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Being a Stranger and a Suspect : Being Sri Lankan Tamil

A Reading on Autobiographical Visual Narratives

T.Sanathanan

ABSTRACT : Based on the visual narratives of works produced by the Sri Lankan Tamil artists during the time of war, this article tries to foreground the complexities of 'being' and 'becoming' in the locations of forced migrations, exile, displacements and militarization. The paper also attempts to reveal how the co-existence of the self in incommensurable geographical, historical, psychological and cultural locations alters the ways in which persons experience their own being. It also questions notions of the self as rooted in the categories of nation, state and history. The article argues that the making of the Sri Lankan Tamil personhood is primarily grounded in the feeling of being a stranger and suspect in everyday life; a grounding that draws and redraws the 'difference' between being a Tamil and being a Sri Lankan.

KEY WORDS: self, visual, victimhood, war, nation

Introduction

The situation created by the war in the North and East, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna insurgency and the State's counter insurgency contributed significantly to a paradigm shift in the field of visual art in the 1990s in Sri Lanka. Artist and art historian Jagath Weerasinghe traces this shift by identifying certain kinds of configuration in themes and styles. One of his major identifications is the emergence of autobiographical narrations which portray artists as victimized individuals (Weerasinghe, 2005). Here the artist, in keeping with modernism's valorization of the individual, writes his/her personal history as a glorified and celebrated artist into the history of suffering of a people and a nation, and thereby acquires a momentum and recognition his self-narrative would otherwise lack. Even though these observations were made in relation to Colombo-based visual art practices, I believe it may help us to place in context similar tendencies in the works of a few Sri Lankan Tamil artists as well.

Furthermore, by extending Weerasinghe's argument, we may be able to better appreciate the multiple differences that operate within these autobiographical narrations, and the different mechanics of self-making

involved in war-turned Sri Lanka. Ethnic riots in the South, Tamil nationalism and the culmination of militant politics in the 1980s contributed significantly to the relocation and popularization of the medium of painting among middle-class Tamil youth. Popular as well as the modernistic languages of painting had been invested in the project of imagining and imaging the self and its nationalist fixation with nation (Shanaathanan, 2009). However, in the 1990s, the enforced isolation at many levels ignited a new consciousness of the artist's position as a victim or an eyewitness or a person who willingly persecutes his/her self on behalf of his/her society. This shift in the plane of positioning of the artist of himself/ herself is exhibited in the works of Vaidehi, Shanaathanan and Sivaruban. In their works, the artist's own body becomes the switch-point for the interplay between public and private pain. By functioning as registers of oppression and resistance, they become a vehicle that contains and transfers the burden of pain and torture inflicted both by one's own self and by society. By using the body and its articulations as metaphors and metonyms, their works weave personal myths into surreal locations.

Having observed the emergence of different kinds of self in these paintings and prints, I was thrilled to engage in a visual expedition of revisiting my own work, in order to identify the nature and process of the emergence of a Tamil self in the period of mass exodus, displacement, migration and militarization. In order to avoid theorizing my own work, my attempt here is to trace certain commonalities in the contemporary visual representation that underline the larger shift happening in the visual arts and to understand the micro-politics behind these autobiographical narratives. Even though similar tendencies can be found in the works of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora artists, I limit myself here to those works produced by artists who presently live in either Sri Lanka or India. While extending Weerasinghe's earlier observation to these works I would argue that the consciousness of "self" in the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils is rooted in the sense of being a stranger and a suspect; a felt identity delineates the experiential realities of being a Sri Lankan or being a Tamil in general.

History of Histories

'History of Histories' (Image;1) is an installation done as part of the exhibition titled *'Agam-Puram'*, at the Jaffna public library, which was turned into ashes in the summer of 1981 and embodies memories of a 'cultural genocide'. This large-scale installation was carried out by the people of Jaffna with the assistance Art History students S. Kannan, S. Kumutha, G. Tamilini, Vasanthini of the University of Jaffna and T.Shanaathanan.



