

(For Art & Deal Magazine)
View from the Lion Mountain

By Sahar Zaman

The newsroom, unfortunately, fills up your mind with just the immediate. As a *bona fide* victim of the newsroom the only image of Sri Lanka I had in my mind were television glimpses of its three-decade war and its recent dramatic end. But as an art journalist, I also knew a little bit more than that. I knew of a clutch of contemporary artists from Sri Lanka and of course, its modern master George Keyt whose works I have seen adorn houses in Delhi and Karachi.

However, visiting a place is not the same as hearing and reading about it. The whole experience of Sri Lanka made me realise the richness of its art and architecture. And the potential it has in making a mark on the Asian art scene. This is an interesting time to be in the country. It is a time of great transition and perhaps greater recovery. There is visible relief in the air but ancient paranoia can't be wished away in a jiffy. People are happy that the war is over. There hasn't been a single blast in the country since the collapse of the LTTE six months ago. But the government is on extra high alert. There are sandbagged check-posts every 100 m in Colombo; cars are routinely checked, foreigners are expected to carry their passports with them all the time, sometimes traffic is held up for hours during these surprise checks. It seems everyone is a suspected LTTE sympathiser and every foreigner, a spy.

Most people are either too grateful to President Rajapakse for having decisively ended the war or too scared to question the tight grip his government is beginning to have on its people. Journalists say they aren't totally free. In fact, it is widely believed that Sri Lankan artists are the only ones asking questions, something that in most countries is the preserve of the Fourth Estate. So it was no surprise that my stay in Sri Lanka became my channel for dialogue and discovery.

I was in Lanka for an art camp aptly themed 'Dialogue and Prelude'. Organised by the Chennai-based Art East, this was a godsend for me... an opportunity to help me understand a country, away from the decibel-defying urgency of newsroom headlines. "It's too early to comment on the opportunities after the fall of the LTTE, but for me the Tamil struggle isn't over yet. Their rehabilitation still hasn't happened. The true mark of success will be the cultural and social mixing between Tamils and Sinhalese," says Sanjeewa Kumar, a vocal Lankan artist. Sanjeewa likes to reinterpret history in his works. At the camp, he went way back into prehistory juxtaposing the ancient rock of Sigiriya with the woolly mammoth, perhaps hinting at co-existence and the hope of finding reconciliation in his own country.

A total of eight artists—five from India and three from Sri Lanka—were part of the camp. And we spent most our time in the ancient city of Sigiriya (a corruption of *Simha-giri* or 'Lion Mountain') which is a 4-hour drive from Colombo. The capital of a former Sinhala kingdom, Sigiriya has the quaint luck of having been both a pleasure palace and a monastery. Its magnificent gardens, cave frescoes and precariously-situated palace were built during the reign of Kasyapa (AD 477 – 495), a usurper king who it seems was neither liked by his people nor later historians. However, what

Kasyapa has left behind is truly priceless: Frescoes of *apsaras* and a uniquely-cut natural rock that is now protected as a World Heritage site by the UNESCO.

The camp itinerary also included an elephant safari at one of the two national parks near Sigiriya. Sri Lanka by the way is the only place in Asia where you can spot the largest herds of the Asian elephant. “I get lost in the colours of Sri Lanka, which unlike the colours back home are so spare and unmixed. There’s also this zen-like peace in the air, which, honestly, I didn’t expect. But coming here has also made me realise how similar we are as a people... all the more reason why we should be a borderless region... say like one Southeast Asian Union,” said Dhiraj Singh, a participating artist from Delhi. And he was not alone in thinking along those lines. Kolkata’s Subrota Gangopadhyay too felt strongly about the need to dissolve borders. “What has largely been an isolated island so far,” said he, “Sri Lanka needs to open up to the world just as much as India needs to reach out to people here.”

The end of the war has in fact made much of this possible. Mumbai-based Prabhakar Kolte admitted to agreeing to come for this art camp after having refused many others in the past because of the ‘situation’ in Lanka. But having agreed this time, Kolte had no regrets. “I strongly feel the influence of Buddha here and my works here are on my first impressions,” he said.

Jagath Ravindra and Anoma Wijewardene from Sri Lanka prefer to call themselves abstract expressionists, something that the Lankan art scene is not used to as a figurative hangover still persists. Jagath’s colours are strong and vibrant and his works at the camp were inspired by the hues of Sigiriya’s cave paintings. Anoma, who also does mix-media installations, focused on spirituality in her war ravaged country. “I have used the Pali script in my works. It’s about stepping into the divine light. But two separate canvases depict two different paths to enlightenment, that’s why the second one has a dark patch.”

Shyam Kanu Borthakur from Assam is not just an artist but an activist too. And for him the camp became bridge across to the island. “I think spending time with artists from the host country offered me a new perspective. It’s much better than exploring the place like a tourist. It’s the job of the artist to create a vision. And through this camp, we created a vision for stronger Indo-Lankan ties.”

“I see so much similarity in Indian and Lankan women. At least the Bengali women I paint could easily pass off as women from this country. There’s so much racial affinity which never crossed my mind before,” said a surprised Jayita Borthakur.

For the CEO of Art East, K Saravanan, these comments spoke of a successful maiden venture. Having been in the business of collecting art with his partner Singapore-based businessman Karthik Menon since 2006, Art East has its eyes set on art from the East—be it China, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines or even Vietnam. “We have collected 300 works so far and we really don’t care about big names, we just buy what we like. We plan to start an art fund in the years to come but before that we want to set up an all India restoration laboratory: a service which is not available to most art buyers,” he said.

While Saravanan and his team are already planning their next art camp in another Asian hotspot next year, the artists have returned home with one question on their minds. If India and Sri Lanka have always shared strong military ties, why has progress been so slow in people-to-people initiatives? Unlike Pakistan, which is so often seen as the enemy country, India and Sri Lanka have officially always had cordial relations. So what's stopping Indians and Sri Lankans from forging stronger cultural ties with each other? Maybe, this could be the theme of another art camp...

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