

ARTFUL RESISTANCE

Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka

EDITED BY
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Upali Ananda, *Stop and Read*, 2004

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VISUAL ART IN JAFFNA: A Register from the Periphery

T. Shanaathanan

Introduction

Colombo has been identified as the institutionalized center of colonial and postcolonial art trends in written Sri Lankan art history. Even though Jaffna,¹ unlike other regions in the country, has a continuous record of various visual art practices, it has been a neglected site in popular Sri Lankan art discourse. These art practices can be read in relation to the larger social and cultural transformations under the agency of colonialism, Hindu revivalism in the 1850s, cultural revivalism in the 1930s, and Tamil nationalism in the 1980s. Colonial education provided by Christian missionaries, the Hindu revivalist movement, and the job opportunities available within the colonial administrative machinery at various levels in and out of Jaffna played a crucial role for social mobility and encouraged a strong middle-class consciousness, which characterized art activities from the beginning. In the absence of an art market, colonial-style art institutions, and art-consuming urban elites, the development of art in Jaffna society is the outcome of an everlasting struggle between middle-class anxieties and the emerging consciousness of identity in an ethnically polarized posttraditional Sri Lanka. In a way it also represents a regional modernity engaged in a two-way process of amateurization and professionalization in the field of art. As an attempt to map a regional history, this preliminary essay tries to register major shifting planes and different voices which constitute posttraditional art making in Jaffna. This attempt at identification is inevitable in the process of acknowledging and understanding multiple voices and multiple representational tactics operating within a multicultural and multicentered Sri Lanka.

Art and the Dilemmas of Jaffna Society

Jaffna's geographical position in the Palk Strait between Hindu South India and Sinhalese Buddhist Sri Lanka, as well as European colonial interventions contributed to its eclectic culture. Even though English colonial education had a strong impact on Jaffna society, it never singularized the meaning of "art" and "artist," but rather contributed to existing complexities of meaning based on class and caste within the producer-

consumer relationship, which is intimately connected with artistic function and style. Hence the posttraditional art of Jaffna is not monolithic and uniform in nature. But as in the case of other Asian cultures, the notion of art making as a self-chosen profession and medium of individual personal expression evolved with colonial modernity and colonial art education. Interestingly, this practice has coexisted with vibrant temple-based collective art practices and splendours of popular visual expressions, which cater to everyday political and religious needs. For practical purposes, the present survey only focuses on self-chosen individual artistic expressions.

In many ways the introduction of art as a subject in school curriculum and the availability of new job opportunities as art teachers significantly reshaped the caste dimension of traditional art practice. It also contributed to changes in the role, cultural meaning, tastes, and modes of representation in visual arts. While in traditional practices the production and consumption of art (or craft) had been governed by caste membership,² the new concept of art as a secular activity based on individual choice, aspiration, and skills made it possible to follow this career regardless of caste affiliation and without risking the loss of social status. The absence of patronage for this secular art in the local setting, however, persistently pressurized the artists into taking up teaching jobs. Hence being an "amateur" became a social reality for many practitioners. On the other hand, visual art played a major role in nationalist discourse, which imagined the nation on the basis of "invented heritage." Therefore, while art practice was mainly situated among the "amateurs," the dominant art discourse was always based on the artistic achievements of a "classical past." This ambivalence between practice and discourse defines and characterizes the dynamics and politics of art making in postcolonial Jaffna.

