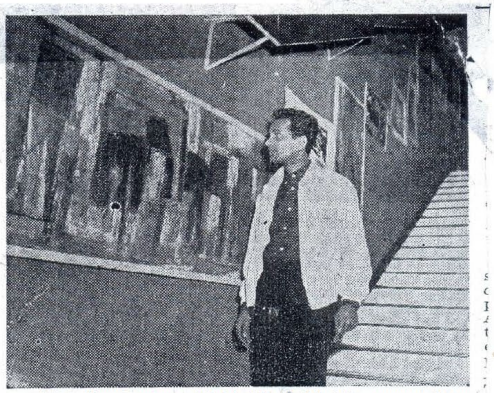
H.A. KARUNARATNE

1929 - 2026

HERE IN TOKYO

ASAHI EVENING NEWS, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1960



H. A. Karunaratne, with his "Festival." His one-man show of 16 oils, 11 lithos and two line drawings may be seen at Sogo Department Store this week.

ART AROUND TOWN

By Gavin Marshall

A 25-year-old artist from Ceylon, H. A. Karunaratne, has some pointed object lessons for local artists, as a visit to his one-man show at the Sogo Department Store, Yurakucho, will quickly reveal.

The exhibition, 16 oils, 11 lithographs and two line drawings, is open until 6 p.m. November 21.

Mr. Karunaratne's work teaches the difference in meaning between freedom and lack of restraint. Every one of his works shows a liberty of spirit without indulging in excess; there is discipline, but not so rigid that the source of ideas is curbed; and there is a fresh liberty which is never allowed to rampage.

Most of the young artists' oils are freely impressionistic. Sunset, one of the smaller canvases, is a dramatic color composition; speed is in dull browns and olives; Odori conveys delightfully the color and movement of the Japanese dance; in Festival, which refers to a festival of Ceylon, we can discern a lumbering elephant—or perhaps it is a distillate of all elephants; Shepherd is a work of great delicacy and beauty; Haste, Destiny, Storm, Harmony —the abstract titles alone will indicate the predilections of Mr. Karunaratne.

Turning to the lithographs, we find a level of excellence that is all the more to be admired when it is known that this young man has only studied lithography since living in Japan.

A graduate of the Ceylon University of Fine Arts, Mr. Karunaratne exhibited widely in his own country, and as a matter of fact many of his canvases can already be found in widely scattered parts of the globe—from Washington to London, and including Switzerland and other parts of Europe.

He came to Japan under a Japanese Government Foreign Scholarship, and is now studying at Gedai. Ceramic painting is his next field of study; and he intends to develop further his skill and natural inclination for lithography. After that, Mr. Karunaratne says, he wants to go to Paris.

The 11 lithos on display at Sogo are extremely pleasing arrangements, ranging from the abstract to the semi-figurative. Their layout, design and general arrangement speak a great deal for the assured future the young artist has in this field.

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H. A. Karunaratne (1929-2026) is widely considered the father of abstract art in Sri Lanka, and to understand his practice is to understand the delinearization of histories in the country after independence. In an era of nation building, marked by a heightened appreciation for the world at large, his work resisted a single inherited narrative in favour of layered, open and non-sequential ways of seeing. Across a career of more than six decades, he explored the interplay of diverse materials, from fabric to metal, to evoke rhythm, energy and dissonance, shaped by Buddhist and Zen philosophies.

His formation was both local and global. After studying at the Government College of Fine Art in Colombo under Stanley Abeysinghe and David Paynter, he was awarded a Japanese Government Scholarship to the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1961. A Fulbright Award took him to the Pratt Institute in New York in 1966, where he encountered the New York School and Abstract Expressionism. His time in Japan, from the time, Mono-Ha: the School of Things, was emerging, resonates with the material sensibility that defined his work.

As a lecturer at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, University of Kelaniya, he shaped generations of artists. His work was shown from the São Paulo Biennale (1969) to Tokyo, Dhaka, Delhi, London and, most recently, Crossing Borders: Modern Art from South Asia at PhillipsX and Grosvenor Gallery (2025). It is held in major collections in India and Japan. He was honoured with the Kala Suri by the Government of Sri Lanka and the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays, by the Government of Japan.

As the gallery managing the estate, we feel a deep responsibility to present this body of work with the context it deserves. We are grateful to LYNEAR Wealth for their partnership in securing the artist's legacy and for working alongside us in archiving the estate. Our commitment ensures that Dr Karunaratne's contribution to the modern history of South Asia will be preserved, studied and shared with future generations.

Saskia Fernando

A CONSTELLATION CONTAINED WITHIN: H. A. KARUNARATNE

Mariyam Begum

Widely regarded as the father of Sri Lankan abstract art, H. A. Karunaratne (1929-2026) left an indelible mark on the landscape of Sri Lankan visual art as an artist and a mentor. He is well regarded in the arts community and is often credited with shifting the approach to image-making. As a pedagogue, he was instrumental in the shift away from the figurative, breaking away from the academic realism that was predominantly encouraged at the College of Fine Arts [1].

His own career in the arts was informed by encounters with the work of the 43 Group, in particular Justin Deraniyagala, whose works reflected the synthesis of artistic languages that took root in Europe with regional and South Asian sensibilities [2]. Karunaratne's practice is nestled within a period where artistic responses in the South Asian region coincided with the formation of national identity, a desire to formulate a modernist and international visual language, and rootedness in the historical and cultural landscape of one's region [3]. Yet, his own practice resists easy categorisation. His was a singular pursuit of art as a way of living, without situating itself immediately within a conversation of national or international identity [4].
Initially trained at the Government College of Fine Art under the mentorship of J.D.A. Perera, Stanley Abeysinghe and David Paynter, Karunaratne completed a Diploma in Painting and Drawing (1952 - 58). Following his Diploma, he was awarded a two-year scholarship by the Japanese Government Scholarship for Foreign Research (1959) to study at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, where he pursued printmaking. This was followed by a scholarship from the Asia Fellowship Society, prolonging his stay in Japan. In 1965, he was awarded the Fulbright Scholarship to continue learning printmaking at the Pratt Institute in the United States. During this period, he came across the works by artists from the New York School, including the works of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

In the fifteen years as a lecturer at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (1975 - 1989), Karunaratne became instrumental in redefining the art curriculum within fine arts institutes in the country. His emphasis on independent, individual expression, along with his role in introducing young art practitioners to modes of expression that were informed by abstract art and encouraging them to explore alternative mediums, played a pivotal role in broadening the contemporary visual landscape of Sri Lanka. His approach to teaching was one where young artists were encouraged to witness the beauty that exists in the environment around them, probing them to think through their own work and encouraging them to engage with the aesthetic qualities of the material world around them [5].

Karunaratne was not limited by the materials he worked with, instead choosing to turn every available material into a medium that embodies his inner world. Born in Kotalawela, a village in the Kalutara district, Karunaratne grew up in an environment surrounded by artisans working with gold, clay and iron, spending considerable time in their workshops [6]. These encounters prefigured the artist's later disposition towards working across media ranging from terracotta to metal, tissue to palm leaf.

Understanding the artist's prolific practice requires sustained engagement in art history and the building of cohesive archives, to allow us to construct a comprehensive sense of his wide ranging practice. His early works, dating to the 1950s, are evidently figurative. However, beginning in the 1960s, abstraction

gradually begins to appear in his work; informed both by the approaches to printmaking in post-war Japan, where artists experimented with abstraction as a mode of upholding ideas of humanism, individualism, and liberalism, [7] and his encounter with the New York School.

Karunaratne's works created in the 1980s present a curiosity with the vocabulary of American Abstract Expressionism; the artist has incorporated it in his practice, almost as an exercise to unearth and thereby explore the essence that can be contained within it. This penchant towards reworking the visual form to enumerate its various possibilities appears across his work, where the visual idea is transformed across his career that spanned six decades [8].

This tendency continues even in his approach to the image. In the early part of his career, Karunaratne created visually recognisable forms, such as Mother and Child (1985) and Music (1982), with the forms subsequently moving towards dissolution in the latter years. This is also evident in the paintings created between 1968 - 1970 [9] where the artist distilled the image into primary colours, using bold, sweeping strokes of black only to unify it.

The shifting nature of the subject matter, along with the shifts in his visual style, permits inference that the form, in Karunaratne's works, offers itself up as a substrate, almost like an armature in a sculptural work that gives the foundational structure upon which the artist reproduced the sensibilities he desired. This becomes even more evident in the three-dimensional works he created on canvases and in sculptural works; the artist began to experiment increasingly from the early 2000s [10] . The works created in the later part of his career almost appear to envision the flattened 'image' on the canvas as tactile.

