

Features

Strokes of desire



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Pala Pothupitiya and Aruna Vidana Arachchi's Art Exhibition

By Radhieka Peeris

Convergence in works of Contemporary Artists - Pala Pothupitiya and Aruna Vidana Arachchi presenting suppressed innate sexual desires of human through sculptures and paintings was launched on 9 December at Hempel Galleries, 30/3, Barnes Place, Colombo 7 with Annoushka Hempel and Pala as co-curators of the exhibition.

Hiding behind umbrellas, escaping from rigid societal norms of what's "right and wrong", exploring, enjoying the closeness of one another, delving in each other's sexuality - a common sight in parks, beaches and other spaces dedicated to public recreation in Sri Lanka. Pala's work entitled "Umbrella Lovers" a variety of acrylic paintings on canvas and paper has been inspired by the visions experienced during his train commutes from his hometown of Deniyaya to Colombo. He said that the umbrella lovers need that special place that provides private spatial freedom under that umbrella to be who they long to be.



Aruna Vidana Arachchi's "Other Object of Desire"

Aruna puts into play a subtle yet poignant interpretation of the Theory of Deconstruction in a collection of sculptures depicting the male human body. The deconstruction of masculinity and machismo obscured by normative gender roles has been uprooted in his sculptures. Fibreglass figurines of gold coloured men lying on pink cushions in a posture that is traditionally associated with a woman, half men with butterflies embedded in their inner thighs and underwear, pink cactii on pink cushions with butterflies

signifying the underlying femininity in a man, half bodies of men representing the presence of their suppressed yin speaks of myriad unspeakable realities.

Annihilating the superfluous concept of masculinity by inserting the soft, fragile innocence of a butterfly - these sculptures speak to the viewer beseechingly to re-think in terms of a man possessing the ability and longing to express his sensual yet feminine feelings and desires. Aruna says the 1977 Sri Lankan open market economy, green flagging global products to reach the common man, encouraging a wider choice in consumer goods –led to companies recognizing and using the male body to market its products like perfume, body lotion etc. This shifted gaze to recognize man as being an object of desire in consonance with the dominant object of desire still being reserved for the woman.

The breaking down of gender roles associated with a man is what he wanted to achieve said Aruna. “A man can't cry, a man always has to be strong, a man is not a man if he does not display even a streak of violent machismo, a man paying attention to his looks is laughed at and considered effeminate, and by virtue of being born a man has to sacrifice his innate human feelings – if he cries society mocks saying “don't cry like a woman” – does he have no avenue whatsoever to express his innermost feelings of sadness? Instead does he have to lead a suppressed life to please society adhering strictly to societal norms?” Aruna's thought provoking contemporary art work attempts to create such dubious thoughts in one's mind.



Annoushka Hempel, host of international and national art exhibitions, Founder and Director of Colombo Art Biennale and Co-curator of this exhibition hosts exhibitions with strong messages in her gallery, and the subject matter of this exhibition appealed to her in every sense of the word she says. Commenting on the works on display she says being of European background where things like kissing in public is not looked at as an abnormal deviation, she was quite perturbed when she saw umbrella lovers on beaches and parks; however, she later understood the unspoken charm in the surreptitious construction of private, temporary, shadowy spaces of lovers under umbrellas. According to her this entire exhibition is about the lack of freedom of sexuality.

While Pala's work, according to Annoushka succeeds in representing the romantic charm of hidden love which is misunderstood and deemed decadent by many; Aruna's work is androgynous in the sense that he has created by way of subjective interpretation a symbolic statement relating to homosexuality which is technically illegal in this country. Living in Sri Lanka for the past nine years it always surprises her that the strongest instinct of all humanity, the basic essence of procreation – sexuality, is a taboo subject. This charming and aesthetically pleasing exhibition actually addresses those poignant issues she says.



The reluctance of norm bound society to be more open and accepting of people living their lives expressing their sexuality and sexual orientation was the common thread that bound both artists at this exhibition.

If a picture paints a thousand words then why can't we open our mind when we see one? Why is the most natural and basic feeling between a man and a woman taboo? Why are people ostracized for being themselves? Aren't we all humans with ticking hearts and rational minds needing the freedom to live in love the way we long to? Feelings of love are just as they should be, between any couple no matter what the sexual orientation. Love will always be love even though it maybe subject to one's personal interpretation...one stepping out of the Hempel Galleries that evening may in all probability have been privy to such "taboo" thoughts...

Photography: Pamod Nilru

Other Images