Art as Racial Identity and Invented Past

In the 1850s art came under sharp criticism by Arumuga Navalar's (1822–1879) Saiva revivalism, which was based on Protestant Puritan ideals. Navalar propagated a total negation of images which were criticized by Protestant missionaries as

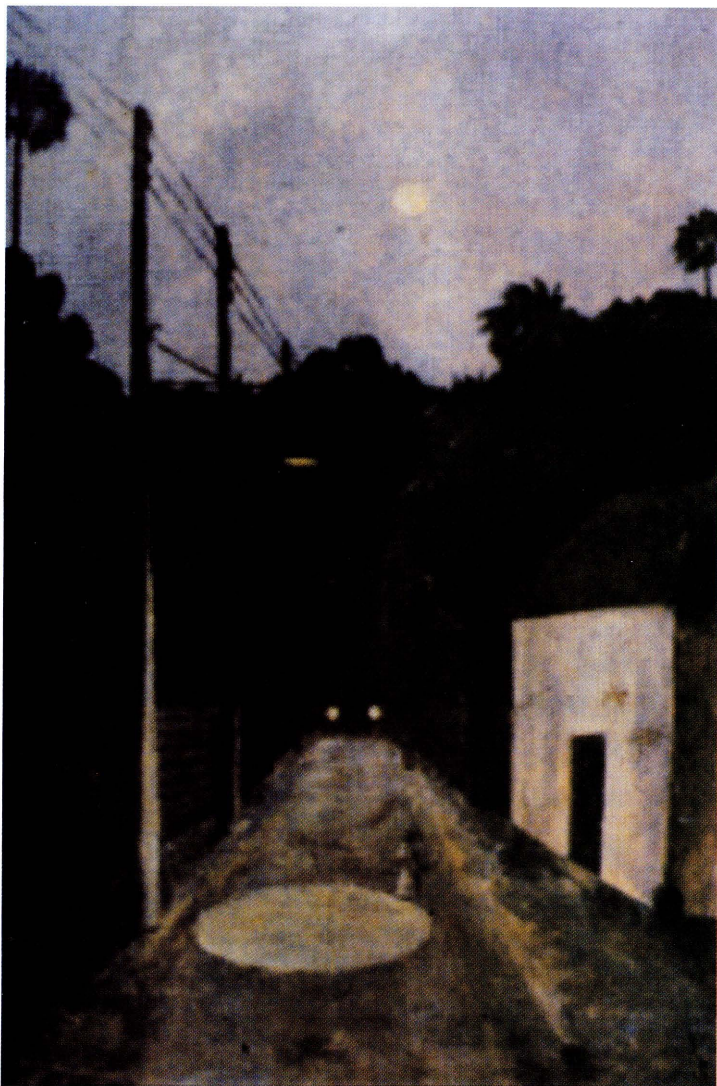


Fig. 1
S. R. Kanagasabai, *Black Out*
Oil on canvas, 1948
Photograph courtesy of the author

“erotic” and “sensual.” Therefore, apart from the temple murals dating to the latter part of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, executed in a hybrid style combining Western naturalism and Eastern symbolism (“Company style”), Narvalar’s critical writings became a major source of information about the role of painting in the temple culture of the colonial era.

But the notion of art drastically changed with the cultural renaissance of the 1930s under the influence of the Indian national struggle and the cultural revivalist movement in India. In Jaffna town itself many cultural organizations mushroomed during this period in an effort to revitalize and modernize local art practices, which were declining due to the lack of patronage under colonial rule and changes in taste. One such organization was Kalanilayam, which came into exist-

tence in 1930 to patronize and promote local art, particularly the visual arts.³ Kalanilayam and Sangeetha Samajam jointly invited Rabindranath Tagore to visit Jaffna in 1934 with his group from Shantiniketan. The great Indian poet’s visit stimulated the feeling for revival of local artistic culture in order to emancipate selfhood from colonial bondage.

Kalai Pulavar Navaratnam, the secretary of Kalanilayam, played a major role in art writing at the time. Following pioneer Ananda Coomaraswamy and influenced by colonial discourse on art, he considered art as an expression of racial experiences and employed art history in the nation building project. Kalai Pulavar’s writings were mainly in Tamil and English and focused on the artistic heritage of Indian and Sri Lankan cultures, which he considered a cultural entity, in order to create awareness among the newly English-educated locals enmeshed in colonial values. Therefore, for Kalai Pulavar and Kalanilayam, art was something associated with identity and the past. In a way they “museumized” living traditions and selective fossils of the past, which they considered equal to Western classical art, within the discourse of orientalism and nationalism and the colonial middle class’s longing for identity.