S. Kannan, S. Kumutha, G. Tamilini, R.Vasanthini and T.Shanaathanan/History of Histories/Instalation/2004

For this endeavor, accompanied by friends, they visited 500 randomly chosen houses in different parts of the Jaffna Peninsula in order to ask the residents to give them any material object that memorializes the last 20 years of people's own lives in this embattled land. This activity "collecting" is in a way similar to that of a local Hindu *madi pichchaikaran* who, with collected rice from various houses, makes a special offering to the public at the temple(Shanaathanan, 2004). Every single object in this collection was placed on a red velvet pedestal, in identical containers and displayed as in a conventional museum or a library. The collection included a wide range of ordinary, mundane objects such as a single shoe of a dead child, the broken head of a temple icon, various kinds of identity cards, passports, death certificates, reports of disappearances, letters of missing relatives, keys of the houses that were demolished for the expansion of the "high security zones", police residential permits, photographs of loved ones lost in the war, the ashes of a burned house, particles of trodden buildings, shell-pieces, bullets, broken dolls, pieces of dance and costume jewellery, barbed wires, water, sand and so on (Image;2).

The particular installation excavated the layers of conflicted, contested and mismatched memories, histories and emotions that generated in a single unified geographical territory in the “no war” period (during the time of the Norwegian peace initiative between the time of 2002 and 2006). The objects provided viewers recurring possibilities to participate in making, unmaking and remaking histories and in so doing opened up many opportunities for positioning oneself. Here, the act of collage is not only the principal way of making meaning but is also the metaphorical and metonymic representation of the character of this



Details of History of Histories/Instalation/2004

society. These observations directly pose a question in relation to the kind of self and its process of emergence in dislocated locations. The following testimonies may help the reader to grasp the nature of the problem I am trying to address here.

Testimonies of Strangers

Statement 1

The early morning security announcement over the loudspeaker awoke us from our beds and ordered everyone to assemble in the temple ground. We waited in queues for our turn to come, like the animals for a ritual sacrifice to be identified by the Thalai atty or “the nodder”, the informant. Our lives hung on the little careless movement of this hooded informant’s head. Who could he be? My classmate? The man who lives opposite to my house? My relative who got arrested last month? These were the only questions that echoed in everybody’s minds at that time. Later, in unexpected moments, faces in our surroundings brought the informant back to life.

Statement 2

How can I forget that day when my sons who belonged to different political organizations with different ideologies, but still fought for the same cause, turned

enemies and betrayed each other? They killed each other in a bloody internal fight. As a mother how do I justify one's life at the death of the other? And how do I point my finger at either one of them?

Statement 3

With the key of the house which had been locked in a high security zone, my grandfather died in yet another displacement. On the day in which all the Muslims were forced to leave their homes, my friend's wife gave birth to a child in the Mandapam refugee camp in Tamil Nadu.

Statement 4

My elder brother is married to a Dutch woman and lives in Paris and the younger one is in Sydney. Last Christmas, my only sister got my cousin married in Germany after having gone through many transit points around the world with the help of a travel agent. Two of my aunts migrated to Canada while their only brother and his family still live in Madras. My parents are internally displaced in Sri Lanka. How do I identify my self?

Statement 5

I still live in my ancestral house under the same sky with the same moon. The neighbors I lived with vacated the village many years ago. Nevertheless, unlike others, my village is still alive, filled with strangers from other dismantled villages. Am I displaced without being displaced?

Statement 6

During the time of no war, I visited my parents in Sri Lanka after 20 years. My French-born two daughters met their grandparents there for the first time. My sister who lives in Norway also visited my native land with her family during my stay. However, my parents could not share a word with their long-awaited grandchildren and no dialogue took place among the cousins who spoke different languages. Have you ever heard about a homecoming of strangers?

