

Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative
No Country: Regarding South and Southeast Asia Part II
Symposium at the Queens Museum of Art, Thursday April 18, 2013
Edited video presentation by Sharmini Pereira

So, the name of my talk responds to the title of the exhibition, as you can see, “Country.” I plan to introduce you to the work of a handful of Sri Lankan artists who are all quite different, yet all concerned, in some way or another, with the idea of “country” in their work.

I came across this exhibition poster some time back—it says, “Sinhalese and Tamils are the people that make up Sri Lanka.” It informs us that Sinhalese and Tamils are inhabitants of Ceylon. It tells us two things. They have legal residency, and they occupy a place. I presume that the brackets were employed as a device for providing that extra bit of information. However, the bracketing of this information also means the words stand out visually. To our modern sensibilities—or at least, mine—the parenthesis carries a sense of visual fracture.

In South Asia, while Sri Lanka is unique for being an island, and not an interconnected set of divided territories, Sri Lanka is the only country in the region to have been through—and not yet quite finished—a thirty-year civil war.

The problematizing of ethnicities, and the effects of this conflict in Sri Lanka, have indeed been leitmotifs throughout the work of many Sri Lankan contemporary artists since the early nineties. And I’ve chosen to show you an image which you wouldn’t perhaps expect to see. It’s a work by a female artist called Anoma Rajakaruna, and it’s called *Pots*. She says, “These pots have an ethnicity, too. The clay pots are used by Sinhala people. The brass pots are used by Tamil people. Women who fetch water for their families from both communities come together with their pots at the common wells in many villages, on the border of the conflict zone. They not only share water, they share life, too.”

This is a work by Chandraguptha Thenuwara. It dates from 1997. Amongst other things, it explores this idea of freedom. The artist purchased this map from the survey department. It’s one of the earliest works by Thenuwara, in his ongoing *Barrelism* series, which began in the form of a manifesto by the artist, which aimed to make visible the militarization of the urban environment, concealed within the symbol of a camouflaged barrel. If you note, around this frame of this map, you’ll see small painted barrels. These “barrelscapes,” as Thenuwara calls them, have become an iconic feature in the country, and operate as a recurring motif throughout Thenuwara’s practice. The artist has said of his work, “By reproducing the barrel, to represent the truth I questioned, the very notion of security. Security is necessary, but the question is, security for who? Is it security for the people? Or those in power? Who is being protected? And from whom?”

Here are two more works, again showing a map of Sri Lanka. This one shows Thenuwara’s continued interest in camouflage. It shows the country as a place that is hidden beneath a layer of weapons. This second one responds specifically to the situation north of the

country, towards the end of the war in 2009. Chandragupta writes: "I watch the images of people who had been trapped in the areas controlled by the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam], as they crossed over into the no-war zones in May 2009. The borders of these 'no-war zones' had been defined by barbed wire. We saw people running along the corridors marked off by the barbed wire. I imagine that the barbed wire that was there for so long would, in time, intermingle with the natural thorny bushes and scrub from that area, and generate an entirely new landscape. I wanted to depict barbed wire entangled with the debris of nature."

I actually came across this poster dated 1948, which would have been produced when Sri Lanka was on a war footing during World War II. And the translation of the text is: "Recycling campaign has begun." It's marvelous to see how history has a strange way of also being recycled, I think. It makes me think of that famous line by Burke, "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it."

I want to turn to another expressive representation of "country," the flag. The creation of the country's official flag in 1950 by D.S. Senanayake, the country's first prime minister, registered the country's independence from its colonial past. It's called the Lion Flag.

The lion represents the ethnic Sinhalese, and the bravery of the Sri Lankan nation. The maroon background represents the majority Sinhalese. Like the lion, this is the color used in early flags of the ancient kings of Sri Lanka. The orange stripe represents the Sri Lankan Tamils. The green stripe represents the Sri Lankan Muslims. They're the third-largest ethnic group in the country. They're about 9.2 per cent of [the population]. In short, the national flag of Sri Lanka represents the country and its heritage as a rallying device that integrates the minorities with the majority race. However, the flag makes graphic that the Tamils and the Muslims are minorities. The flag's coding demarcates the supreme rule of the Sinhalese over the Tamils and the Muslims; they are not equals. The flag preserves their inequality.

Here are two other bodies of work that also deal with the idea of the flag. The first is by Chandraguptha Thenuwara. It's a body of work that explores a series of drawings under the title *This Is Not a Flag*, in homage to Magritte's well-known work *The Treachery of Images* from 1928–29. Magritte's painting portrays a large, single pipe, and at the bottom of the painting it says in French, "This is not a pipe." Magritte's point is quite simple: The painting is not a pipe, it's an image of a pipe. *The Treachery of Images* displays Magritte's interest in asking the viewer very simply to question their reality, what they see, and what they are told.

In Thenuwara's series of works, the point is as simple. The works portray an array of white triangles. At the bottom of each runs the line, "This is not a flag" in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Like camouflage that conceals something, these works do the reverse, and show the white flag is missing, like an inverse camouflage. The white flag, a universal symbol of peace, is missing, but present as a trace and an outline. Or as a crumpled sheet of paper, like something that has been tossed into the wastepaper bin. These works were made after 2009, when peace was declared.

This is a work by T. Shanaathanan that relies on having multiple perspectives and the interplay of narratives to create its meaning. This work was made in 2009, and is drawn from three hundred individual stories of home. Each bottle contains an object or keepsake that reflected the idea of home. The plastic bottles, I note, were an item collected by people in Jaffna. When the government imposed embargos on the North, they were used to grow plants, like small incubators. This work was created, however, in Vancouver, with the Tamil diaspora, as a follow-up to a similar piece that was made in Jaffna in 2001. I actually haven't been able to show this material in Sri Lanka due to the sensitivity of some of the materials. All LTTE materials, flags, posters, et cetera are banned in the country.

I inserted this next set of works by Arjuna Gunarathne to give you a feel for some of the figure-based work going on in the country, and to add here as well that this particular artist studied in Pakistan, and learned when he was there to paint using the Mughal miniature style of painting. I would also add that this is another quite important but much overlooked way in which the region is often not curated through the teaching practices and pedagogical overlaps.