Art as Pedagogy and Practice

The first initiative of local artists to establish a modernist way of art practice in Jaffna led to the formation of the “Winzer Art Club” in 1938, named after C. F. Winzer, Chief Inspector of Art in the Department of Education, Ceylon, from 1920 to 1932. The Winzer Art Club, under the leadership of the charismatic art inspector and Madras-trained local painter S. R. Kanagasabai (1901–55), was one of the regional responses to Winzer’s efforts and approach.⁴ This venture was supported by W. A. G. Beling (1907–92), who took over as Chief Inspector after Winzer and who was one of the founding members of the Ceylon Art Club and the ‘43 Group. The prime aim of this local initiative was to train art teachers in contemporary knowledge to improve the standards of art teaching in the absence of a formal art institution in that region. Some of the teachers like K. Kanagasabapathy and Ampalavanar Rasaiah, who were trained in the Winzer Art Club, became the first generation of Jaffna painters. Later K. Rajaratnam joined this club after receiving his art training at the Madras College of Arts and Craft under the eminent sculptor R. P. Roy Chowdhury and painter K. C. S. Paniker. Kanagasabapathy subsequently studied painting at Colombo Technical College and exhibited with the ‘43 Group. The academic realistic approach in the earlier works of these artists reveals their struggle to master the Western way of seeing and its technicalities of representation, which lent them agency in the so-called “colonial progressive” site.

It is important to note here that the ‘43 Group—the first significant art movement in posttraditional Sri Lanka—came into existence in Colombo in the same period and that S. R. Kanagasabai was a founder member, who together with K.

Kanagasabapathy exhibited his work in Colombo. Like the other members of the '43 Group, these artists attempted to rephrase styles and approaches of Impressionism and Cubism to embody local landscapes and the local "body." Therefore one could argue that while mastering the Victorian mode in the early phase of modernity gave some sort of agency to locals in the colonial space, the appropriation of local sceneries in a modernist idiom helped them recast their identity within the imaginations of nationalism. With the death of S. R. Kanagasabai in 1955, the Winzer Art Club came to an end. In 1959 a collective called the "Holiday Painters Group" was formed by a number of artists and art teachers in an effort to sustain and safeguard their artistic impulses by providing a common studio space and by organizing exhibitions. This group also trained the younger generation in the field of visual art and provided the stepping stone to enter professional training in the Art Department of Colombo Technical College. This group also had an impact on the developments which followed in the 1980s.

Art as Resistance

The passing of the "Sinhalese Only" Act in 1956, which made Sinhalese the sole official language in Sri Lanka, and the introduction of quota system in university admission in 1976 violently transformed realities in the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka. These government acts decidedly limited the access of Tamils to government services and education. Anti-Tamil riots in 1983 and state suppression further fueled ethnic tensions, which intensified Tamil nationalist sentiments and eventually led to separatist armed struggle. Jaffna became the epicenter of heightened political and cultural activity, especially after the influx of refugees from Southern Sri Lanka following the anti-Tamil riots. Later, in 1987, Indian "peace" intervention in the ethnic crisis turned it into a bloody war between the Indian Peace Keeping Force and the LTTE.⁵

Art gathered new momentum with the aggravation of armed conflict. As in politics, youth were at the forefront of cultural activities. Activities of cultural and student wings of various militant groups and different student organizations in the University of Jaffna contributed to a diversified vibrant expressive culture that debated identity and freedom. Along with intense community feeling and consciousness, the search for the "new" and "men of merit" became the dominant sentiment in the political, intellectual, and aesthetic spheres in the 1980s. In a way, with the influence of leftist movements and changes in the new socio-political positioning, the 1980s became a time of revivalism in theater and literature which carved out Sri Lankan Tamil identity and distinguished it from the dominant Tamil identity of South India in terms of issues and their articulation. This revivalism also influenced developments in the field of visual art. Meanwhile militant groups and cultural activists, by smuggling the "Tamil little magazines"⁶ and printed reproduction of artworks of Indian Modernism and the Modern Art movement in