His works simultaneously carried tension and ease, almost embodying the Zen ideals of dualism. This is particularly revealed in the series of black paintings created by the artist, where the canvas is met with the swift application of paint, while the prints or impressions left by tissue carry a meditative quality, in the softness and care required to place it on the canvas surface. The viewer engaging with the work is compelled to carry a myriad conflicting emotions within themselves - and in that we begin to find a glint of H. A. Karunaratne's interior world, wherein even squeezing the paint from the tube is a moment too long for him to commit the 'image' he sees in his mind's eye onto the canvas.

Much like in Santiniketan, where Japanese ideals and ways of creating art informed artistic exercises at the time, Karunaratne's encounter with Japan and the philosophies of its cultural landscape shaped much of his approach to art-making. Informed by principles of Zen Buddhism, his was a practice that sought to liberate the mind and produce the essence of the self. Karunaratne's stance towards art can be inferred through the popular koan involving the monk Nan-in, who poured a cup of tea that overflowed for a professor who had come to him to learn about Zen. When stopped by the professor, Nan-in is said to have famously responded that to receive the knowledge of Zen, one must approach it without preconceptions[11].

Within the content of South Asia, H. A. Karunaratne's practice is part of an ongoing exercise in developing a modernist language, adding to the contribution of the Bengal School, the 43 Group, and the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group. Reading his work through the lens of the New York School and Buddhist philosophy, provides us an entry into his work. Yet, given his own approach to art where it occupied a central part of his life, his oeuvre opens up the conversation to rethink how we write the history of our region. It also invites us to ponder on the frameworks we use to think about abstract art - requiring us to think of it as a linguistic form that is shaped by language, culture and the multitude of experiences we carry within us.

PROFILE OF A MODERNIST

Anoli Perera

"...the True Self is the theoretical position from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea. The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel the real..."' [1]

H. A. Karunaratne is the most senior and revered living visual artist in Sri Lanka at the moment. For Karunaratne, a quiet, patient and, at the same time, a very determined artist, the act of painting is 'not to paint but to let it paint'. Through the logic of this statement that embodies his aesthetic philosophy, he has been able to embark on an artistic quest that has consciously removed the derivations and stimuli from the external world, and established the canvas as a spiritually heavy embodiment. And so, I thought of starting this rather formidable project of writing a book on one of the most prolific master artists living in Sri Lanka, H. A. Karunaratne, by quoting D. W. Winnicott, because his formulation of the psychoanalytic idea of the True Self and the False Self implicitly parallels the aesthetic philosophy of Karunaratne.

With an artistic practice spanning nearly 60 years and a body of work too numerous to count, Karunaratne, at the age of 88, still remains in a state of youthful vigour, geared in a mode that is super productive. Karunaratne's confidence and ability to manipulate different surfaces and textures to create atmospheric differences, and his imaginative power clarifies that he is a master of his style. He produces canvases that are devoid of realistic figurative motifs and replaces them with equally fascinating colour gradations, abstract shapes and built-up impasto with a combination of paint, found objects and textured surfaces that transform his art into solid relief. His art goes through an alchemic process, while he remains an enthusiastic and inquisitive alchemist. His constant attempt to synthesise mystical senses, spiritual aspirations and physical gestures in his work has managed to produce an aura capable of enticing artists, as well as audiences, to consume a highly secular artistic product as a very spiritual object.

Karunaratne was born to an era of nationalist struggle for independence, and the search for new identities and parameters for 'authentic' projections to construct a cohesive national image through cultural means. Not suffering from the usual anxiety of the nationalist or the 'cultural schizophrenia' [2] of the fundamentalist, nor pining to self position within an oppositionist ideology assuming a radical stance, Karunaratne's artistic persona has instead opted to be absorbed in his art practice as more of an academic exercise. His artistic quest is not about the revival or reinvention of a grand tradition, but an application to make an imagined past palatable to the present. In that, he differs from the popular thrust of artists who aspire to become conduits connecting the past to the present. His utopia is of a different kind. He positions his struggle with the canvas and paint in the pursuit of connecting the idea of time and materiality within a spiritual framework, within a Buddhist paradigm. But his spiritual pursuit in art does not extend to the conscious reworking of the image within the iconography of Buddhist art or any other image seen as strongly traditionally-rooted, unlike that of artists such as George Keyt, whose ideas overwhelmingly explored mythologies of Hinduism fused with aesthetics of classical/traditional painting styles found in Sri Lanka and elements from Paris-based modernist idioms. Neither does Karunaratne enforce an authenticity rooted within a nationalist agenda in his

art—a tendency that he consciously distances himself from: “When I paint as an independent contemporary artist, I am inspired by my own individual vision. I don’t consciously or with special effort recall and introduce motifs and symbols of my traditional culture.[3]”

In Karunaratne’s art, the vernacular is successfully transformed into the modern and the contemporary, politely extending beyond its traditional visuality of form and figure to include the possibility of representing an idea, a mood or moment in a non-figurative format, and within the minimalism of monochromic colours. With his deep appreciation of traditional art and craft, his knowledge of international art developments received through his pedagogical art training in Sri Lanka and spells of artist residencies abroad, he has been able to find a suitable idiom for presenting the aesthetics grasped in his own observations of the vernacular, or rather the abstraction in the vernacular found in his immediate cultural environment.

H. A. Karu Imprint

Recent Sri Lankan art history has witnessed only a few turning points in its evolutionary course. Since the introduction of the secular tradition of visual art based on the aesthetic premises and ideologies of British academic art practices, adapted to local art discourse in the latter part of the 19th century, Sri Lankan art experienced its first major epistemic break in the 1940s. In 1943, a group of artists reacting to the prevailing ideology of painting, which pursued a restrictive academism, pseudo Oriental impersonations and the naturalism of British art, came together as the 43 Group.

Emerging from a background charged with nationalist sentiments and an anti-colonial slant, the 43 Group absorbed most inspirations from avant-garde art movements in Paris and art centres like Shantiniketan in India. Each artist in the 43 Group found their liberating aesthetics so different to the other, and their collective unifying thread was this particular autobiographical stamp of dissent, which is a particularly modernist attributes. Their avant-gardism proposed different stylistic and philosophical fusing approaches to their formalist, as well as thematic, formats in art that projected their effect anxieties of a period that sought political and cultural change. Writing on George Keyt, Justin Daraniyagala and Ivan Peries, three major artists of the 43 Group, Jagath Weerasinghe comments on these artists’ disparate approaches to their art: “Of the members of the 43 Group, George Keyt can be considered the best-known Sri Lankan modernist, whose work combined a modernist idiom rooted in a ‘cubism-like pictorial language with orientalist themes, motifs and moods. His works played a pivotal role in the popularisation of modern art in Sri Lanka. If Keyt is to be considered the ‘orientalist visionary’ in the 43 Group, then the works of Justin Daraniyagala and Ivan Peries represented the two extremes of the group’s expressionist trends. The intense and complex psychological dispositions portrayed in Daraniyagala’s works subtly explore and reveal the tragedy and irony of the human condition, while the symbolic and meditative landscapes of Ivan Peries suggest extreme tranquility and compassion [4] .

The 43 Group was credited with forming a Sri Lanka modernist movement successfully, fusing indigenous draughtsmanship with the idioms of European modernism in an effective way, paving the road to a new hybrid form palatable to a nation that was trying to establish a cultural identity ‘authentic’ to its traditions. Although the 43 Group’s art met with its share of resistance in the initial stages as in any situation of change, the influence, paradigms and premises of the 43 Group remained intact within modern art in Sri Lanka for a long time.

The modernism that was created by the 43 Group also opened up many possibilities for the forthcoming generation of artists, more clearly visible in the painterly tradition of art. Centring their responsiveness, particularly towards the dissection of space and image/form within the two dimensional frame, they shed off the restrictive formulas of the art academy practiced by the Ceylon Society of Arts. They found other ways and means of presenting or capturing the ‘mood’ and ‘desire’ in a painting, apart from resorting to capture realism as it is. This search, however, was almost always pursued through distorting and dissecting the figure or image and manipulating the space around it with a new aesthetic in mind. In their work, the application of paint

or the process of painting had its own radicalism. In this context, Weerasinghe makes the following observations, which indicates the arrival of Karunaratne's influence on Sri Lankan art:

"The two decades from the late 1960s to the late 1980s experienced relatively less dynamism in art compared with the 1940s and 1950s, except for an important development that had far-reaching consequences in terms of method and style in painting. Sri Lankan modern painting until the 1960s was mostly a figurative style that evolved with inspirations absorbed from such major European trends as post impressionism, fauvism and cubism, except for an artist such as George Claessen (1909-99) of the 43 Group, who was both an abstractionist and a representational painter. This situation changed after the 1960s, when the nonfigurative tradition of painting became firmly established in Sri Lankan modern art as a result of the works, ideas and teachings of the painter and art teacher, H. A. Karunaratne (b. 1929). In other words, it was H. A. Karunaratne who established the sign of the New York School as the mark of excellence in art-making in Sri Lankan painting.[5]"