Statement 7

Since I was born in a place that is part of their national imagination, they make me roam around with identity cards to prove my identity as a 'citizen' of their country and advice me how to avoid becoming a suspect. So I always travel with an album of IDs;

National ID, Navy ID, Police Report, Army Vehicle Permit , Driving License, Job ID.....In addition to this, I have to hang my family Card along with a group photograph of my family in front of my own house. For the first time in our lives, three generations of our family went to the nearby school to get our family photograph clicked by an army man.

Statement 8

My Sinhalese friend told me that some think it is unusual to know how very important the ID card is to him too. Because without that how do others know that, he is a Sinhalese and how does he prove his identity as non-Tamil?

Statement 9

I am 69 years old. Apart from my one-year stay in Colombo during the 1995 exodus, I have spent almost my whole life in this little town. Every street I know here shares a story with me; every junction evokes a line of poetry in my memory. Slowly, places in my town are transforming into a strange space, like a military camp. I do have a body because there is a security check. I do not have a day without a check -point. When did I lose the city I knew? When did I lose the body I love?

Statement 10

Two years back I escaped from the heavily guarded roads of my city. Still, I show my identity cards, open my clothes for security-checks to the strangers who come in my dreams. Still I am woken up in the middle of the night for house searches. Still I am afraid to stand at a bus-stop for long or to roam around the city streets alone, because I have a feeling that someone is following me. I cannot even stay inside my room for long, because I wonder whether it might lead someone to suspect me. I started living with the feeling that I am under the surveillance of someone. All the time I live with a feeling of being a suspect. Am I a suspect? Whose suspect? Have I started suspecting my own self?

Statement 11

The government suddenly cautioned the public about the strangers whom it found to be a threat to "national security". People became so vigilant and started looking for strangers everywhere, in roads, shops, vehicles, beaches and parks and even in the interior of houses. They started hunting for strangers. However, how do they know what a stranger really looks like?