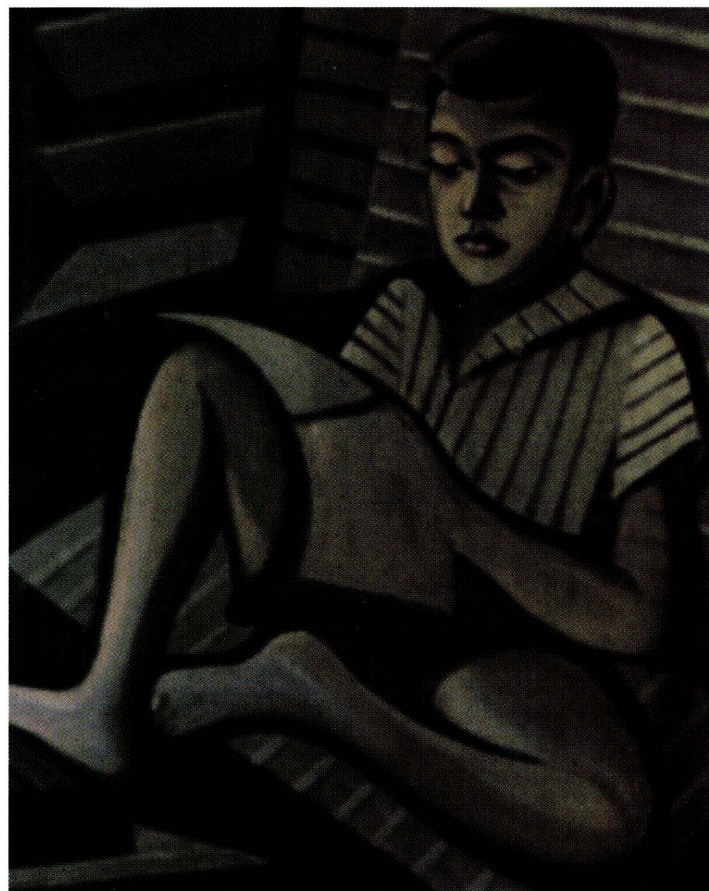


Fig. 2
K. Kanagasabapathy, *Boy Reading*
Oil on canvas, 1945(?)
Photograph courtesy of Arunthathi Ratneraj

Madras⁷ from the Indian coast, infused the flavor of the "new" into Jaffna visual culture. Concurrently, as a response to the 1983 riots and the Welikade jail massacre,⁸ an exhibition of paintings and drawings was presented by the Indian artists V. Santhanam and Sam Adaikalasamy in Madras. Later a collection of Santhanam's drawings were published by one of the Eelam rebel groups and circulated in Jaffna.

Tamil nationalist sentiments and the vicious realities of life at the time contributed to two different approaches in the art of the 1980s. While the meta-narratives of Tamil nationalism celebrated the armed struggle, the realities of war found instant expression through the articulation of experiences of disappearance, violence, loss, torture, struggle, pain, and ambivalence. These contents sharply differentiate Jaffna art of the 1980s from its own past and from work created in Colombo in the same period. The younger generation of artists—a number of them were women—dismissed the popular notion of art as beautiful, pleasing, charming, and spiritual entity articulated in oil painting and handled it as an intimate political weapon of



Fig. 3
Nanda Kandasamy, *Letters*
Collage on paper, date unknown
Photograph courtesy of the author

resistance and revolt. With sympathy for the course of the Tamils' struggle for equality, art became a weapon to attack social injustice and state sponsored terror, suppression, and insurgency. In a few cases artistic activities became a kind of sanctuary for silent individuals who were forced to spend their teenage years in the realities and memories of terror, torture, war, death, and despair.