As observed by Weerasinghe above, the next major change in the aesthetics and ideology in art was experienced in the 1970s. Karunaratne can be singled out as the sole instigator of this change, which introduced the possibilities of art being nonfigurative and the process of art making as alchemistic. Used to an art that was habitually figurative, and infused with exotics and sensuality of the 43 Group and its followers, the cultural elites who engaged with art initially found Karunaratne's scarcely figurative work difficult to fathom. Their anxious reaction to an art that had such a minimalist approach to the figure was to categorise it as a cerebral exercise, and therefore a Buddhist one. Martin Wickramasinghe, the eminent Sri Lankan writer in his review of Karunaratne's work articulates this anxiety:
"In Karunaratne's paintings, all figures undergo a process of dehumanisation which sometimes generates a tragic and pessimistic feeling in a man of sensibility who looks at them artistically. This suggestive aspect of most, if not all, of his paintings, I believe, is an unconscious manifestation of the mind disciplined by the Buddhist culture and modern art. [6] "

Karunaratne's association with the New York School of Painting happened during his affiliation with the Pratt Institute in New York, in 1965, as a Fulbright scholar. Exposure to a vast array of abstract art gave Karunaratne additional confidence to continue on his already well-formed ideas of abstraction, as a total expression of an aesthetic experience. The young Karunaratne was acutely aware of the power and allure so abstract expressionistic ideas, first visually experienced in the stained walls in his village. Discovering similar ideas on abstraction ahead, an ideology well-formed within the New York art scene made him further believe in his own convictions and experimentations on the canvas, decentring the figure and form, and reinterpreting his approach to art within a somewhat different philosophical basis than of American abstract expressionism. Upon his return to Sri Lanka, he enthusiastically engaged in professing his philosophy of art making with an absolute conviction of his methods and process. This resulted in one of the most influential and widely adopted stylistic movements in Sri Lankan art in the latter part of the 20th century.

Until Karunaratne's intervention with abstract expressionistic art in the 1970s, the major source of influence on local art was still the modernism of the 43 Group. Although Sri Lankan traditional art and rituals reflected abstract ideas in their motifs and decorations, the introduction of an evolved body of abstract art and its aesthetic philosophies to the Sri Lankan art community came only with the new art of Karunaratne through his familiarity, with works by artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, as well as American abstract expressionism. Until then, Sri Lankan art had remained within a pictorial tradition, privileging the figurative and the nostalgic.

The success of Karunaratne's inroads into the local art scene with abstract art has as much to do with the way. It was packaged as its aesthetics and Ideology. Even though the final impetus for an abstract art probably came about with his exposure to the art ideology on abstraction, found In Abstract Expressionist work in New York, his ability

to understand its alchemy and relate to its aesthetics came about because of his familiarity to the aesthetics of the local religious and ritual art that used high stylizations and nonfigurative elements. His body of knowledge on art had already internalised abstraction in the natural and cultural environments of his lived reality even before his American exposure to abstract art.

...Look how aesthetically beautiful the walls made with clay is. One can see the wooden rafters and coir knots embedded in the clay. When they are plastered with cement and painted, the beauty of it is gone.... The shed where 'sekkus' (oil extracting contraption) are kept is like an art gallery. It is made with stone and its arm is in wood. One could see fungus patches on places where the oil has dripped over the years. These are aesthetically important things. When observed from a distance, these are extremely delightful. It is this experience I got from my life in the village that permeates into my work little by little. They are delightful . [7]

Karunaratne was also able to contextualise the abstractionist aesthetics within the ideas of spirituality, which held meaning to local audiences even in the absence of a recognisable image. Karunaratne declared that painting was a method and process of meditation and an elevated spiritual activity that purifies and calms one's mind. Therefore, a painting should be executed by letting forms and shapes emerge within the canvas as a result of a deep understanding between the artist and his/her soul. Here, his assertion was that this unique process of art should not be tarnished by preconceived notions that have a direct reference to an external influence. This way Karunaratne managed to elevate the act of painting to a transcendent act [8]. The idea of understanding the creative act within a primary process of feeling is similar to the ideas that Winnicott describes in his concepts of True and False Selves. Winnicott's True Self embodies the experience of the body's aliveness and "the idea of the primary process," that is, a process "especially not reactive to external stimuli, but primary [9]". Winnicott presents abstract art as a "cul-de-sac communication" which carries "all the sense of real". He further describes it as a "true communication involving the core of the sense, that which could be called a true self". The practice of the abstract in the work of Karunaratne centring on the concentration of feeling with a sense of authenticity fits in with Winnicott's analysis on the abstract artist's ploy for introversion. For Winnicott this true communication is a "mystic's withdrawal into a personal inner world of sophisticated introjects... the loss of contact with the world of shared reality being counter balanced by a gain of terms of feeling real [10]".

If American expressionism is looked at through a study of the aesthetics embodied in Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, what is evident is an artist's introversive methodology in reaction to post-war social and political chaos. The crisis of the artist's position in society and the ability to intervene in the face of this socio-political chaos was redirected to an artistic advantage and an excuse for self-absorption. In the process, artistic endeavour was shifted from the concerns and challenges of society to that of a struggle between the canvas and the self. As a result, through this, artists were able to circulate and negotiate their personal crises as a social phenomenon. For Karunaratne, abstract expressionism allowed space for a new philosophical approach. Through his idiosyncratic preoccupation with transcendent ideas and hermetic theories of the universe (earthly verses spiritual), he formulated a technique for giving expression to a highly abstract and aesthetically challenging paradigm of art making.

For Karunaratne, the ideas of abstraction go beyond shedding the figure or seeking alchemy with colour on the surface that emanates a strong sense of experimentation and chance discovery. His art is a search for an aesthetic experience that almost replaces a religious one. In order to transform successfully from the aesthetic to the spiritual or vice versa, his act of painting explores a philosophical base congealed delightfully within the general elements of religiosity or spirituality such as 'seeking the truth, and the more specific elements from Buddhism where 'seeking the truth' has an internal investigation, which involves shedding layers to discover the pure? In his philosophical base, he also dislodges 'aesthetic experience as something that appeases

the eye, a motor activity for the external, by privileging it as something for the mind, something internal. As he pronounces: “to appreciate art, you have to think of it in terms of art - for art is not for your eyes but for your soul. And that is why I have called my forthcoming exhibition Soul Searching [11]. Karunaratne refers to a mural done on the outer wall of his house as “the art of inner necessity [12]”. Everything is spiritual when it is dictated by inner necessity. This is a necessity that inherently collaborates with the inner search, which strives for a purer form of art embodied in the abstract - process of shedding the clutter of figuration.

The motivation and philosophical premises of his art making are best articulated by Karunaratne when he declares,

I paint when the mood holds me. I do not conceive of a message I wish to point to. Therefore, I cannot pinpoint what exactly inspires me. When the mood arises, I paint in what one might say is an act of meditation. To me, it is an act of faith and I stop when I feel it is done... True art is a form of meditation. When the artist is in the right mood for meditation, myriad ideas come flowing into his mind. The canvas is something sacred and pure to the true artist. The canvas is the means that enables the artist to convey the ideas that rise from the depths of his heart. The canvas is not meant to be polluted with meaningless brush strokes harshly rubbed over each other... When I put something on canvas and I feel that no further action of mind is needed to fulfill my objective, I stop the painting and let the viewer seek its meaning. [13]

An artwork holds a deeper meaning for Karunaratne than that represented by its aesthetic value. According to him, a “painting is not photography. Nor is a work of art meant merely to ornament a room. A true work of art is primarily not meant for the eye. People use their eyes to see the painting, but they should appreciate it with their hearts[14].”

The formulations of Karunaratne on the relevance of art, reminds one of Ernst Cassirer’s idea on the subject: “He who does not understand these intuitive symbols, who cannot feel the life of colours, of shapes, of spatial forms and patterns, harmony and melody, is secluded from the work of art- and by this he is not only deprived of aesthetic pleasure, but he loses the approach to one of the deepest aspects of reality[15] “. In this scheme of things, Karunaratne, whose work relies much on intuitive impulses and capturing feelings of creativity, is clearly a committed modernist, spiritualist and secularist in the same instant. But above all, he is a prolific artist, and the shift in art practice and philosophy he introduced will continue to be felt in Sri Lanka well into the future.

