

## Chandragupta Thenuwara - GLITCH +

## Distorted Transmissions

Everyone remembers the route they took home that day. Nearly 35 years on from the Black July Riots of 1983, Chandragupta Thenuwara is still able to trace his exact journey from Wijeya Newspapers in central Colombo, where he was working as a freelance artist, to the Tamil suburb of Wellawatte. In his mind, certain images remain crystal clear: gangs on the street, Tamil restaurants on fire, signs saying 'this house belongs to a Sinhalese,' and people being brutally murdered depending on the way they pronounced the word 'bucket' or 'pen' (*pana* in Sinhala; *pehna* in Tamil). What haunts Thenuwara the most, is that the police and army were there, but did nothing to stop the bloodshed until dusk. Essentially, he feels, the state allowed it to happen. Everyone remembers the route they took home because they navigated through streets of fear.

In many ways, the government's incendiary role in the conflict remains unacknowledged and unresolved. Some say its controversial decision to bury the 13 soldiers murdered in Jaffna by Tamil separatists in the Sinhalese-majority city of Colombo, played a role in inciting the 1983 riots. This civil unrest went on to trigger the 27-year civil war which ended in 2009. The country has since witnessed a peaceful democratic regime change in 2015, but two years in, the new government's promises for constitutional reform and transitional justice are yet to materialize. Despite the rhetoric abroad that Sri Lanka is finally moving toward a space of truth and reconciliation, for many people at home, there are still no answers. The state remains amnesic, the truth remains camouflaged and, as Thenuwara reminds us, this peace remains fragile.

The moment of transition from wartime to peace, and promises to proof, was the subject of Thenuwara's recent solo exhibition, "GLITCH +," 2017, staged at Saskia Fernando Gallery in Colombo. More than a presentation of the 57-year old's latest body of work, GLITCH + acted as a major milestone for the Colombo-based artist and activist. This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an exhibition he has held religiously each year on the day of the 1983 riots (23<sup>rd</sup> July). Self-curated and uncensored, his recurrent staging continues to act as a rare and independent critique, a form of public protest and as a site of memorialisation. Where other artists in Sri Lanka engage with the conflict in abstract or autobiographical ways, Thenuwara stands out for his cutting, fearless and direct commentary.

In what has become a longstanding ritual, the works for the July exhibition are made in the span of a few short months, but are the result of a year's contemplation. GLITCH + began with three large-scale canvases covered in dappled hues of blue, green and red - the three colours of light, but symbolically also the colours that represent Sri Lanka's main political parties. These include the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), whose customary merging and member-swapping can be difficult to keep up with. This muddling state of affairs could be why Thenuwara's colours appear to be mixing and in a constant state of motion, pixellating and reconstituting before us, as we squint and try to decipher them.

There is no clear image to be found, however, and staring at them for a period of time only propounds any sense of confusion.

Facing the three canvases is a fourth, painted in patches of mottled yellow; the colour of the generic barricades used by the government in order to block street protests. The regular sight of marches in Colombo is indicative of what the city's artists, writers and academics describe as its newly expanded civic and psychological space. For Thenuwara, to be able to speak without fear is not enough. "We don't have justice for the killings, we still don't know what happened to those who went missing," he said when we spoke in June. "We're meant to be living in the information age, but it feels more like the dark ages."

In many cases, the information that does surface in the press offers more questions than answers. The new administration's investigation into the torture and murder of local rugby star Wasim Thajudeen by state security in in 2012, who the police initially claimed had been killed in a road accident, is still underway. It is still unclear why the state narrative maintains that a broadcast journalist for the Tamil separatists Isipriya was killed by the army in 2009, when photographs proving that she was alive in 2012 have emerged. Both the haunting face of Thajudeen and the disturbing figure of Isipriya make an appearance Thenuwara's eponymously named paintings. The latter work is so blurred, that it can almost be read as a ubiquitous symbol for the countless, faceless and nameless victims of the conflict that are yet to receive any resolution.

The distorted effect we see in much of the works shown in GLITCH + is produced by Thenuwara painting an original image, then covering it with strips of masking tape, at half-inch intervals. The entire canvas is then layered with oblique brushstrokes of paint. Finally, a partially obscured image is revealed when the artist removes the overlaid tape. His installation takes this visual obfuscation a step further, whereby an underlying image

is covered in so many strips of tape, that what the viewer sees is closer to a redaction than an abstraction. Thenuwara heightens the sense of distortion by covering the installation with strings of multicoloured fairy lights, commonly used in Buddhist festivals in Sri Lanka. The lights periodically flicker and fuse irregularly due to an unstable voltage setting.

If multiple ideas and references seem to jostle for space in this exhibition, the artist's message remains loud and clear: "You may have a super television," he told us. "But without a proper power supply, you will still get a glitched image." Where his criticism of the current state comes across as reactionary at times, it is saved by his history of being committed to the cause. Two decades ago, "Barrelism," 1997, shown at the Heritage gallery in Colombo, was his first exhibition to critique Sri Lanka's shifting landscape, for which he placed several army-green barrels in the white-cube space. An object once associated with boiling tar to build the newly independent nation's roads had become synonymous with routine check-points and civil strife. Thenuwara, as always, was unafraid to spell it out.

The drive to be this kind of artist - critical, provocative and socially engaged - was fuelled by formative moments in his youth. Thenuwara studied for his Masters in Moscow, from 1985 to 1992, and was immersed in the movements of socialist realism and its avant-garde revisions. While he was away, the second JVP uprising in southern Sri Lanka was taking place; a violent social revolt which resulted in the death of thousands of people. Two bodies of work he exhibited on his return to Colombo were a direct response to this time; a solo show of figurative works, called "Moscow Paintings," 1992, and a painting commemorating the killing of journalist and JVP activist Richard

Manik de Zoysa, shown in the game-changing exhibition "New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art," 1994.

Thenuwara's voice, as a painter of the human condition, had already developed a distinct tone. In a country submerged by waves of violence and oppression, corruption and injustice, he felt duty bound to be an artist that spoke to and for the collective. Today his commitment to social endeavours takes on many guises. As an outspoken activist, he sits on multiple committees for democratic change, gender equality and educational reform. Whereas his belief in the power of art sees him direct initiatives from the Arts Council of Sri Lanka to the alternative art school Vaibhavi Academy for Fine Arts. Despite all this, Thenuwara maintains that his 20 year dedication to one continuous theme - the horror, killing and carnage of the anti-Tamil riots on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1983 - is his most significant role.

What compels the artist to memorialize this moment in this way is not just the state's denial of past events, but its own, selective and agenda-driven commemoration of them. Over the past few years, the erasure of certain histories versus the furthering of others has often had disastrous consequences in a nation where communities are already divided. Thenuwara's counters this biased approach to memorialisation not with monolithic statues of victors or victims, but with transient reflections on the contemporary moment. With this choice, the artist effectively challenges the very notion of memory and the monumental - replacing it with something that is ongoing, that is intangible and that deserves renewal on an annual basis.

After years of bloody conflict and state censorship, Sri Lanka has finally managed to rid itself of the old guard and make room for the new. The promise of a more stable future seems more

possible than before. Thenuwara remains uniquely positioned, as a cultural practitioner who is critical of the state, who is also an active part of the movement for change. The next couple of years will be crucial in determining whether the country moves toward accountability and accord, or swings back to apathy and instability. It is in this pivotal space that GLITCH + has the potential to resonate the most, as a mirror to the distortion of ideologies that prevail, and as a testimonial to the truth, so that the past can finally be laid to rest.