In 1986 an exhibition by three young women artists, Arunthathi, Suguna, and Nirmala, was organized by the cultural group of Jaffna University. This signified a decisive paradigm shift in art practice. First, this group of artists were not art teachers but proclaimed themselves as "painters"; second, this was the first occasion when women artists displayed their works; and third, it received overwhelming response and support from the public and local press. In the wake of this exhibition, many youngsters came forward to exhibit their works in the following years. Interestingly, most of the Tamil rebel militant groups accommodated contemporary art in their national agenda and gave room for contemporary art in their exhibitions, which displayed the imaginations of a future Tamil nation. This indicates how the realities of war and growing ethnic consciousness started to alter the ordinary Jaffna middle-class psyche toward a new site of positioning which gave a prominent place to art practice. These exhibitions also evoked enthusiasm among the youth to get further training in art. Unfortunately, the only existing institution to study art in the country at that time, the Colombo Technical College,⁹ had already changed its language of instruction to Sinhalese in 1976, thus denying the rights of Tamils to study art.¹⁰ In this context the "Holiday Painters Group" gained new momentum, and artist Appuhamy Mark was reinvented by the group of youngsters and art

activists. With his training at Colombo Technical College, Mark had started his career in academic style, but in the 1980s he adopted a modernist approach, especially that of Picasso and Indian modernist painters like Jamini Roy and Satish Gujral, in an effort to express social realities. In a way Mark's formalistic appropriations represent the dilemmas of the posttraditional South Asian painter who tried to be "traditional" as well as "modern," and "authentic" as well as "different" at the same time. The preoccupation with formal identity in the art of the 1980s gave importance to a cognitive search for "style." Like in the high phase of modernism, style here signified the artist's individual identity. But paradoxically, within the nationalist framework, this individuality was deeply associated with national or ethnic identity.

While most of the younger artists of this period took a radical approach, M. Kanagasabai, from the first generation of painters and moved by the wave of change, took an introverted approach by nostalgic recalling of the good old days in a form of an anthropological document. On the other hand, Asai Rasaiah in his tenebrous paintings romanticized the local landscape as a manifestation of nationalist narratives. Even though both artists employed methods and styles of the first generation of painters in their treatment of local subject matter, there is a visible difference in their intentions and statements. In both these instances landscape symbolizes aspiration of homeland on a personal as well as public level.