The essay was first published in H.A. Karunaratne by Anoli Perera and is reproduced with permission from the publisher, Taprobane Collection

ROOTED IN AND REMOVED FROM

Jyoti Dhar

He wakes up at 4 am, sips his tea and listens to the radio. He turns the dial to hear the latest news on the island, before tuning into Buddhist sermons at dawn. As the light begins to permeate through the windows, he makes his way to the corner of the house, to a room filled with fuses, trip switches and shock absorbers on some days, cement, cardboard and wires on other days. The tables and surfaces in this space brim with debris from construction sites as well as materials hand-picked from hardware stores and local markets. He studies his bounty of supplies, and then he begins. Cutting, painting, bending or burning, breaking, moulding and transforming. Favouring his hands and body over workman's tools, the artist shapes material into form. H.A. Karunaratne is 95 years old. These days his children often aid him in the making of his work. Still, he persists with his practice — something he sees as an endless pursuit. His is an intuitive, instinctual and embodied process; one where the egoic mind is stilled, and the autonomy of the activity takes over.

For Karunaratne, or 'Karu' as he is known, both process and product are equally significant. When asked about the meaning or purpose behind his prolific practice, spanning 1950s till present day, the artist tends to be cryptic and philosophical."It is not easy to express (oneself) through abstract art unless you practice it throughout your life," he says in characteristic fashion. "It is only through abstract art that you can express your inner thoughts."[1] Karu has been described as a lone and enigmatic artist who has largely stayed away from exhibiting and selling his work. Yet he is also cited as a key figure within the field of abstraction in Sri Lanka.[2] Tracing the trajectory of his work more closely, however, suggests that Karu's work sidesteps these easy dichotomies and labels, and does not sit easily inside the established canon. Focusing more on the contextual than the biographical,[3] this short text reviews how his work draws from and charts its own path through local and international histories of modern and contemporary art.

Crediting modernist and '43 group member Justin Deraniyagala with sparking his artistic journey,[4] Karu went to art school in Colombo[5] in the 1950s where he was taught by renowned figures such as David Paynter and J.D.A. Perera. He tells us that such teachers played a crucial role in his early development, but also reveals that "there was not enough freedom for them (in this environment) for creative expression."[6] In 1959, having received a government scholarship from Japan, Karu set off for Tokyo. With American occupation post-World War II having ended three years earlier, the artist found himself in a nation still in the process of recalibrating and redefining itself. For visual artists, and printmakers in particular, this manifested in a move away from modernist-collaborative methods, to one where they were working to innovative new methods, being fully autonomous and incorporating multiple media.[7] As such, Karu experimented with lithography, woodblocks, silkscreen, etchings, ceramic and collage while in the city. His work, later shown at the International Print Biennial in Tokyo,[8] incorporated "tar, printer's ink, Chinese lacquer, oils and unheard-of materials".[9] This exposure to printmaking in Japan, and how it opened up and fuelled Karu's pursuit of abstraction, is interesting to consider. Printmaking is abstract by its very nature; it is the abstraction of one image to make another.. It is about process as much as product, involving labour of the body, and requiring a degree of 'letting go.' All of this manifests in Karu's practice even today. The cultural and spiritual context within which he

studied also impacted his approach to abstraction,[10] in particular the emphasis of Zen Buddhism on producing one's essence, becoming one with the work and liberating the mind.

However, it is important to remember that these influences were not one-way or limited to Karu. Artistic exchanges in the 1950s between Europe, the U.S. and Japan included a Zen Group being formed in Germany, and American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning citing Zen Buddhism as an influence. In this post-war period, several global artists were exhibiting in Tokyo and many Japanese artists were drawing from Abstract Expressionism and Colour field paintings. This sheds light on the context in which artists like Karu went from Japan to the U.S.

In contrast to his time in Tokyo, we know little about Karu's stint in New York (1965-66), other than that he went to see museums and modern masters' works up close. In particular, De Kooning and Pollock's work impressed him. One could certainly see De Kooning's black and white gestural paintings from the 1950s sharing space with some of Karu's own, [11] as well as Pollock's signature automatic and impulsive lines placed in conversation with some of the expressive and free-flowing forms of Karu's canvases.[12] Digging a little deeper, however, reveals that many artists in New York in 1965,[13] including those studying graphic art at the Pratt Institute (as Karu was) were absorbed by one overwhelming preoccupation — the Vietnam War. 1965 was the year that a wave of student protests and counter-culture movements were triggered by the U.S. ground invasion. Some artists became overtly political in this moment, while others (some of whom also witnessed the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) turned to existentialism as a way to refuse binary political positions and move beyond conveying particular meanings through their work.[14]

Considering Karu's work against this heady mix of internationalism and war-instigated existentialism may help us to see it in a different light (especially as it continued to be shared in transnational circuits from the 1960s onwards). [15] This may be one reason why Karu continued to pursue abstraction when he returned to Sri Lanka and began teaching in the late 1970s and 1980s.[16] At this time, in response to the atrocities of the JVP uprisings, the Black July Riots of 1983 and the ensuing civil war, many of Karu's students including Jagath Weerasinghe and Chandragupta Thenuwara were turning towards the overtly political in their work.[17] Surrounded by a sea of figuration, Karu chose to focus on expanding his practice into abstract prints, murals, sculptures and paintings. [18] One could read this focus on his work as another way of being present. His central concern in a desire for freedom and a quest for creativity is reflected in the many phases his practice underwent in the 1990s and 2000s. He describes this pursuit of stillness and nothingness against such a milieu by saying, "a void... speaks loudest."[19]

A visit to Karu's home studio in Nugegoda yields compelling insights into an abundant and influential life quest, spanning seven decades. At the very entrance to his home, where you are greeted by a mural embedded with shards of ceramic, to his living room filled with metallic sculptures on pedestals, to the walls and floors covered in scores of canvases layered with cardboard, protruding objects and colourful wire — every corner serves as a record of an artist who has spent a lifetime experimenting and pushing a singular practice. References to local crafts and materials parallels with modernists in Sri Lanka and abroad, as well as the overarching influence of Buddhism (not as an ideology but as a way of life) are most clear when these bodies of work are viewed together in this home studio/ archival space. For Karu, as someone who has been shaped by history and place (but has also been able to liberate himself from all constraints and categorizations) what matters most is another day to see and make work, as one lifetime is not enough.[20]

The essay was written by Jyoti Dhar for the exhibition catalogue accompanying H.A. Karunaratne's solo exhibition Water for Life, held in 2025.



Portrait of Thilani Karunaratne, c. 1970, Oil on Canvas, 64 x 44 cm

Untitled, 1968, Oil on Board, 63 x 76 cm





Untitled, 1969, Oil on Board, 64 x 77 cm



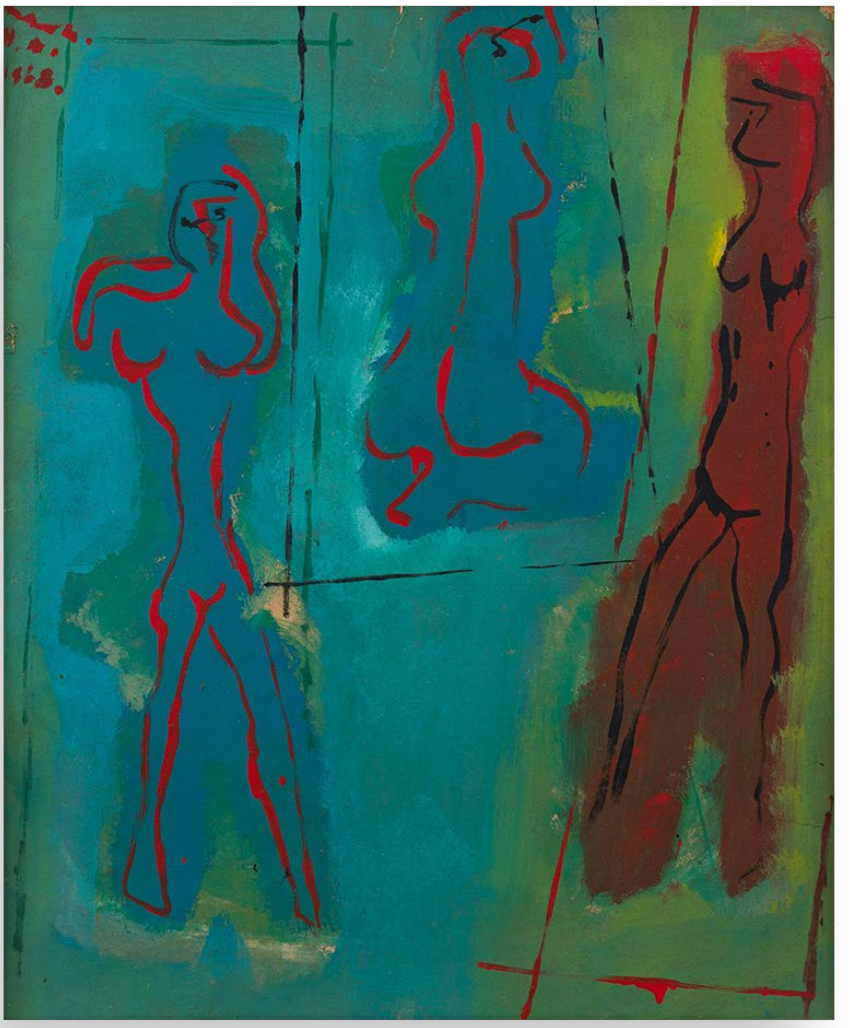
Untitled, 1969, Oil on Board, 64 x 77 cm



