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Past master

Sri Lankan artist Anoli Perera seeks to complicate the past through memory



In 2011, two years after end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, the government dismantled Jagath Weerasinghe's "Shrine of the Innocents", a public memorial for children who died in the south of the country between 1988 and 1991. This removal struck fellow artist Anoli Perera. "After the war, I could see a lot of things being erased," Perera, who currently lives in Delhi, told us when we met at her studio. "The government started cleaning up and beautifying Colombo, and in the process, they dismantled this monument." This anxiety over losing the past runs through *Memory Keeper*, Perera's first solo show in the capital, with the artist taking on the role referred to by the title.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the installation "Left Behinder", about the Burgher community of Eurasians, who migrated from Sri Lanka in the years following independence "because the atmosphere became too nationalistic". Perera partly drew upon her own memories of Burgher neighbours in Colombo's outskirts in the 1970s. "Left Behinder" visually interprets a poem by Dutch Burgher poet Jean Arasanayagam, on her anxieties and memories of people leaving, and of looking for her identity through old family recipes. A trunk lies at the centre of a canopy bed, surrounded by bottles containing old scrolls of recipes. Projected on a mirror above it, Perera's video "The Lost Doll" shows a lonely Burgher woman searching around her home for photographs, an old doll, and recipes. The walls around the bed are covered with rose-patterned wallpaper, on which Perera printed black-and-white family portraits of Burgher families she knew in her childhood. "We lost a particular culture. Their presence had cosmopolitanism," Perera said. "This ultra-nationalistic discourse tended to remove the vibrant aspects of the culture. And with the war, we lost touch with Tamil culture."

Perera also used craft techniques like embroidery and lace-making in this piece: the bed is draped with white lace curtains, the bedcover is embroidered with Arasanayagam's verse, and the video can only be seen through the prism of a crochet cover. Although she trained in stone carving, these threadwork skills are a recurring feature in her installations. "It's very familiar to me," Perera said. "I grew up in an environment of women embroidering and stitching."

The personal also comes to the fore in two other installations. In the first, Perera displays her own family's photographs of women playing tennis or at weddings, printed on a crochet instruction booklet and displayed in a revolving box on an antique wooden table. Perera believes these images of a

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more cosmopolitan time are a way of questioning the concern with “being authentic and pure Sri Lankan” during the civil war. A second piece looks at the political and social milieu of her childhood years using cushioned balls, set with occasional peepholes, through which you can see photo-collages of life before 1977: the winner of the Miss Ceylon beauty pageant; an image of the first female prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike embossed with the word “non-aligned”, and that of her husband, former prime minister SWRD Bandaranaike with the word “aligned”; scenes from ’70s urban romance films; and of people queuing up to purchase bread. “I always call it between-eras because earlier it was post-colonial, nationalistic movements,” she said. “In 1977, there was a major transformation with an open economy. It was also a crucial time, politically and economically. The government was socialist, so people don’t want to remember that.”

The gentle nostalgia of these pieces contrasts with the dark imagery of “Ghosts of Swarna Bhumi”, which makes a direct reference to the human and cultural devastation caused by the ethnic conflict. Three figures shrouded in black dresses stand together, each carrying a round box (Perera calls these “wombs”) around their abdomen. The prints and drawings inside these “wombs” subtly critique nationalism: for example an old library in Jaffna destroyed during the war, or Tamil cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan celebrating the team’s 1996 World Cup win, superimposed over an old map of the country. Perera extends the gendered symbolism: a black rope (a stand-in for umbilical cord) connects each “womb” with three others on the floor that contain lists of the dates and locations of wartime skirmishes.

Perera is one of the co-founders of Theertha – the Sri Lankan artist collective which argues for socially engaged art. She brings a critical edge to her art even when it is shaped by the experiential. “[The exhibition] is about rereading history through an art process,” she said, “because of which it is rooted in the Sri Lankan context.” By intertwining the personal and the political, *Memory Keeper* takes a critical look at the history of the island nation, bringing to light a past which might not always fit well with the present, but must be confronted.

Memory Keeper is at Shrine Empire Gallery from Sun Jan 20.

By Sonam Joshi on January 18 2013 11:57am

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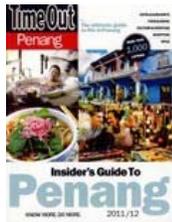
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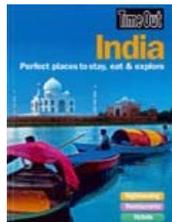
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