Art as Personal Narrative

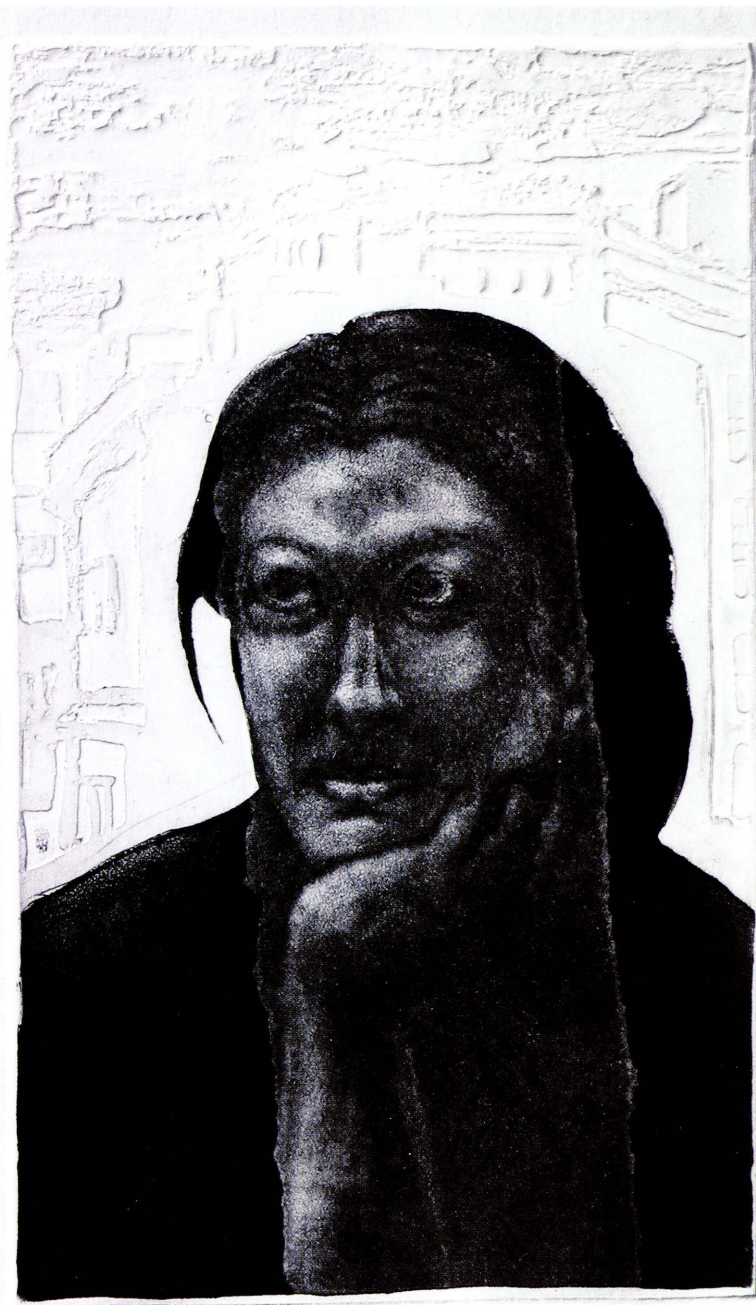
Jaffna's social fabric, having evolved from colonial times, fell apart with the increase of forced migration of various kinds in the 1990s. When the cruelties of war pressurized many families into vacating the battle zone, internal fights and killings among the guerrilla movements continuously produced their "others" as "culprits" or "suspects" and threatened each other's lives. Hence the loss of hope in the promises of the 1980s encouraged many frustrated individuals to leave their hometowns to safeguard their lives. The situation got even worse when the battle over Jaffna Fort opened a new war front and the LTTE took charge of the peninsula soon after the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Thousands of local Muslims were forcefully driven out of Jaffna in 1990 by the LTTE in revenge for the ethnic clash in the eastern part of the country. Subsequently, the expansion of high security zones by the military uprooted age-old civilian settlements from the surface of the earth, which continued to exist only in maps, stories, histories, and memories. People of different histories, regions, and social order were forced to live in their own land with a new identity as "internally displaced people." The economic embargo imposed on the region by the government further increased civil strife and migration toward other parts of Sri Lanka, India, or Western countries. The mass exodus of 1995, when government forces captured LTTE-controlled Jaffna,¹¹ became the biggest human

suffering in the known history of Jaffna. These developments led to unprecedented social situations: Members of the same family came to hold different citizenships; individuals came to hold citizenship in one country while identifying themselves with another nationality; persons became displaced without being dislocated, through the absence of their neighborhood and their own kith and kin. Therefore the simultaneous existence of a person in incommensurable physical and mental locations became a common everyday reality.

This sudden appearance of refugees by circumstance, refugees by birth, and Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora communities all over the world, while unraveling the existing social fabric, fundamentally altered the way in which the individual came to terms with his or her own surroundings and thereby his or her own self. In this context the earlier categories of identity, belonging, and recognition based on nationality, citizenship, geographical territory, and collective history and memory became meaningless. A feeling of mismatch, pain, and nostalgia constitutes the common and mundane experience in which the new consciousness of self is now rooted, despite all differences in individual histories or destinies. These realities of nomadism dispersed most of the artists away from their hometowns and brought art activities almost to a stage of standstill. On the other hand, the experience of exile, while decisively changing the artists' social circumstances, opened up immense opportunities in art making as the availability of proper art training and exposure to the larger art world made them face new challenges.

