

NORTHERN DREAM

Yohan Medhanka

In this interview Yohan Medhanka discusses his path in becoming artist and the concept behind his solo show, to open on the 20th of June 2013 at Saskia Fernando Gallery. The exhibition will remain open until 4th of July 2013. For further information email info@saskiafernandogallery.com

Yohan Medhanka is twenty one years old. He is a self-taught artist who at his young age has a skill and intensity that is uncommon in artists with no formal education in fine art. In the few weeks since his paintings have collected in our gallery, waiting to be hanged in this exhibition, they have captivated each person that looks upon them. There is something incredibly real in the work of this young painter. His faces tell a story, while his technique merges oil painting with contemporary colours and concepts. Many artists have connected with the North in postwar Sri Lanka, often travelling there to mentor or to conduct workshops. For Medhanka, it just took one visit to captivate him. And after what seems to have been a three year journey from painting to meditating and back, he has emerged with a powerful series of portraits that prove to us that young Sri Lankan contemporaries still have what it takes.

How did you start to paint with oils?

I did something new every week, my teacher taught me about watercolour. It was hard to learn oil painting in school. For an exhibition at school we were meant to do some painting. The exhibition never happened but I bought some oil paint and I found a canvas at home, that my father had left behind and it was really old; it may have been 15-20 years old. I stretched it and I did my first oil painting of my mother. Da Vinci was my inspiration for this painting. I taught myself how to paint with oil paints. After O Levels I joined the Art Way Institute and I was there for one year and I found new friends and learnt about how things work in the art scene in Sri Lanka.

What did you learn about the art scene at the institute? What did you gain from this experience?

I was really alone as an artist, I am a loner. Jagath Ravindra taught us for a few days, he was not a permanent lecturer, he only taught us some lessons. They were the best I have ever had. He has inspired me a lot, he was like a hero to me when I was a kid. Him and his pupils, they have inspired me a lot.

What happened after the institute?

I joined Saskia Fernando Gallery to work as Gallery Assistant. My schooling was a nightmare, so I had little direction and then I just ended up at the gallery. I learnt a lot about Sri Lankan artists working in the gallery for two months. Then when I left the gallery I was lost. I joined a monastery and I lived there for one and a half years. I stopped painting. I was not a religious person but I met a Buddhist monk who preached good things to me. While I was there I used ball point pen and scrap books and kept drawing my left hand. I focused on this for a while. This act became meditative for me. Drawing became spiritual for me. My experience there gave me freedom. I was surrounded by nature. I detest the city. When I left the monastery after one and a half years I began working on the exhibition at the Alliance Francaise. This was my first solo show in December 2012.

Why did you focus on people in the north in this series, this exhibition?

I think as an artist it is our duty. I am a socialist and I am an artist. I could work in the advertising industry but I choose to be an artist to avoid working on the promotion of a product or idea. We have a duty in our freedom of expression to speak for those unspoken for. I think when it comes to art, mainly in Sri Lanka, the politically inclined artists use art to promote their own agenda. I don't view art as a tool to promote ones personal agenda.

Have you been to the North?

Once. I loved Jaffna. It was three years ago. I loved the people. I had this crazy dream to become mayor of the city. I fell in love with the landscapes, the people. There was a purity there. It felt real and natural to me.