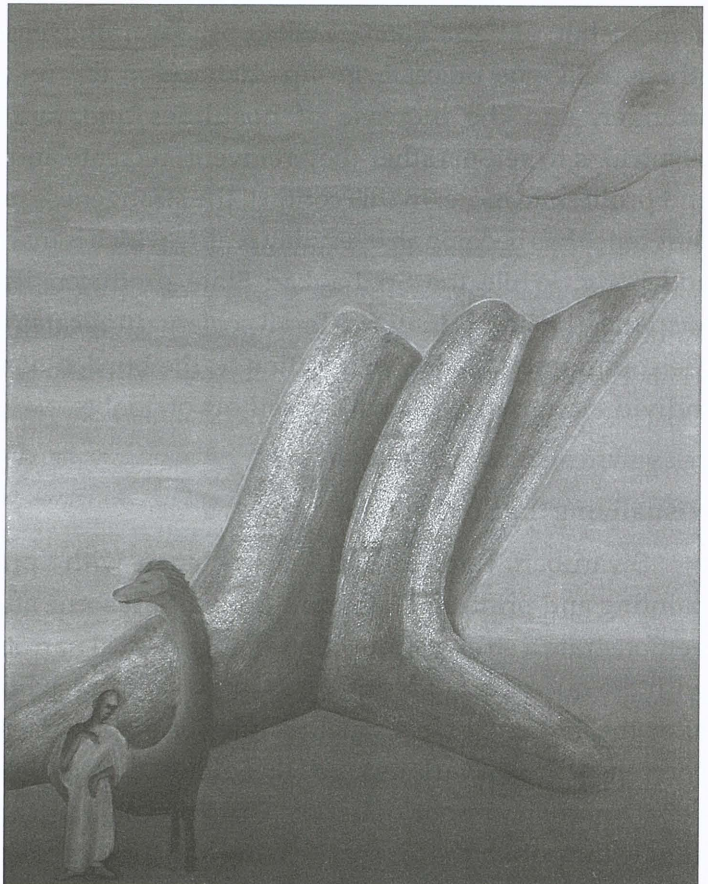
Imagined Strangers

As in the case of *History of Histories*, the above statements reveal the present physical and psychological realities of Sri Lankan Tamils. The civil war and the constant displacement and migration lead to a drastic change in the social fabric and produce isolated individuals. In the laps of an organized system of healing in the country's health services, these silent individuals are forced to live their lives with memories of loss, violence, and torture. This situation makes the individual a stranger to other individuals and also to his/her own space and time. This socio-psychological gulf has been further widened by the state-staged security performances. Producing documentary proof to justify one's identity and exposing the body for the scrutiny of the State has become "normal". In an ethnically polarized society, inadvertently in most cases, these routinized security checks produced the opposite or the "other", the stranger. Depending on the context, this stranger has the potential to become a suspect. The amount of doubt or suspicion and the imagination determine the production and demarcation of both. The intensity of the war, the tension between the regions, ethnic, religious or caste groups determine the imagined person called the stranger, and the increase of hostilities and militarization never allows suspicions to settle: rather they reinvent, recreate and redefine existing doubts and proliferate more. In this context, the strangeness produced by the politics of difference has become an everyday reality which is inscribed upon in every mind and body. While the Sri Lankan State produced its other as strangers and suspects, the individualized Tamil society duplicates a similar category within the community. Hence, in addition to the burden of memory and history, the individual started living with a plethora of doubts.

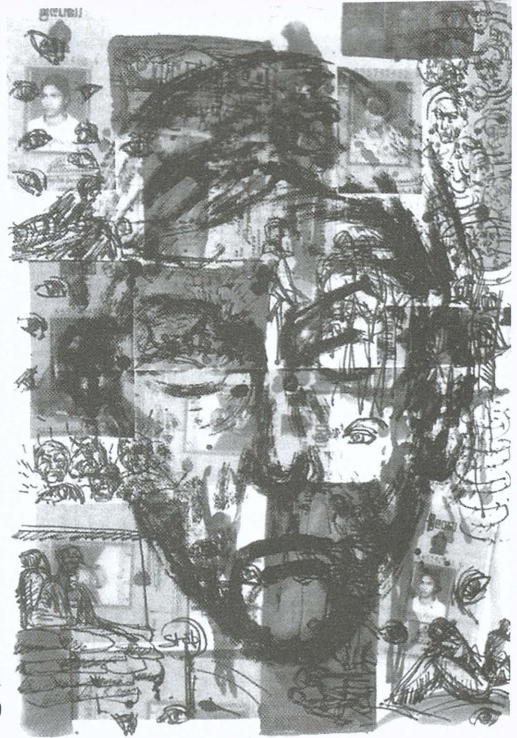
Visualizing the Strangeness

Sivaruban, Vaidhehi and Shanaathanan, with a proper academic training in painting and print-making, came onto the art scene after the 1980s. Their works demonstrate a strong strain of autobiographical narration which is preoccupied with the question of identity. It is important to remember here that the period after the 1980s registers cruel realities of displacements, disappearances, loss, and censorship of various kinds that almost closed the door to any kind of public debate and sharing of opinions. Cruelties of war, the increasing of suspicion among the public, the fear of speaking and the loss of hope in the promises of this period seem to lead these visual artists to choose a more reclusive, introverted

journey or travel. In this context, while the artist's self emerges as the prime theme and occupies a major area of the painted space, the language becomes more symbolic. Shanaathanan, by combining mismatches of reality, metaphorically and metonymically creates his own personal myths and history. On the other hand, Sivaruban (Image;3) plays with scale and proportion of images and discloses a disturbing and threatening environment. The bizarre visuals of both these painters convey the melancholic mood of a victim trapped in social calamities, thereby embodying an element of the narrative of individual suffering. Interestingly, one could argue that the realities which we found in *History of Histories* and the testimonies gathered take on the shape of a surrealist landscape in this personal visual unfolding. As Weerasinghe argues, in different contexts these autobiographical narratives usually hold or tell us of a character that is isolated yet sanguine or of a character that is struggling with some sort of bondage yet in captivity and is perplexed and whose location and position remain undefined (Weerasinghe, 2005).