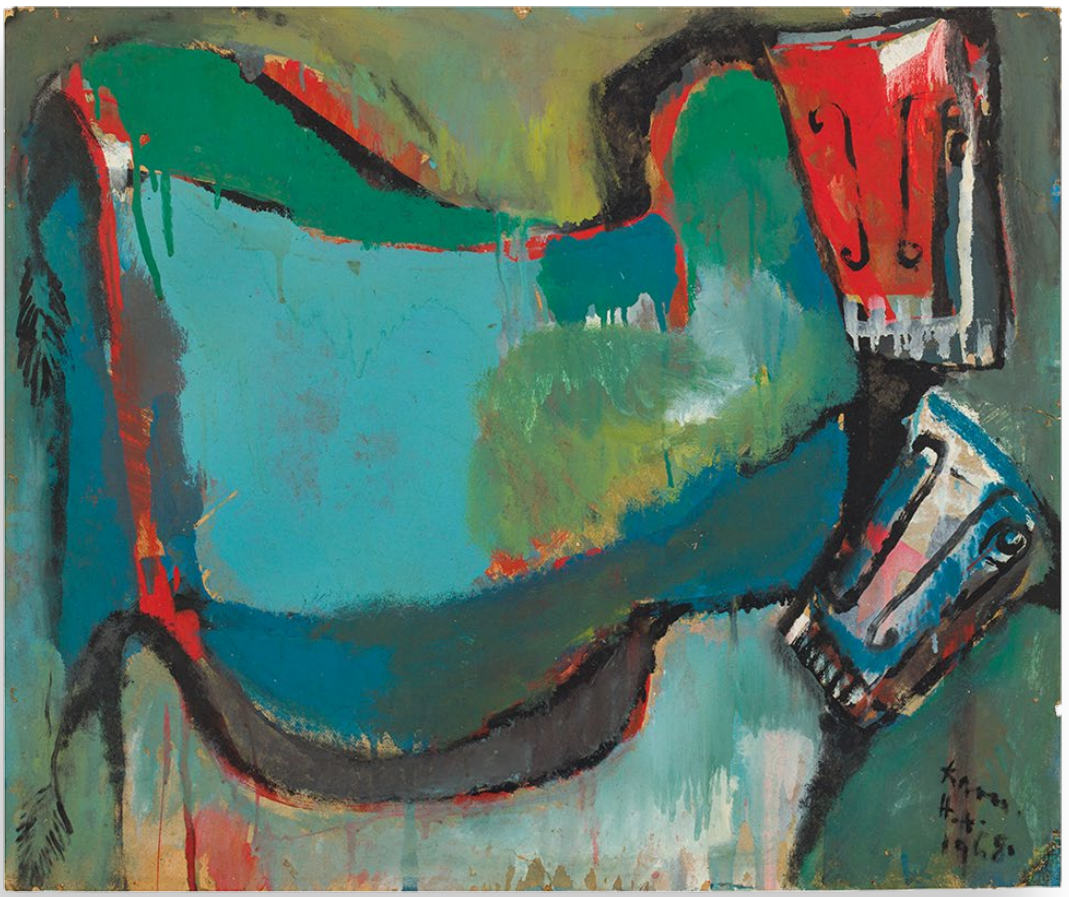
Untitled, 1970, Oil on Board, 77 x 64 cm



