

# Drawing across borders

by Jayne Dyer, Australian artist and writer living in Beijing



**Ren Han (China),** *Soft Impact*, 2013, paint, architectural debris, performance, dimensions variable. Photograph by Geng Han.

## China: 21st-century introspection?

Today's generation of young artists face a very different China from the post Mao halcyon days. Emerging artist Ren Han's (b. 1984, Tianjin) participation in *Consciousness* at Tianjin Art Museum, Tianjin, 2013, indicates a drawing praxis with a visual interiority and a quiet intellectual/material contradiction that simultaneously mirrors and refutes expected thematic and spatial relationships, referring as much to absence (what is lost? denied? unattainable?) as to presence.

Simply executed with graphite pencil or pigment, site-specific installations and discrete drawings slide between objective and non-representational form, that owe as much to his postgraduate training in France as to systems of cartography and classical Chinese calligraphic ink painting. Ren Han challenges assumptions about what constitutes drawing. *Soft Impact* (2013) exists only in documentation. Constructed in an abandoned factory site, the artist drew a perfect circle on a wall, filled the circle with black pigment and proceeded to assault the wall with detritus — fragments from the site, such as machine parts, building materials. Resulting in accidental, white marks

penetrating the black void, Ren Han created what he describes as a 'landscape'. His massive wall drawing *Little Labyrinth* (2011) appears simultaneously as a fractured landscape viewed through a wide-angled lens and as unidentified microcosmic fragments from a demolition site. China in transition. Ren Han identifies the speed of change, boom-time uncontained, an environment compromised; presented from a distance, silently...

## Sri Lanka: war / post-war

The Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the north and east and the Sri Lankan Government affected a generation of artists who lived a social and personal reality of conflict and displacement.

The collaborative *The One Year Drawing Project*, between four pioneering Sri Lankan artists, Jagath Weerasinghe (b. 1954, Moratuwa), Chandraguptha Thenuwara (b. 1960, Galle), Thamotheerampillai Shanaathanan (b. 1969, Jaffna) and Muhanned Cader (b. 1966, Colombo), tracks a 29-month drawing exchange to 2007. Drawings were swapped by post, between Jaffna in the north and Colombo in the southwest; centres that have been, and

continue to be, ideologically and ethnically polarised. This seminal visual archive offers an acute lens to the civil war and is considered one of the most innovative contemporary art projects that has taken place in Sri Lanka. Commissioned as a Raking Leaves publication, the project was launched at Art Dubai 2008 and exhibited in *The 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009.

Dr. Virginia Whiles describes the activity as 'no parlour game'.<sup>1</sup> She suggests: 'The works were daily performances undertaken in the spirit of diarist documentation: 208 pages of 52 sketches by each artist manifesting his reaction to the war-mongering factions which have tormented Sri Lanka for the last decade.'<sup>2</sup>

While post-war, next generation artists' interests have diversified, the legacy of Weerasinghe, et al. is evident in *Jaffna Map* (2010) by Pala Pothupitiye (b. 1972, Deniyaha). Awarded the 2010 Sovereign Asian Art Prize, the work, drawn in ink and pencil on an antique map of the northernmost tip of the country, is a powerful pointer to Sri Lanka's geopolitical landscape during the height of the war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. We are familiar with mapping as a scaled portrayal of geographical

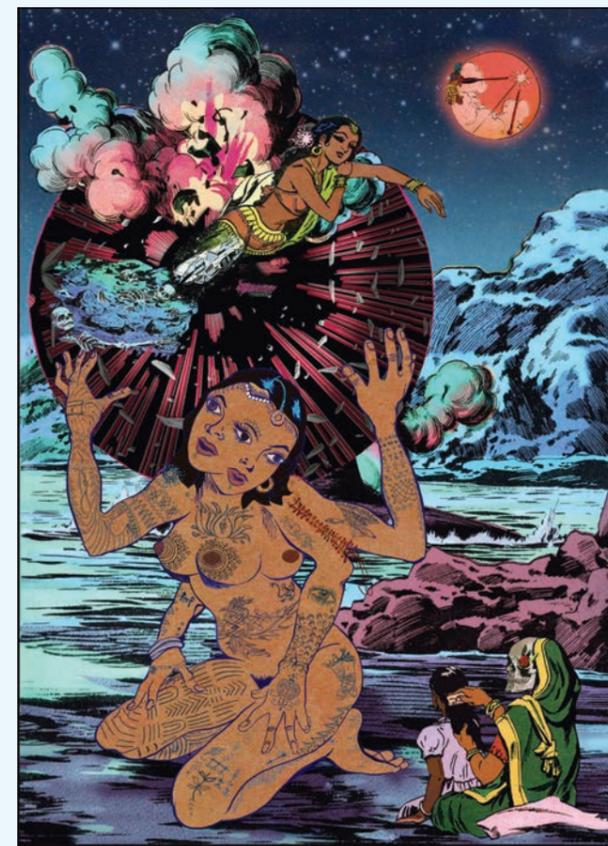
features and political borders. Pothupitiye makes metaphorical extensions to these conventions, revealing evasive ethnic territories and identities and raising questions about the problematic construct of what is and what may constitute a national identity. *Jaffna Map* was included in *Making History*, the 3rd Colombo Art Biennale this year.

## India: heritage and identity

Chitra Ganesh's background (b. 1975, New York, Indian-American) offers an arms-length relationship with India, possibly permitting her license to probe attitudes to female identity and behaviours that expand to South Asian history, imperialism and queer politics.