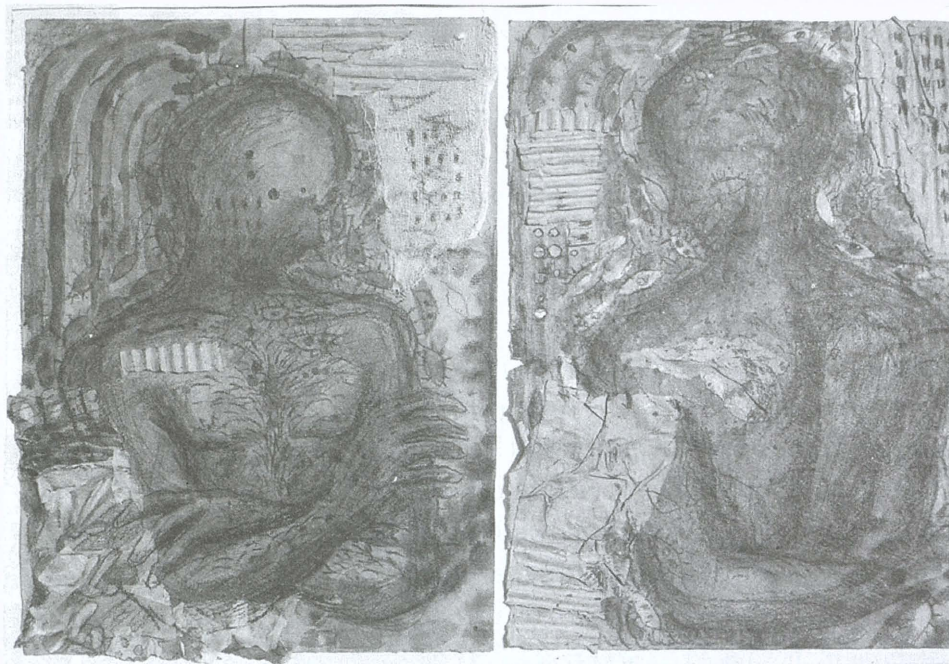
S.Sivaruban/Untitled/Oil on Canvas/2004



R.Vaidhehi/Stranger in My Own Land
/Mixed media on paper/2000

Vaidhehi's mixed media work titled *Stranger in My Own Land* (2000) (Image;4) and Shanaathanan's work called *Strangers* (1999) (Image;5) reposition discussions of identity in a different terrain. As the imageries and the titles also suggest a shift in the consciousnesses of the self as well as everyday experiences, these imply a new reality which everyone is forced to come to terms with, beyond the conflicting imaginations and imaginaries of the Sri Lankan State and the Tamil nation. Vaidhehi's works that deals with identity cards and Shanaathanan's painting titled *Check Point 1 & 2* summon the viewer's attention to the routinization of the anomalous and the anomaly of the normal. By registering the refusal to being identified, these works question the way in which the identities are simplified, handled, transected, performed, exchanged, and monopolized by State and counter-State performers.