Untitled, 1968, Oil on Board, 77 x 64 cm



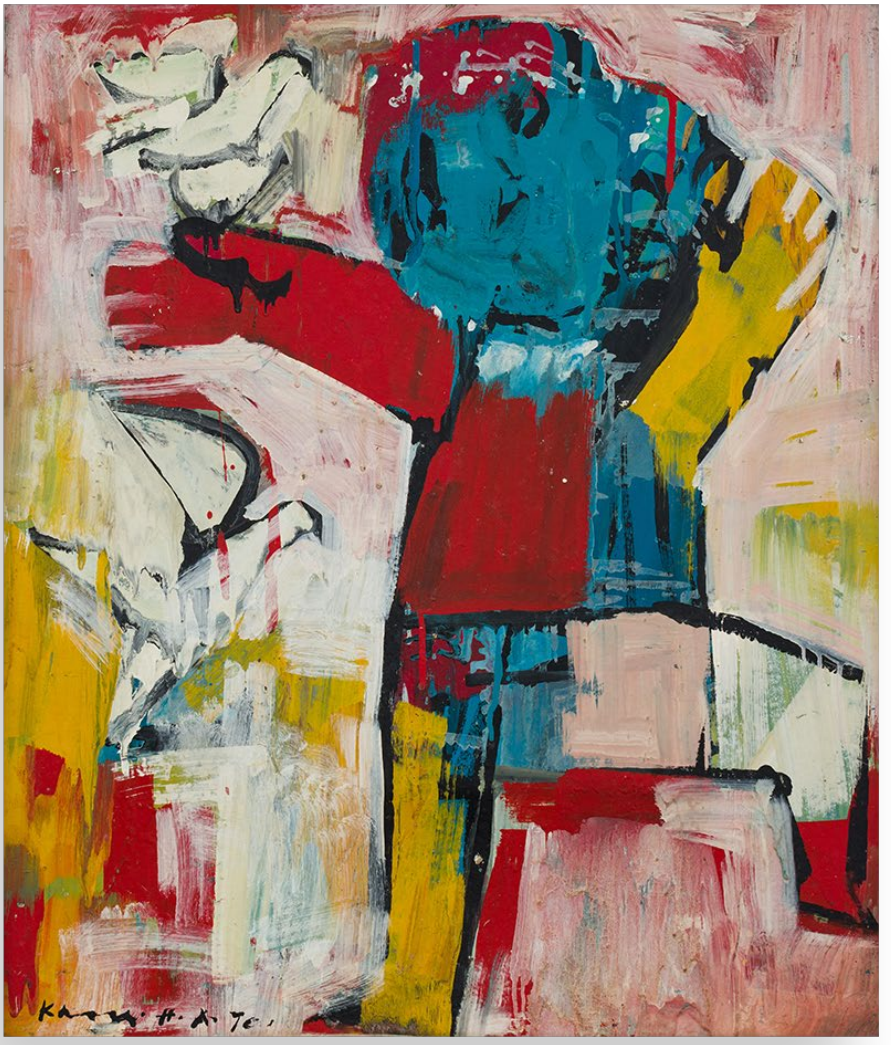
Women, 1968, Oil on Board, 77 x 64 cm



Untitled, 1968, Oil on Board, 64 x 77 cm



Untitled, 1968, Oil on Board, 64 x 77 cm



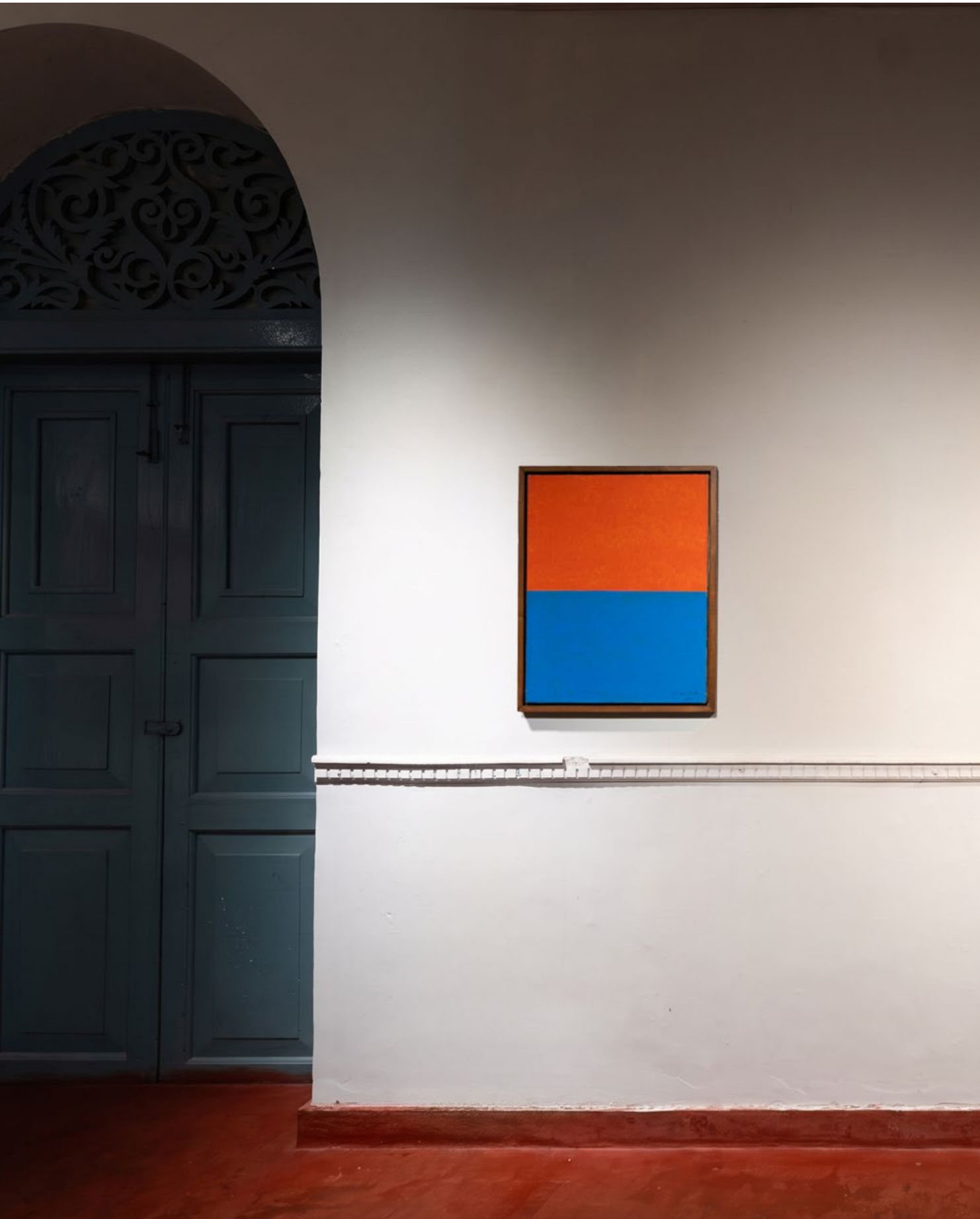
Untitled, 1970, Oil on Board, 77 x 64 cm



Untitled, 1970, Oil on Board, 64 x 77 cm



Untitled, 1971, Mixed Media on Board, 64 x 77 cm





Left to Right | Untitled, 1992, Oil on canvas, 65 x 49 cm
Untitled, 2016, Acrylic on paper, 84cm x 98cm

Pivot Glide Echo, 2nd Edition, KALĀ, University of Visual & Performing Arts, Sri Lanka, 2025



Untitled, 2023, Oil Paint and Thread on Canvas 128 x 146 cm



Untitled, 2018, Mixed Media on Canvas, 130 x 122 cm



Untitled, 2023, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 90 cm



Untitled, 2019, Mixed Media on Board, 88 x 102 cm



Untitled, 2019, Oil Paint on Canvas, 120 x 146 cm



Untitled, 2019, Mixed Media on Canvas, 90 x 120 cm



Untitled, 2016, Tissue and Oil on Canvas, 90 x 120 cm



Untitled, 2019, Oil on Board, 102 x 64 cm





Left to Right | *Water of Life*, 2000, Mix Media on Canvas, 59 x 28 cm
Untitled, 2018, Mix Media on Canvas, 80 cm x 120 cm

India Art Fair, New Delhi, 2025



Untitled , 2019, Oil and Tissue on Canvas, 50 x 60 cm



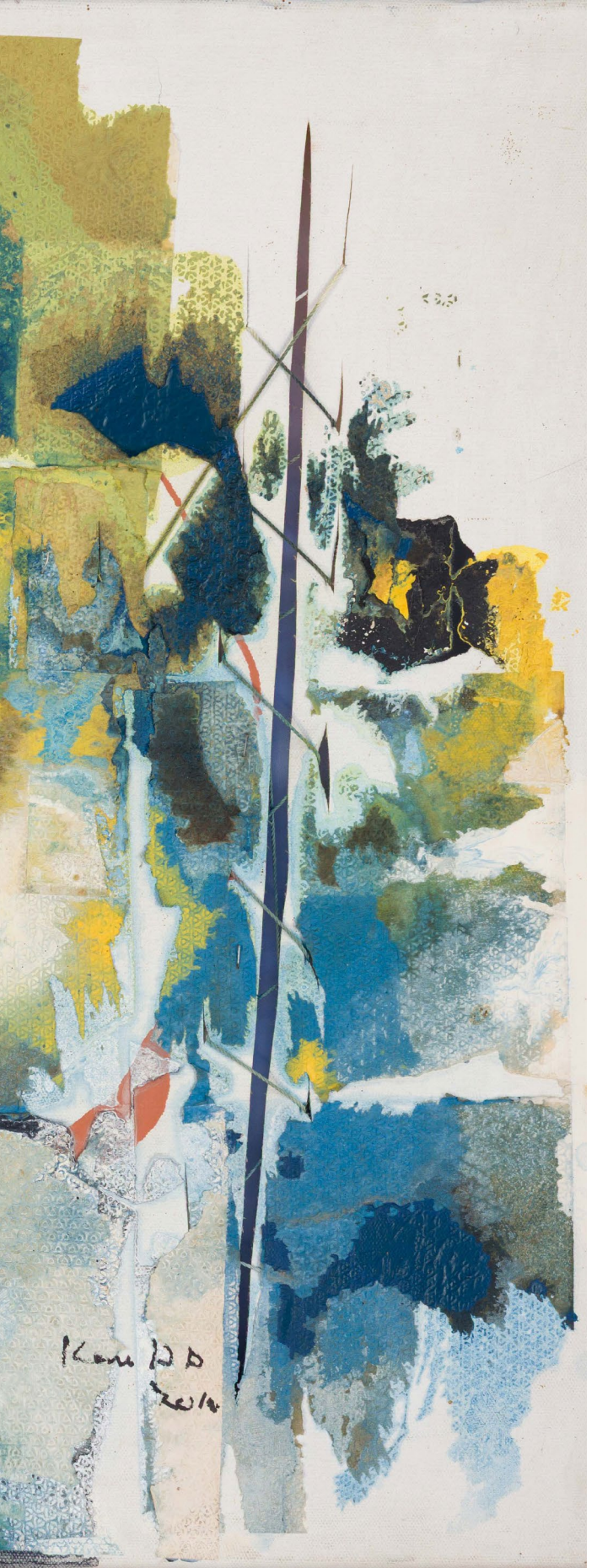
Untitled, 2019, Oil on Board, 88 x 102 cm



Water for Life, 2000, Oil on Canvas, 140 x 100 cm







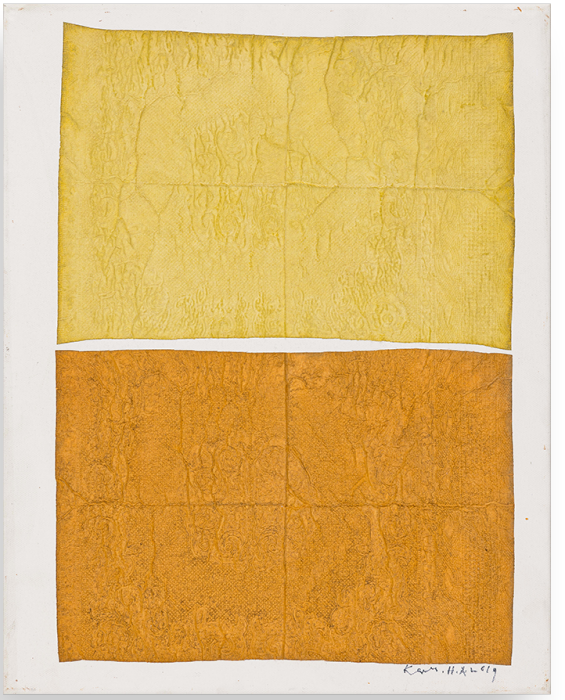
Untitled, 2018, Mixed Media on Canvas, 60 x 70 cm

