," explained Thenuwara. Around this time, Weerasinghe also met Anoli Perera, Muhanned Cader and T. Shanaathanan, who all went on to shape the contemporary landscape in their own ways. "Things were beginning to change and everyone was together at one stage," Weerasinghe says of this collaborative moment. He was also struck by the students he encountered—such as Bandu Manamperi, Pushpakumara, Sarath Kumarasiri and Pradeep Chandrasiri—who had spent time in torture camps during the second JVP uprising. "They embodied me," he says in a way that explains the fatherly responsibility Weerasinghe went on to assume for such artists—eventually forming the Theertha International Artists Collective with them in 2000. Reflecting on their own sociopolitical contexts, many of Theertha's initial performance seminars, which began with a seminal workshop at Lunuganga (Geoffrey Bawa's garden estate) in 2003, centered on the idea of the afflicted human body within the larger body politic. In particular Manamperi's performances, *Body in Ashes* (2003) and *The Bandaged Barrel Man* (2004), explored the physical and psychological pain that an individual endures within wartime conditions.

Parallel to such collaborations, Weerasinghe's own work continued to probe the concept of the lonely or anxious individual, often "aligning [his] personal pain with social pain." As part of this, the male body was a motif that the artist came back to time and again—whether it was in his numerous depictions of the "Long-Necked Man" (1989–93), the many versions of the Hindu god Shiva in *1,000 Shivas* (2000–06) and *Dancing Shivas* (2007-), or in his multiple drawings of kings, demons, buddhas and bodies as part of *The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005–October 2007*, a mail-correspondence project organized by Sharmini Pereira with four artists. Asking Weerasinghe about the driving force behind such imagery reveals both artistic and psychoanalytical sources. Whereas the former includes the "class expression" in Lionel Wendt's black-and-white nudes, the eroticism in David Paynter's portraiture and the anxiety in modernist Justin Daraniyagala's paintings, the latter includes his own complex relationship with his father.

It was not until the catalog text for his "Celestial Fervor" exhibition at Theertha's Red Dot gallery in 2009, however, that someone proposed a Freudian analysis of Weerasinghe's work. In the catalog, Anoli Perera delved into the artist's exploration of his own masculine identity, uncertainty and homoeroticism. References to ideas of masculinity are evident in many of Weerasinghe's male nudes, often depicted with their legs splayed apart and phalluses on display, and in paintings such as *Shiva Nataraja* (2007), this veers toward a questioning of divinity and destruction. It is interesting to consider that *Shiva Nataraja*, alongside paintings such as *Celestial Violence: Knives in Heaven* (2007), were made during the highly charged, final stages of the conflict, but only shown after the end of the war, a controversial time when some were intent on celebrating peace and others, such as Weerasinghe, felt the need to acknowledge the violence—both chronic and acute. "Celestial Fervor," therefore, acted as a crescendo point for several of the artist's preoccupations. As Perera wrote, in this show, "Weerasinghe links the notions of homophobia to the pathological violence manifested in society in a multitude of ways such as . . . ethno-chauvinism, racism, religious fundamentalism, sexism and machoism."

The central installation in "Celestial Fervor" is made up of a blacked-out nude male figure holding a knife, whose outline and central weapon is lit by saffron light-bulbs. The life-size *Man with Kitchen Knife* (2009) looms out of its frame; its fusing of masculinity, violence and religion are overtly apparent. The hilt of the knife, for example, hangs down between the figure's legs, becoming one with the phallus. The use of saffron, as well as the illuminated sculpture and decorated float-like construction of the installation, mimics motifs used in Buddhist festivals in Sri Lanka. For someone such as Weerasinghe, who had spent his life studying the ancient heritage sites in Sigiriya and Dambulla, this moment in time embodied a perversion of the idea of nationalism and Buddhism. Indeed, in an interview given to journalist Sanjana Hattotuwa just days after the end of the war, Weerasinghe had provocatively proclaimed, "We have betrayed Buddhism to its core."

In the eight short years that have passed since the end of the war in 2009, Weerasinghe and his contemporaries, such as Thenuwara, have continued to critique the residual issues derived from civil conflict as well as to engage with the authoritarian policies of the state in their respective solo exhibitions, such as Weerasinghe's "Decorated" (2014) at Saskia Fernando Gallery and Thenuwara's "Beautification" (2013) at Lionel Wendt Gallery. Both exhibitions were established artistic responses to the government's rapid urban renewal project after the war, which saw barricades, barbed wire and memorials—including Weerasinghe's *Shrine of the Innocents*—swiftly replaced with promenades, shopping areas and parks. At the time, many artists felt these new "decorations" for the city were disturbing, as they attempted to erase the past, overlook ongoing post-conflict issues, and reaffirm the presence of a dominant political power.

In conversation earlier this year, Weerasinghe told me that he is currently in the process of working on "a book that looks very beautiful on the outside, but when you open it, it reveals a story of violence." The volume will reference notions of the sacred, the past and Sri Lankan heritage, with a focus on how these concepts are manipulated to justify violence. "I'm not interested in why people get violent," he said. "It's when you try to justify violence through a historical or sacred idea. That's inhuman." It is clear that a sense of individual guilt and collective responsibility still pervades much of his practice and psyche today. Following Milevska's approach, we can see how Jagath Weerasinghe has translated a potentially paralyzing anxiety into something more productive, current and conscious, how he has mobilized collective memory and social shame into a shrine that gave agency to the survivors of war, and how he has confronted hegemonic narratives and allows room for those of difference.

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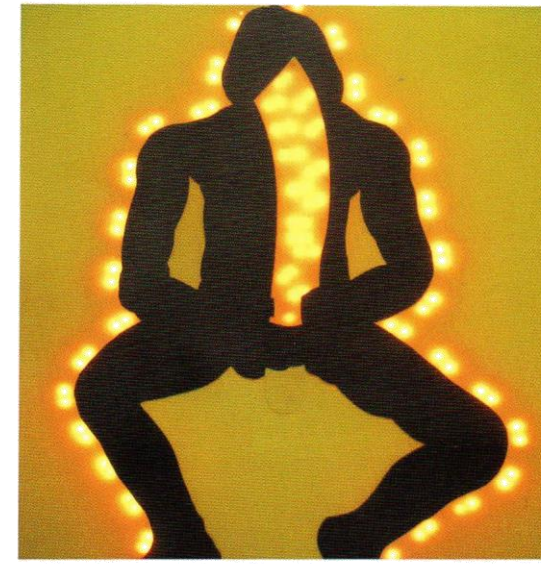

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