

A conversation with Sri Lankan artist Chandraguptha Thenuwara

Darshana Medis
25 November 1999

“With my barrels I seek to provoke people's minds and raise civil consciousness to question the war and make them actively participate in the efforts to stop the war.”

A young Sri Lankan painter, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, has developed a specific identity through his own concept called “Barrelism.” His latest exhibition, *Camouflage*, held at the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA Gallery) in Ethulkotte (a suburb of Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city), was not large, but included some remarkable works (see: “A superb exhibit on militarism”). Thenuwara was interviewed by Darshana Medis on behalf of the WSWs a month after the exhibition.

Darshana Medis: Please describe the way you developed as a painter.

Chandraguptha Thenuwara: As any other painter, I liked to sketch from my childhood. The existing education system and the social value system was bent on destroying the artist in me by pushing me forcibly towards the science stream. But fortunately I failed to get through the “O” levels and then I was permitted to study art subjects. In 1978, I enrolled at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Colombo and graduated in 1981. Around that time I learned the Russian language. After sending a portfolio to the State Academy of Fine Arts (Surikov), Moscow, I was selected for advanced studies. After completion of the Masters Degree at Surikov, I became a full-time artist.

DM: How did you form the concept of Barrelism?

CT: Although I have held several exhibitions since 1978, the major turning point in my career was Barrelism. Everyone understands that this is not a spontaneous concept. After the notorious July incidents in 1983 and the subsequent [anti-Tamil] pogrom, I didn't hear of any good news from my country during that period. When I came back in 1992 the racist war was going on with full force. Roads, along which we earlier walked freely, are blocked-off with barrels. Meanwhile, a woman leader—Chandrika Kumaratunga—came into power with a big promise of peace. But the only result was the spreading of the war to the capital itself.

Usually, I have very much preferred to draw the human figure. But today, if someone requested me to portray the present state of Sri Lankan society, I have nothing else but to draw barrels. Why? Barrels have occupied the space around us, that no one can deny. An artist especially can't afford to ignore this truth, and this situation inspired me to draw “Barrelscapes” instead of landscapes. I publicly declared the concept of Barrelism in May 1997 at an International Artists Camp held in Sri Lanka

DM: Could you explain in your own words the social reality which is symbolised by the barrel?

CT: In fact, the tar barrel is not an innocent object anymore. It symbolises state power and Sinhala racism. You can see that the yellow colour is widely used for painting of military barrels. Generally, the meaning of camouflaging an object is to avoid drawing special attention to it or to hide it. But, the yellow colour draws one's attention quickly. For example, the major colour, which is used to paint road signs and pedestrian crossing lines, is yellow. Then, what is the purpose of yellow coloured military barrels? To show the power. Thanks to the overwhelming presence of barrels, the government maintains its power over the masses. On the other hand, barrels provide security for the centres of power. I have tried to express this reality through the image of barrels.

DM: Your previous exhibition, *Barrelism*, was solely comprised of painted barrels. What did you hope to achieve by arranging these barrels in a gallery?

CT: Visual media are represented in the galleries. Coloured barrels displayed at isolated points cannot necessarily be held up as works of art. Art should be baptised and kept in galleries.

Not only in Sri Lanka, but also in many countries, metal barrels are used for the needs of the military. But it was only here that I saw such colourfully painted military barrels. These barrels represent a frightening reality because they are a permanent, organic part of life and, what's more, a state of nature! This is horrifying! So, I wanted to construct a “third eye”. In bringing those barrels into the gallery, my intention was to severely shock the spectator. It is shocking to see barrels invade our private space, our consciousness.

The barrels painted by the authorities stand guard for the so-called security of people and as a symbol of the ongoing racist war, where as those painted by me stand against war.

DM: The paintings *Thousand Barrels* and *Victor*, I feel, are the most beautiful among your recent exhibits. Could you reveal the specific experiences, if any, on which you based these paintings?

CT: In the case of the first piece, I was stimulated by the concept of the “Thousand Buddhas,” which is a very popular belief in Buddhist literature. Manifestations of Buddhas aside, we see the mushrooming of thousands of barrels around us. Likewise, we have another myth which is deeply rooted in our culture: “Three Hundred and Thirty Three Million Gods.” The common man sought security from these gods. Today, they have been replaced

by the military. Perhaps, my next project may be called as “Three Hundred and Thirty Three Million Barrels.”