Untitled , 2019, Oil and Tissue on Canvas, 60 x 50 cm

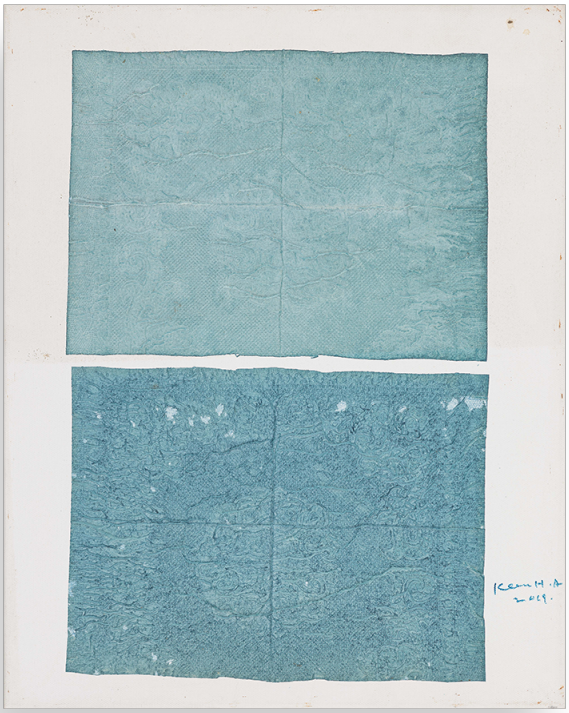




Untitled, 2018, Gold Lacquer and Tissue on Canvas, 60 x 50 cm



Untitled, 2019, Tissue and Oil on Canvas, 50 x 40 cm



Untitled, 2019, Tissue and Oil on Canvas, 50 x 40 cm



Untitled, n.d, Oil on Canvas, 91 x 69 cm



Untitled, n.d, Oil on Canvas, 91 x 69 cm



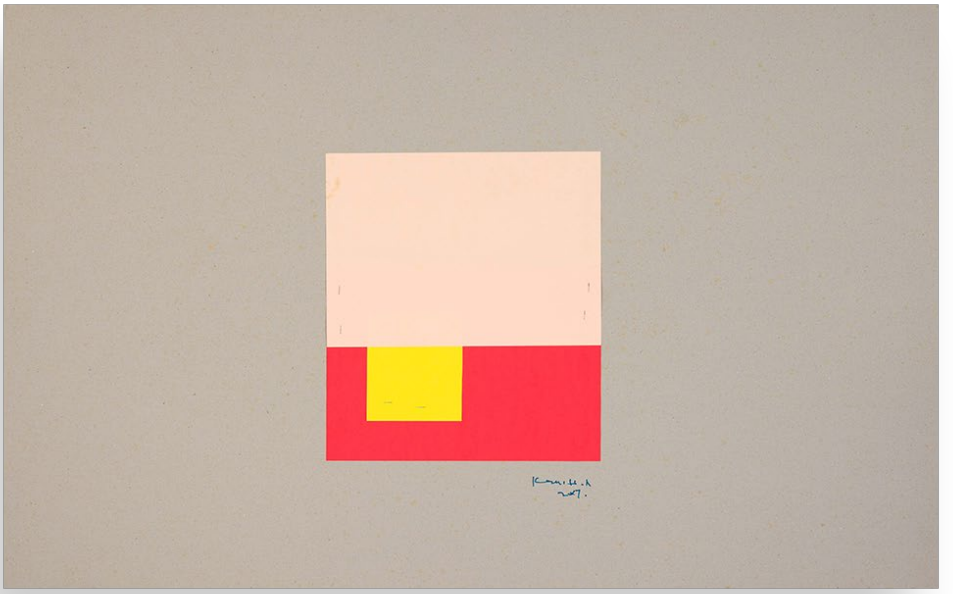
Karl H. L

2011.



Untitled, 2019, Paper and Staples on Board, 64 x 102 cm

Untitled, 2019, Mixed Media on Board, 64 x 102 cm

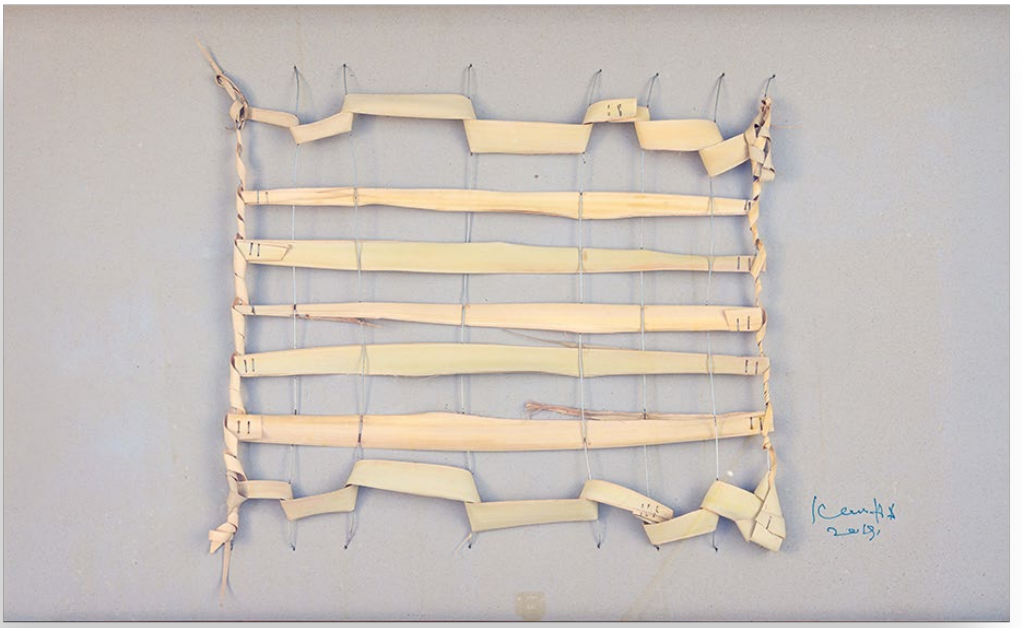




Untitled, 2019, Mixed Media on Board, 101 x 62 cm



Untitled, 2021, Cardboard, Wire, Paper on Canvas, 60 x 90 cm

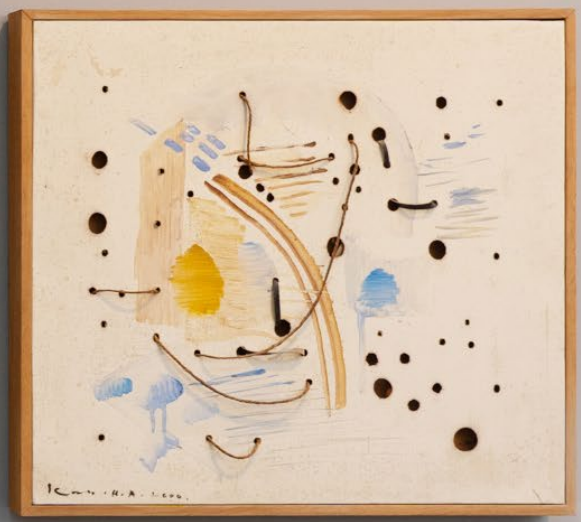


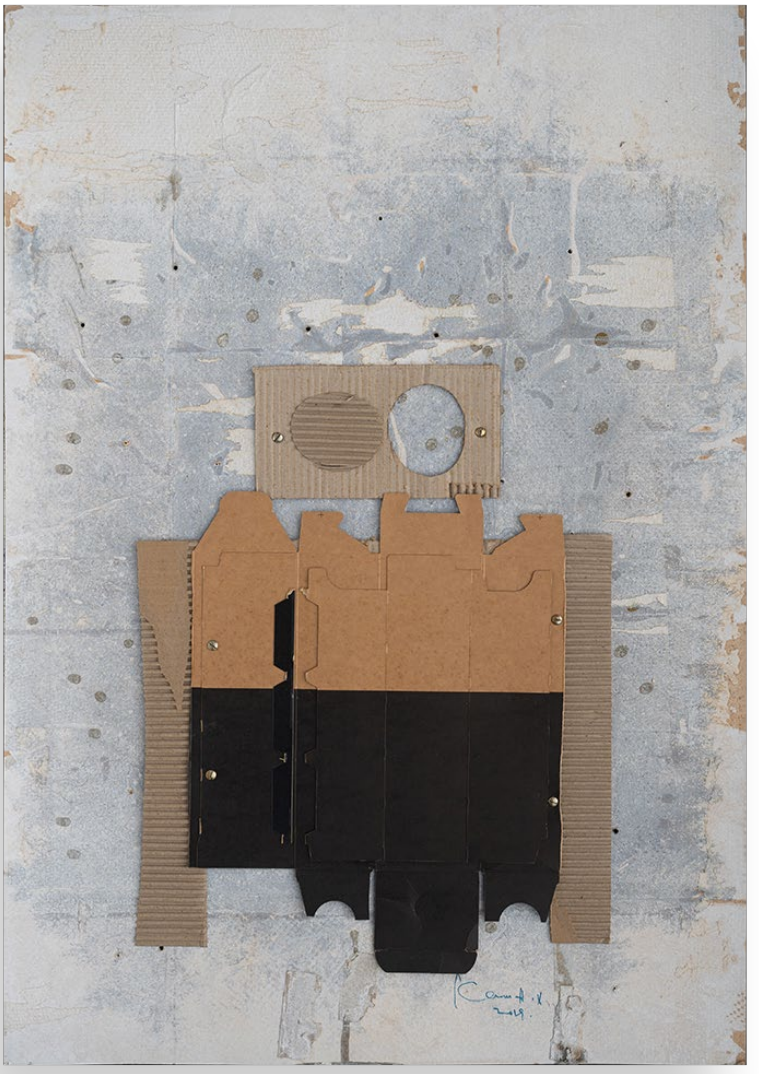
Untitled, 2019, Mixed Media on Board, 62 x 100 cm