Even though the earlier modernist formalistic approach continued in the feminist criticism of Vasuki's paintings, the naive approach of Arunthathi (London) and the conscious distortions of Krishnarajah (London), Karuna (Canada), Nilanthan, and Kailasanathan, a significant shift of expression is exhibited in the works of Nanda Kandasamy (Canada), R. Vaidehi (India), S. Anushiya (Ireland), T. Shanaathanan, and S. Sivaruban. The nature of art of the 1990s can be categorized as autobiographical, collage, and surreal.

Loss of collective histories, censorship of various kinds, and a sense of victimhood and strangeness shape the autobiographical character of these artists' works, which are characterized by implicit metaphorical or symbolical expression. While R. Vaidehi portrays herself as a lonely stranger in a colorless backdrop of a cityscape in her etchings, Shanaathanan in his personal mythical narrations depicts himself as a suspected stranger in his own location. Similarly, Sivaruban's paintings display the victimized artist's self situated in an empty frightening surrounding without a trace of human presence. In these autobiographical narratives the artists' own body become the reference point not only of personal pain, but also society's pain, thus reflecting Foucault's idea of the body as the site in which all forms of repression are ultimately registered and hence can be regarded a site of resistance. While Shanaathanan, as an act of self-dissection and self-inflicted torture, lays bare the internal



R. Vaidehi

R. Vaidehi
Awaiting I, 2006

organs of the human body to the scrutiny of the viewer, all the works of Vaidehi have a resemblance to her self-portrait.

The medium of collage, which most of the contemporary artists amply use, has emblematic and symbolic functions both as meaning as well as means. Nanda Kandasamy in one of his collages attempts to create location by pasting together pieces



T. Shanaathanan
Untitled I, 2004

from the letters he received from his cordoned-off home during the peak of war. Similarly, Vasuki's collaged personal letters and printed news from the dailies and Vaidehi's collages of family photographs, photocopies of identity cards, police registrations, and other documents which are crucial in the day to day existence of Tamils in Sri Lanka, demarcate the new space of exist-

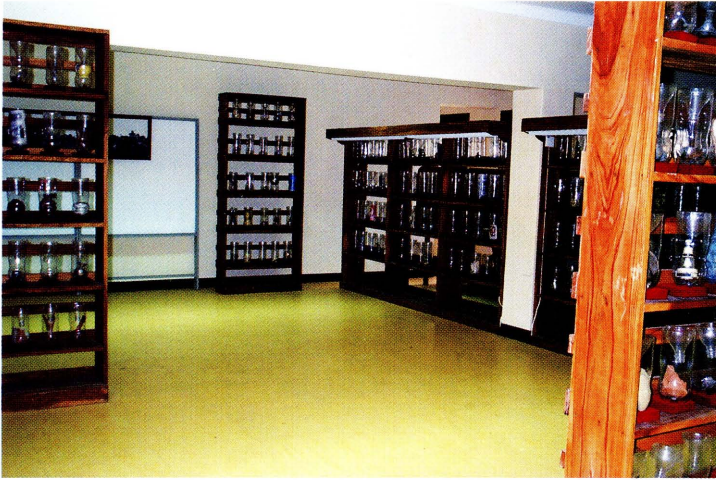
tence as well as experience. Interestingly, by the act of collage, with the erasure of private and personal domain markers, these personal documents become public. These personal and public domains are differently articulated by Shanaathanan as "self" and "location" by collaging human anatomy with cartography of different kinds, belonging to different political powers. His tailored maps from recollected memory attempt to mirror the surreal nature of reality in "dislocated locations."

The realities of dislocation forced the artists of the 1990s to take a more introverted approach toward nuances of the common, the ordinary, and the mundane. Their expressions are based on the experience of the "now" and the "present," rather than on history or invented past. In their works they define their identity as rooted in incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon each other. This acceptance, while rendering a surreal character to their visual work, also allows the individual to cope and negotiate the anomalies of social realities.