The other painting was created when the government forces launched the operation “Jaya Sikuru” (victory assured)—I called it as “Parajaya Sikuru” (defeat is certain). Defence Minister General Anuruddha Rathwatte spoke of a great victory while thousands of soldiers were dying on the battlefield. They didn't even have honourable deaths. So I tried to show the actual condition of the soldier who was held high as the victor.

DM: Once you said that war is an organised crime. War atmosphere is not limited to Sri Lanka, but it exists almost everywhere in the world under capitalism. The recent Balkan invasion of NATO, the embarkation of foreign forces in East Timor, Russian attacks against Chechnya, etc., indicate that we are on the threshold of another world war. How do you grasp this situation as an artist?

CT: I feel that imperialism is responsible for most of these wars. These are not wars of the people. I don't believe in war and terror. As an artist, my job is to tell the truth. With my barrels, I seek to provoke people's minds and raise civil consciousness to question the war and actively participate in the efforts to stop the war.

DM: Do you think that the war could be stopped merely by questioning it, or by strengthening the civil society?

CT: No. Certainly a political struggle is also needed for it. War is a political phenomenon and my art is political too. It is temporary and contemporary. I believe this issue-based art contributes to the struggle against war.

DM: Could you say something about the foreign exhibitions you have held so far?

CT: All of my solo exhibitions were held in Sri Lanka and in Russia. Apart from these, I have participated in several group shows in Bangladesh, the Netherlands and England. Recently, I had an opportunity to install a barrel monument at Raizen Park, Fukuoka in Japan. This park was built in memory of the dead in the Second World War, and I named my exhibit the *Monument for the Innocent Victims of War*. Another exhibition titled *Cities on the Move*, containing the works of South Asian painters, including myself, is touring around Europe and America these days. It began in Vienna (Secession) and then passed through France, Brooklyn (P.S. 1), Denmark (Luciana Museum), London (Hayward), Bangkok and it has now reached Helsinki (KIASMA—The Finnish National Gallery).

DM: Do you have any plan to express your creativity beyond the concept of “Barrelism”?

CT: A good idea. But, the problem is that the barrels have blocked my view. How can I paint the sky as it hardly can be seen? And I can't use the colours yellow and green to paint flora and fauna anymore because I use them to paint barrels. Barrels have grabbed one of the basic human rights: the right to freedom.

DM: There is another kind of barrel which is now found together with the camouflaged military barrels: Those of carrying product advertisements. For example, at a barricade in Colombo we can see a lot of barrels stencilled as “Sunvita Biscuits”. How do you look at this newly emerged trend in using military barrels for commercial advertising?

CT: Of course, this is also a very good idea for a work of art.

There is another barrel-notice at the Colombo-Kandy road with the challenge “Stop! Vendol Balm.” The sponsoring companies very well know that these barrels are more permanent than billboards. And those advertisements bring maximum returns as everybody is compelled to stop or slow down at a barricade.

DM: In New Delhi, you told the *Indian Express* that you dream “One day the guns would fall silent, peace would prevail and the 'wounded soldier' would lay down his arms and return to his village.” What would you say if I add that it would happen only under socialism?

CT: That's your wish. I haven't given up the hope.

DM: Let's turn to another topic. What are the problems faced by a painter in a country like Sri Lanka?

CT: I think you mean about the costs of paints and brushes, etc. Actually, the expenses are very high—especially for oil and canvases. You know all of us are paying taxes for the war even when we take a glass of water out of thirst. Likewise, the artist has to pay taxes even on newsprint paper. However, this mostly affects the dedicated easel artists. But, for an artist who seeks new avenues, there are plenty of alternative materials. For example, it is easier to buy a barrel than a canvas.

But the artists who seek wider public exposure face greater difficulties. They can't on their own afford the expenses in organising exhibitions, reserving galleries, advertising, etc.

DM: You also contributed to last year's world-wide protest launched by the Socialist Equality Party against the LTTE's abduction of four Tamil socialists. We were able to get them released as a result of it. What conclusions do you draw from that campaign?

CT: Of course, it was a great victory for all of us. It is essential to mobilise international support in such a situation. The ethnic conflict cannot be solved without a clear political struggle. I strongly believe that the war will end through the help of such actions.

DM: I would like to know your attitude towards the *World Socialist Web Site*.

CT: I have to say it's a very interesting site. I have visited it several times and seriously followed the Arts Review section. Also I have downloaded some articles for the use of my pupils.

DM: Would you like to mention your electronic address for the readers' benefit before winding up this discussion?

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