Her subversive, popular *Tales of Amnesia* (2002-07) was included in *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today* at Saatchi Gallery in 2010, with a related series recently exhibited at the Gallery Espace booth in the 2014 India Art Fair. *Tales of Amnesia* appropriates the trope of the comic book, referencing the Indian comic books of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) that retell stories from the great epics. Ganesh adopts the stylisation and direct storyline where good triumphs over evil, but subverts expected content.

**Pala Pothupitiye (Sri Lanka),** *Jaffna Map*, 2010, pen and colour pencil on printed map, 66.0 x 91.5 cm. Courtesy Hempel Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka.



**Chitra Ganesh (India),** *Atlas*, 2013, archival lightjet print, edition 1 of 3, 175.3 x 127.0 cm. Courtesy Gallery Espace, New Delhi.

The traditional hero (Hanuman, monkey god) is supplanted with heroine Amnesia (a pubescent, adolescent Indian girl) who expresses social and cultural attitudes that 'delve headlong into themes of female sexuality and aggression in ways that are equally playful and provocative, using imagery derived from Hindu mythology, Bollywood, comics and science fiction'.<sup>3</sup>

While Ganesh incorporates traditional drawing media such as charcoal and ink wash to produce large-scale wall and paper works, *Tales of Amnesia* evolved as a seamless union of technologies. Produced as digital C-prints that are part hand, part computer generated, Ganesh starts with brush and

ink drawings, then scans, manipulates, collages; at ease with both physical and virtual languages.

Since 2004 Ganesh has been working collaboratively with Mariam Ghani (b. 1978, New York, Afghan-American) on *Index of the Disappeared*. This on-going archive tracks censorship and data erasure post 9/11 in America. *Index of the Disappeared: Secrets Told* opened in February 2014, a site-specific installation presented as part of an artist in residency at Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University. •

## References

1. Dr Virginia Whiles is an art historian, critic and curator. She is Associate Lecturer at Chelsea School of Art, London, and teaches at National College of Arts, Beacon House University, Lahore. Sourced: *The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005 – October 2007* by M. Calder, T. Shanaathanan, C. Thenuwara & J. Weerasinghe (2008), <http://www.rakingleaves.org/book-projects/>
2. Ibid.
3. Jeff Tompkins, Interview: 'Artist Chitra Ganesh Evokes "Ghost Effect" of Silent Cinema [Images]', Asia Society, NY, 14.05.2012. <http://www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/interviews.Tompkins.pdf>

In early 2014 Jane Dyer attended the Colombo Art Biennale in Sri Lanka and participated in the India Art Fair held in New Delhi, where she met Chitra Ganesh.

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# Drawing in the limit: notes towards a (brief) sketch

by Marcelo Guimarães Lima

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In 1947 Brazilian artist Flávio de Carvalho (1899-1973) stood by his sick mother's bedside and recorded in a series of drawings the final agony of an aged woman dying of cancer. The series, with the descriptive title: *Minha mãe morrendo — My mother dying* (later also known as *Série Trágica — Tragic Series*), was exhibited in 1948.

This series of portraits — for they are indeed unique portraits, a compounded *death mask* — were done with an economy of means and a clarity of touch that translated the motions of extreme human suffering into clear and urgent graphic forms. They presented the pathos of death with urgency and yet with relative sobriety: from a close point of view and, at the same time, with the kind of detachment proper to the type of vision, the *seeing* which is, in fact, that of the artist in the process of observing and recording the inherently unstable, movable forms of reality.

For, indeed, a kind of displaced identification with the figures of reality is for the artist what brings close to the mind (and to the mind-hand connection, the *thinking as making* that characterises drawing) the realities of things and processes or their true configurations. Displaced, that is, in the *object* of vision, as another object, in the *act* of seeing, as another vision, in the *time of vision* itself as another time. A time prolonged or suspended in and by the powers and the constraints and limitations of aesthetic form.

All funerary related art wants to preserve the 'likeness' of the deceased person against death itself: in the graphic (drawn, painted, incised, sculpted) representation of different times and places, what once was is made present again here, now and for the future, as representation appeals to memory countering the destructive powers of time. In Flávio de Carvalho's series, the focus is the event itself: the final event in which the subject is disclosed in all its frailty, in the last universal event of life. The subject, that is, ourselves, in the very particularity and universality of our condition as creatures of flesh (universally sons or daughters), attached by the flesh and the spirit to others and living through, thereby, each other's fortunes and misfortunes, in all of life's joys and miseries.

The portrait, any portrait, is always already a 'death mask', the record of what was and is no longer, gone with time. All funerary art is a *memento mori*, the remembrance of the departed that serves also to remind the living of their own mortal condition. An artistic or art-historical 'ancestry' to Flávio de Carvalho's series can perhaps be located in Late Medieval funerary sculpture: the *transit* tombs. The *transit* tomb portrayed the king, or the nobleman or high church dignitary, in the process of physical transformation by death, symbolically with a cadaverous counterpart figure or partially transformed into a cadaver.<sup>1</sup> The modern artwork is, of course, informed by a somewhat different experience and concept of human time and of human transience, and a different perspective on the ideological dimension, the functions or 'uses' of art, conscious or otherwise.

When first exhibited in São Paulo the *Série Trágica* drawings were met with public shock and disorientation.<sup>2</sup> It contributed to establish the artist's reputation as a kind of 'artiste maudit' of Brazilian Modernism.

Flávio de Carvalho was one of the most important and innovative artists in modern art in Brazil, and yet, for a long time, a relatively marginal figure in the narrative of the history of Brazilian art.<sup>3</sup> He was a de facto pioneer, in the first part of the 20th century, of artistic initiatives that only in the second half of century would be recognised as belonging to varieties of conceptual art and performance art (for instance: *Experiência no. 2*, from 1931, and *Experiência no. 3*, in 1956.)

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