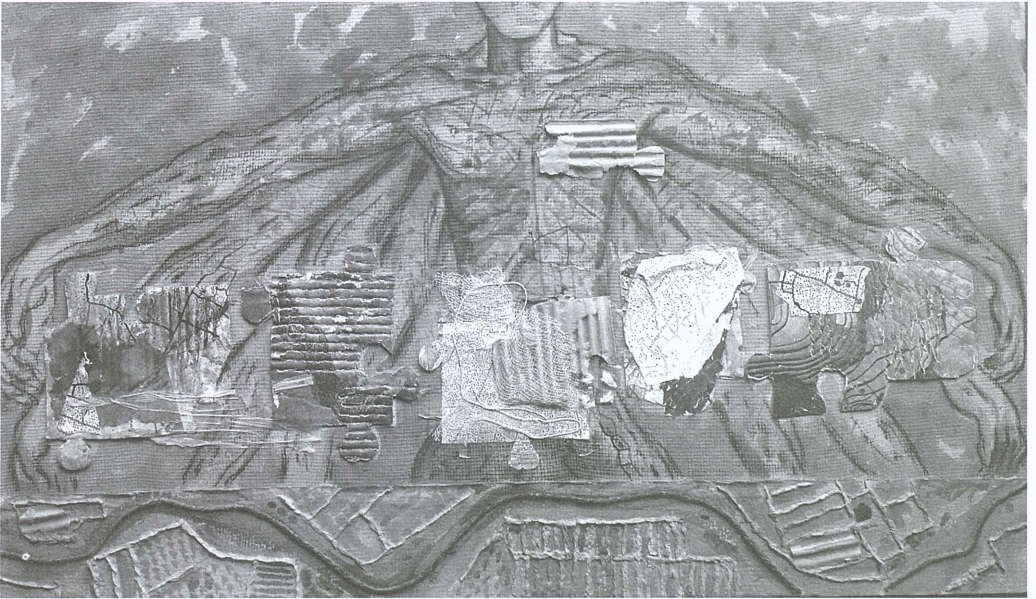
In the next phase of their work, both these artists approach the issue with more intensity. Shanaathanan's 2006 exhibition titled *Locating the Self* may help a viewer to further broaden the discussion to include the socio-historical condition that produced the creature called the stranger. By tailoring, collaging, juxtaposing, and superimposing maps belonging to different places, periods, and political projects he suggests a location, which is a mosaic of



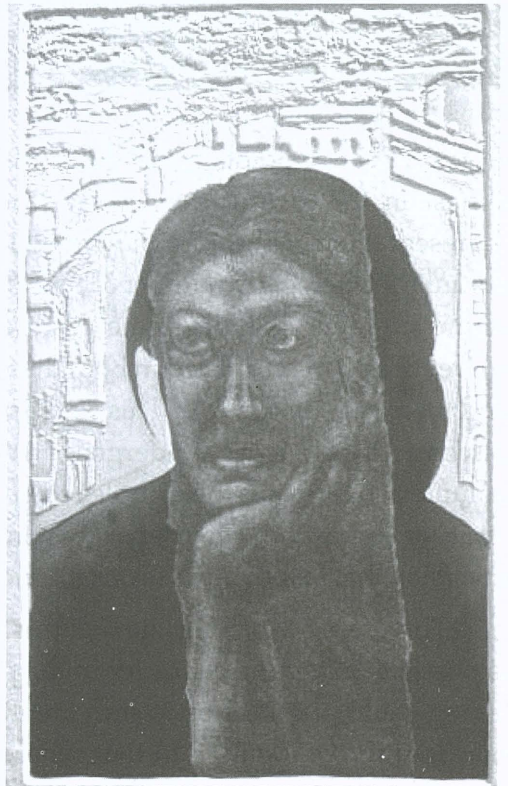
T.Shanaathanan/ *Strangers*/Mixed media on paper/1999

incommensurable realities. Further, he amalgamates these sites with parts of the human anatomy. The visual in a way allows the private and the public, personhood and victim hood, cartography and the anatomy, interior and exterior landscapes to infiltrate and intersect with each other. These works, while questioning the categories of identity that are based on notions of unified territory, collective history, citizenship and nationality, suggest liminal spaces as new locations of identity (Image ;6).