In 2004 Sethu Study Site for Visual Culture, Jaffna, and Theertha International Artists' Collective, Colombo, collectively put together an exhibition entitled *Aham Puram* at the Public Library of Jaffna. This show exhibited art works of the 1990s from southern Sri Lanka, as well as an impressive installation called *History of Histories* done by the people of Jaffna with the assistance of S. Kumutha, S. Kannan, K. Tamilini, S. Vasanthini, and T. Shanaathanan. Ordinary objects which signified the history and memory of individuals who were forced to live in the conditions of war for the last thirty years were collected from five hundred houses in the peninsula and were placed in identical containers in a museum-style display. As in the case of individual works discussed above, this collective effort exemplified a kind of reality situated at the intersections of scraps of memories and fragmented spaces. It showed how the collective pain and the feeling of common loss reconnected individuals and offered reorientation in new locations, new appropriations, and new roles. This installation also revealed an interesting turn in the history of local art practice: As if in a melting point of earlier binaries such as producer and consumer, artist and public, amateur and professional, history and reality, idea and skill, individuality and collectivity, center and periphery, it brought the whole array of arguments into a nutshell.

Notes

1. A peninsula in the northernmost part of the island, Jaffna is largely populated by the Tamil minority and has been the epicenter in the last thirty years of bloody civil war.
2. According to Jaffna's caste system, *Panchchakamalar* (including carpenters, goldsmiths, and blacksmiths), *Pandaram* (floral decorators in temple festivals), and *Vannar* (washer men) are the major castes assigned to the service associated with visual practice for both religious and secular purposes. *Vellala* (landlords and farmers) are the dominant caste and the prime patrons of art.



Figs. 4, 5

T. Shanaathanan, S. Kannan, K. Tamilini, S. Kumutha, and R. Vasanthini (in collaboration with the people of Jaffna), *History of Histories* Mixed media installation, 2004

Photograph courtesy of Theertha International Artists' Collective

3. Similar institutions were devoted to the performing arts, such as Puthuvetiyar Maduvam (1910), Saraswathi Vilasa Gana Saba (1928), North + Oriental Music Society (1930), Vishvakarma Sangam (1931), and Sangeetha Samajam (1933).
4. C. F. Winzer was a painter himself, and his activities as Chief Inspector of Art in the Department of Education and his leadership in the Ceylon Art Club influenced the younger generation of modernists and led to the modernization of art education and the formation of the '43 Group.
5. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are a militant organization who have been fighting against the Sri Lankan State for the last thirty years to create a separate state for Sri Lankan Tamils in the north and east of the island.
6. The "Little magazines" were part of a serious literature movement active from the 1970s up to now both in Tamil Nadu, South India, and Sri Lanka. The modernist Tamil painters, in collaboration with writers, published and circulated their drawings as illustrations in these magazines; by doing so, they popularized the modernist idiom among readers. These magazines encouraged art writing in Tamil and discussed both global and local issues in art.
7. In 1976 the "Madras movement" was initiated by a group of artists under the leadership of K. C. S. Paniker, who was the principal of the Madras College of Arts and Craft at that time.
8. In 1983 more than fifty Tamil inmates were killed by Sinhalese prisoners in Welikade jail situated in the suburbs of Colombo.
9. Colombo Technical College was later renamed Institute of Aesthetic Studies and became a full-fledged university in 2005.
10. The University of Jaffna started a course in Art History in 1989 and a practical course in Art and Design in 1999.
11. Over 500,000 people were forced to vacate their homes overnight due to heavy bombing and shelling by the military and the strict order given out by the Tamil militants, who were forced to withdraw from the northern peninsula and moved toward their stronghold in the Vanni area. The resettlement of people who could not afford to move away from their ancestral land due to various reasons gradually started in the mid-1990s.

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Menika van der Poorten
Ancestral Dress V + VI, 2003