

# A superb exhibit on militarism

## Camouflage: An exhibition of paintings and etchings by Chandraguptha Thenuwara

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A series of paintings and etchings by a noted Sri Lankan artist, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, was exhibited recently at the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA Gallery), in Ethulkotte, a suburb of Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city. Entitled *Camouflage*, the exhibit consisted of 27 works, including a number of remarkable pieces.

It is quite evident that visual art has gone through a period of sharp decline in Sri Lanka since George Keyt\*. Although a great many young artists have entered the field, it is very seldom that one comes across paintings that could be considered great works of art. In such an atmosphere, Thenuwara's efforts acquire a significant value.

The word "camouflage" means a change in one's appearance, especially the natural colouring of animals or painted objects, in order to adapt to environmental conditions. For example, this word is widely applied to the disguising of military uniforms, vehicles and equipment by painting them or covering them to make them blend into their surroundings. Thenuwara also uses the term "camouflage" in this precise meaning.

Last year, he held an unorthodox exhibition with steel barrels, which reminded us of the Dadaist works in the early decades of the century. He called it "Barrelism". In this exhibit, Thenuwara showed how black steel barrels, which contained asphalt used to pave the roads, were "camouflaged". He had a strong interpretation of the piece of art he created with these barrels:

"Once upon a time there was a barrel. It was used as a container and was 35" in height, 23" in diameter, cylindrical in shape.

"I first saw this barrel alongside the roads when I was a child. It was on a fire. Workers took boiling tar from

it to cover the road. I was happy because roads were being constructed and roads reduced the distance between relatives and friends. Roads also brought villages closer to towns and linked regions.

"With the war, that innocent barrel changed. It was camouflaged colourfully with paint. Many barrels invaded the towns and cities, including Colombo. These barrels became a part of the landscape. They created "barrelscapes" (exhibition catalogue, June 1998, "The story of a barrel").

Thenuwara's latest exhibition could be identified as a further progression in his concept of Barrelism. This time, instead of putting colour on barrels, he paints some tragic experiences faced by Sri Lankan society under militarism and the racist war against the Tamils in the North and East of the country. Here also he has given priority to jungle colours.

Generally, in representative art, the purpose of the background of a painting is to enhance and intensify the feelings, emotions and thoughts expressed by the content and released through images. But in Thenuwara's paintings the camouflage background is also an image. On many occasions, in fact, the background itself emerges as the principal image. It identifies the war and the military power of the state as lying behind the social problems that are depicted in his paintings. Hence he creates different paintings with the same background. Indeed, the image is so strong that he manages to elevate the mere background into the basis of perfectly independent works (e.g., *Camouflage*—ii and iii). This is a very rare accomplishment, which could be acquired only by mastering the art form.

Apart from that, Thenuwara also shows his skill in graphic art—engraving, etching and aquatint techniques.

Here, however, the viewer mostly experiences a sense of monotony because the artist presents the very same pictures already displayed in colour.

Some of the distinguished works in the exhibit include the following:

*Thousand Barrels* —i (acrylic on plywood): A beautiful barrel design. The large plywood sheet (96" x 48") is completely covered with many small barrels placed close to each other from top to bottom and from left to right, reminding us of the militarisation of the entire country, without sparing any nook or cranny. The other version, *Thousand Barrels*—ii (oil on canvas), differing only in size (43.5" x 32.5") and colour combination, could be regarded as a masterpiece. These two works alone are enough to indicate that Thenuwara's art has attained an international level. Indeed, these barrel designs deserve to be compared to the compositions of Mondrian or the abstract works of Jackson Pollock.

*Victor* (oil on canvas): A soldier who walks towards the front with the aid of a crutch and the other hand turned into a rifle, also used as a crutch. His entire head is covered with a combat helmet. Here lies an implied meaning: the mercenary has no head, no independent thought. He only has a body, which obeys orders coming from the top. The red background symbolises the river of blood stretching behind the so-called victory.

*Madonna*—i and ii (oil on canvas): These are not portraits of "Mary and child" as the title suggests, but nursing mothers who are victims of a racist war and militarism, as the camouflage background informs us.

*Untitled* (oil on canvas): Several females widowed or displaced due to the war. This painting also emphasises the fact that most sufferers of the war are female.

*Untitled* (aquatint): A small statue of Buddha on a camouflaged barrel. Expressed with a sharp irony, it not only makes use of Buddhism as a scapegoat for the racist war, but also shows the military as the guardian of the religion.

On the basis of a viewing of these works one feels that Thenuwara is the foremost painter in Sri Lanka at present. He is exploring territory where no one has gone before. However, there is an important point to which the artist's attention should be drawn: There is no way of transforming his Barrelism into a common artistic style such as cubism, expressionism,

impressionism, etc., because it bears a specific meaning only under the conditions of war.

Therefore, Thenuwara is confronted with the question as to whether he should remain with Barrelism or emerge from that framework to paint other experiences. Thenuwara clearly has the intuition and the skill necessary to undertake that challenge.

**Note:**

\*George Keyt (1901-93) was the most celebrated Sri Lankan artist of the century.



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