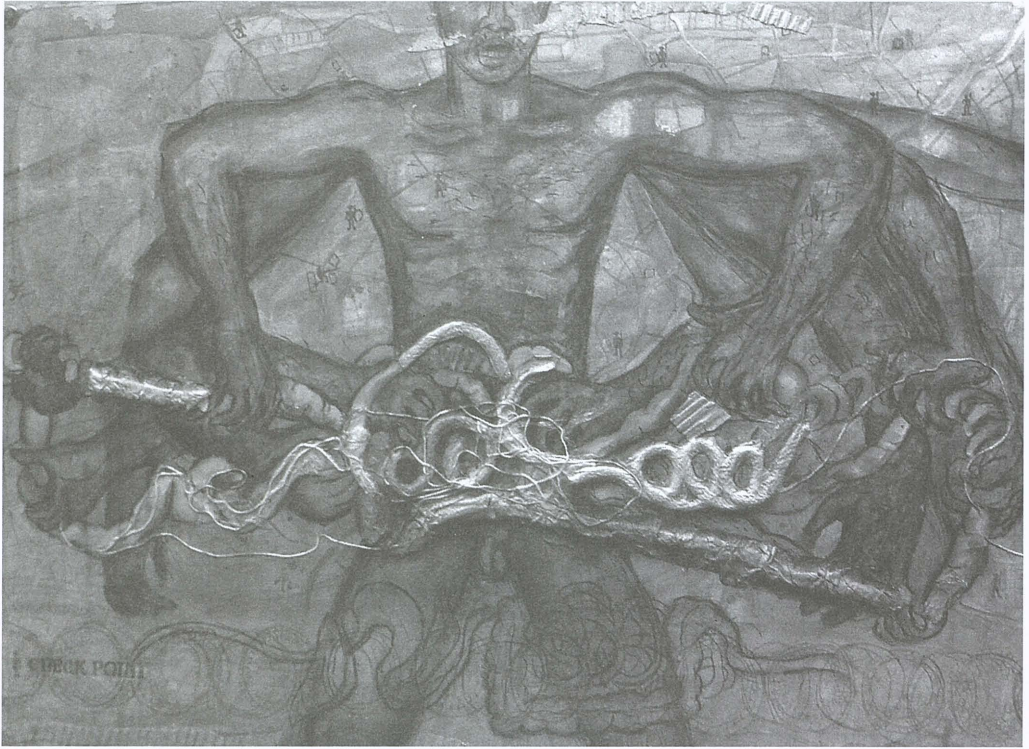
On the other hand, Vaidehi's series of etchings and paintings position the artist's self in the form of a self-portrait in the location of a concrete jungle which resembles an urban environment (Image;7). What is more striking in these depictions is the relationship between the self and its environment. The way she plays with aquatint and blind print powerfully creates the contrast between herself and the world. The world is depicted as a theatre backdrop of the unlivable. In these self-portraits, she encounters the gaze of the viewer/surveyor from the foreground of the picture, whereas in the case of her earlier mixed-media works she places a self-drawn face on the reality created by personal documents like identity cards, police reports, and photographs. Concomitantly, the character is engaged in an intimate dialogue with her own self with the awareness of its new position as a stranger. Similarly, Shanaathanan's recent



T.Shanaathanan/Locating the Self 1/Mixed media on paper/2006



R.Vaidehi/Untitled/Etching/2006



T.Shanaathanan/Check point 3/Mixed media on paper/2009

works on check points consciously places the artist's body on the foreground almost in the face of the viewer (Image;8). Moreover, as in his allegorical representation of the *Last Supper* and the *Doubting Thomas*, these bodies are voluntarily engaged in the act of revealing their internal organs for surveillance of the surveyor as an extreme gesture of protest. The closeness between the surveyor and the surveyed in both these artists' works creates an innate tension, and therefore, discomfort. This astonishing makes the onlooker feel the similar discomfort the suspect undergoes. What is important to note here is that by voluntarily allowing their bodies to be surveyed, characters in these paintings are able to position themselves beyond the limits of dominance or the act of inversion that reverse or re revert the violence of gaze.

Therefore, I would argue that this kind of inversion or resistance or protest is possible only if the character in the painting is fully aware of its realities as a stranger and in a position to start identifying his or her self with that reality as a new location of identity. In that sense, these particular visual narratives differ from the earlier narratives of the same artists, because the earlier ones were never

positioned in the painful and unfortunate present, which has become difficult to come to terms with. Hence, they always attempted to locate themselves in the past or future rather than acknowledging their present. The acceptance of their present and their social position as strangers gain new meaning in the later series of their works. It provides a platform for negotiation and agency.

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