

Beautification: An exhibition by Sri Lankan artist Chandraguptha Thenuwara

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4 April 2014

Beautification, last year's solo exhibition by Chandraguptha Thenuwara at the Lionel Wendt Gallery, was a response by the veteran Sri Lankan artist to the Rajapakse government's urban renewal project in Colombo.

After the more than two-and-a-half decade brutal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sri Lankan government is "beautifying" Colombo as part of its efforts to transform the city into a new Asian financial centre and attract foreign investors.

Tar barrels used for military checkpoints, which previously dominated city life, and were the subject of previous exhibitions by Thenuwara, have been removed. Paths, parks and various buildings are being constructed to revamp the city.

The project, under the direct control of the ministry of defence, involves the forcible eviction of tens of thousands of poverty-stricken, inner-city residents. Shanties, cottages, small- and micro-scale enterprises, offices and even old monuments have been destroyed in the process.

Like most of Thenuwara's previous exhibitions, last year's show challenged viewers' expectations. The walls of the gallery were almost empty. Most of the artwork was on the floor. Ready-made cement paving bricks—a ubiquitous symbol of the government's urban renewal—were used as the artist's canvass. Although the various items are explained separately here, the exhibition was an installation work and an integrated unit.

On entering the gallery the viewer did not sense any immediate difference. Although the floor appeared to be a normal brick pathway, the bricks—red, white and yellow—were painted, cast and sculptured, with several arranged in square-shaped plaques.

Camouflage (4' x 4'), the first of these, was an abstract design similar to those in the artist's 1999 exhibition of the same name. The brickwork plaque contained bas-relief pieces of military uniforms, bullets, rifle stocks and body parts, and reminded the viewer of the human devastation unleashed during Sri Lanka's three-decade war.

Bones (4' x 4'), another plaque, was a mosaic of skeletons

and reminiscent of the mass human grave recently discovered at Matale in the Central Province. Most of the more than 150 bodies unearthed there are believed to have been youth murdered during the military crackdown on riots against the United National Party (UNP) government in 1988–89. The youth were led by the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

Thornes (4' x 4'), a similar work, depicted strands of concertina razor wire, the same type used in the military-controlled Tamil refugee camps in the North.

The latter two works were attractive and appalling, and a stark comment on the Sri Lankan ruling elite's criminal record and its current "beautification" project.

The exhibition also included some large paintings. The most distinguished of these was *Lines: Black Painting* (acrylic on canvas, 6' x 4'), a triptych. This remarkable abstract work consisted of lattice-like patterns with green and yellowish—the Sri Lankan military's official colours—the lines gradually disappearing into thick-black setting.

Thenuwara's show partially reveals a reality that the Rajapakse government's "beautification" is trying to hide—that ethnic discrimination, militarisation of society and judicial corruption continues. Thenuwara's installation gives some sense of the darkness, oppression and tightly-regulated nature of post-war life. While the war ended in May 2009, the government's repressive measures were not just directed against Tamil minority but the working class as a whole.

Colombo no longer has military checkpoints on every corner but state surveillance is being tightened everywhere to monitor workers, students and other oppressed layers coming into struggle against the Rajapakse government's austerity measures. The government's "beautification" project allows people to enjoy shady parks, jog or walk through circular lanes or rest on nearby benches but there are certain conditions. You cannot leave the laid-out tracks. Your space, in fact, is restricted by an invisible boundary and your gestures are monitored by an invisible eye.

Thenuwara told the WSWs he did not oppose the concept of beautifying the city but "implementing this without the

blessing and participation of citizens” was “harmful.”

“King Pharaohs in ancient Egypt built colossal pyramids in order to ensure their dominance and superiority over common man,” Thenuwara said. “Likewise, this city beautification, which is being carried out forcibly and arbitrarily, seems to be another symbol of power. The dwellings of the poor are being ruthlessly demolished. Dr Ananda Kumaraswamy Street [named after the internationally-renowned art historian] is no more and the John de Silva Memorial Theatre is to be wiped out,” he said.

Thenuwara’s reference to the Egyptian pharaohs is apt. Rajapakse’s “beautification” project seeks to make the city, and the country, better serve the needs of global capital, via the further exploitation of the Sri Lankan working class.

Driven by these requirements, the “urban renewal” operation is an inherently ruthless and inhumane affair. It not only fails to comply with minimal architectural and urban planning standards but desecrates the legacy of figures such as Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa (1919–2003) and his contemporaries—Ena De Silva, Barbara Sansoni and Laki Senanayake—who were part of a post-colonial renaissance of architecture and landscaping. Their “tropical modernist” style sensitively harmonised with the environment.

While Thenuwara’s *Beautification* exhibition draws attention to vital social issues, not all its components were successful.

Check Your Memory (painted bricks, 32’ x 32’), for example, consisted of a series of black numbers on a brownish yellow backdrop. These were not random numbers but significant years in the ongoing racial discrimination on Sri Lanka’s Tamil minorities. The dates ranged from the 1833 Colebrook-Cameron Commission, when British colonialism unified the island for administrative convenience; the infamous government-backed anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983; through to the 2009 military defeat of LTTE. These are key historical markers but the work itself has no inherent visual appeal.

Another part of the installation consisted of a large three-piece, white-cement cast of Themis, the mythical Greek Titaness of justice. It clearly reflected Thenuwara’s concerns about the escalating attacks on legal and democratic rights in Sri Lanka. The three parts were: *Head of Themis*, her decapitated head; *Hand & Sword*, her amputated arm; and *Balance*, her broken scales. Thenuwara’s fractured Themis tended to imply that the limited legal rights established in Sri Lanka, following the end of British colonial rule in 1948, constituted some sort of genuine democracy.

Thenuwara has publicly called for a “reviving” of judicial independence but Themis’s scales have never “balanced” in

Sri Lanka. Only the most nominal democratic forms were established by Sri Lanka’s ruling elite, while institutionalising anti-Tamil discrimination. Bourgeois democratic forms, in fact, are being torn up around the world, and as the Sri Lankan working masses come forward to demand their basic rights, new forms of legal repression will be unleashed.

Thenuwara, a well-known figure in Sri Lankan contemporary art, graduated from Colombo’s Institute of Aesthetic Studies in 1981 and studied at the Surikov Academy of Fine Arts in Moscow. On return to Sri Lanka in the early 1990s, he developed gallery installations of military-camouflaged barrels and other artistic forms. This was a reaction to the thousands of empty tar barrels used for military and police roadblocks. Later came his expanded *C amouflage*, *Neo-barrelism* and *Post-barrelism* themes.

Thenuwara has again demonstrated his artistic skills but the *Beautification* show lacked the intensity of previous exhibitions. His *barrelism* installations, in particular, were courageous artistic statements against the war. Thenuwara’s artistic evolution is obviously not a finished question but the waning of his defiant spirit appears to be bound up with an adaption to the post-war situation.

In recent years, Thenuwara embraced the “Platform for Freedom”—an unprincipled political coalition formed to back the right-wing UNP, Sri Lanka’s alternative ruling party. The UNP, however, was responsible for the massacre of thousands of youth in Sri Lanka’s south and initiated the war against the LTTE that Thenuwara felt repulsed by.

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