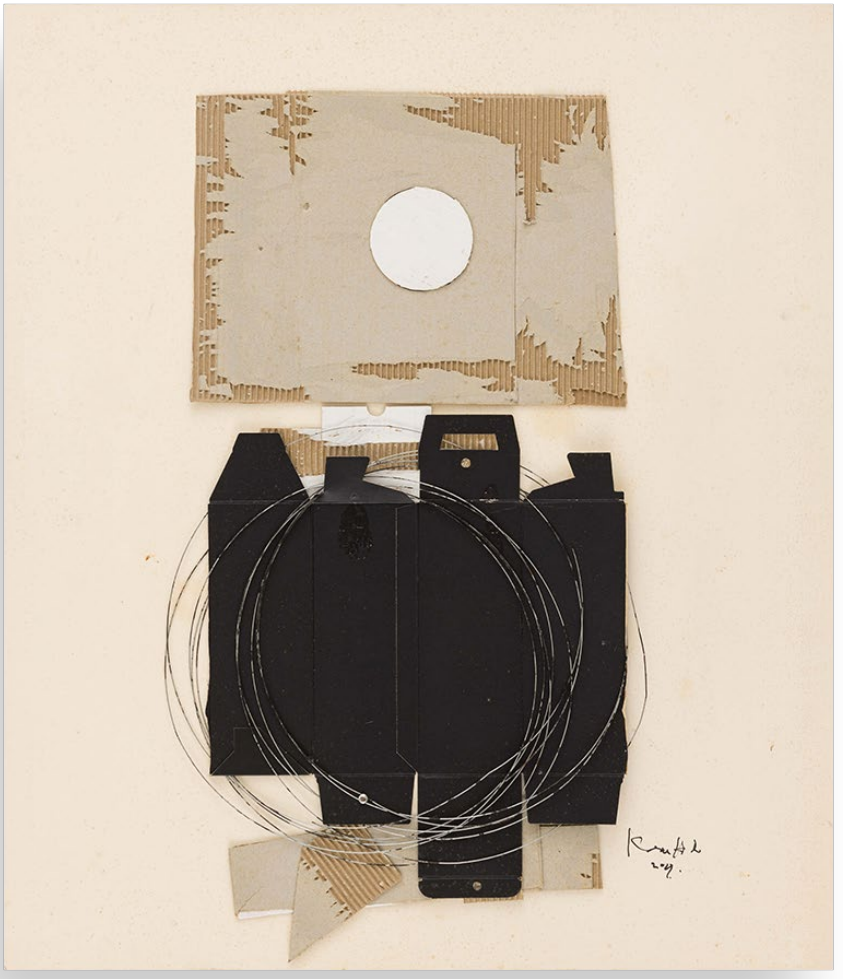
Untitled, 2000, String and Oil on Canvas, 43 x 48 cm

Pivot Glide Echo 1st Edition, KALĀ, Lionel Wendt Art Centre, Colombo, 2024





Untitled, 2019, Mixed Media on Board, 101 x 71 cm



Untitled, 2019, Cardboard and Wire on Canvas, 102 x 88 cm



Untitled, 2007, Wood and Steel , 44 x 95 x 26 cm



Untitled, 2018, Metal and Cement, 50 x 47 x 10 cm



Untitled, 2019, Metal Sheets, Bolts, and Door Handles, 45 x 29 x 39 cm



Untitled, n.d, Cement and Steel, 45 x 26 x 10 cm





Untitled, 2019, Steel, Wire, Nuts, Bolts and Paint, 24 x 23 x 32 cm

Untitled, 2023, Twine and Oil on Canvas, 130 x 125 cm





Untitled, 2019, Steel, Wire, Bolts, and Paint, 196 x 77 x 13 cm







Left to Right | Untitled, 2019, Steel, Wire, Bolts, and Paint, 196 x 77 x 13 cm
Untitled, 2019, Oil on board, 88 x 102 cm
Untitled, 2018, Mixed Media on Canvas, 80 x 120 cm

Exhibited at Pivot Glide Echo 1st Edition, KALĀ, Lionel Wendt Art Centre, Colombo, 2024

A CONSTELLATION CONTAINED WITHIN: H. A. KARUNARATNE

Mariyam Begum

1. Jagath Weerasinghe, “Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka,” in *Art and Social Change*, ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), 181.

2. Jyoti Dhar, “Art as a Place: The Unassuming Modernist,” Sunday Times (Sri Lanka), February 26, 2017, https://www.sundaytimes.lk/170226/plus/art-as-a-place-the-unassuming-modernist-230102.html.

3. Geeta Kapur, When Was Modernism: Essays on *Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000).

4. Anoli Perera, “Profile of a Modernist,” in H. A. Karunaratne (Colombo: Taprobane Collection, 2019), 3 – 14.

5. Chandraguptha Thenuwara, interview by Harin Katipearachchi, Athurugiriya, June 27, 2026, audio recording, commissioned by Saskia Fernando Gallery, held in the gallery archive. Questions prepared by Mairyam Begum

6. Perera, “Profile of a Modernist,” 3 –14.

7. Lia Robinson, “Abstraction in Postwar Japanese Printmaking,” *Insights*, The Koller Collection of Japanese & Asian Art, Koller Art Ventures, LLC, accessed October 1, 2026, https://www.asianartscollection.com/id/Abstraction-in-Postwar-Japanese-Printmaking/39.

8. *H. A. Karunaratne Archive of Digital Images of Artworks, 1958–2026*, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

9. Karunaratne Archive, Saskia Fernando Gallery.

10. Edwin Ariyadasa, “Probing the Soul,” *Sunday Island*, March 23, 2003.

11. Hugo Munsterberg, “Zen and Art,” *Art Journal* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1961): 199.

PROFILE OF A MODERNIST

Anoli Perera

1. Jan Abram, The Language of Winnicott: *A Dictionary of Winnicott’s Use of Words* (London: Karnac Books, 1996), 306–7.

2. The expression “cultural schizophrenia” is borrowed from Geeta Kapur, “A Stake in Modernity,” in *Art and Social Change*, ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), 146.

3. D. B. Kappagoda, “Inspired by His Own Individual,” *The Island, January* 18, 1996. Quotation by H. A. Karunaratne reproduced from the essay.

4. Weerasinghe, “Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka,” 181.

5. Weerasinghe, “Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka,” 182.

6. Martin Wickramasinghe, “A Persistent Abstract Painter,” *The Sun*, March 8, 1967.

7. [Author unknown], “Mage Akalpaya: Kalawata Wargeekaranayak Avashya Naha,” *Divaina Eridha Sangrahaya*, April 3, 2003. Quotation (in translation) by H. A. Karunaratne reproduced from the essay.

8. Jagath Weerasinghe, “Chitraye Anek Paththa,” Vibhavi Academy Publication (Ethul Kotte), 2002, 21.

9. Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson, eds., *The Collected Works* of D. W. Winnicott, vol. 6 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960–63), 167.

10. Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche* in Modern and Post-Modern Art (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 119.

11. Chitra Weerasinghe, “A Haven for the Talented,” Sunday Observer, June 18, 2000. Quotation by H. A. Karunaratne reproduced from the essay.

12. H. A. Karunaratne, interview by Anoli Perera, Dostharawatte, Papiliyana, Nugegoda, April 18, 2014.

13. Quotation by H. A. Karunaratne reproduced from the Bayvon Gallery website, www.bayvon.com. Accessed from press cutting in H. A. Karunaratne Archive, Folder No. 1 of Shamil Peries, 74.

14. Manique Karunaratne, “Art Is a Form of Meditation,” [publication and date unknown]. Accessed from press cutting in H. A. Karunaratne

Archive, Folder No. 1 of Shamil Peries, 50.

15. Ernst Cassirer, Symbol, Myth, and Culture: *Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer*, 1935–1945, ed. D. P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 186.

ROOTED IN AND REMOVED FROM

Jyoti Dhar

1. Jyoti Dhar, interview by author, Pepiliyana, March 2024.

2. Those before him include George Claessen, and those after, Muhanned Cader.

3. Many of the newspaper articles in Sri Lanka on H. A. Karunaratne's practice from the 1950s to the present focus on the biographical and spiritual rather than the processual or contextual. A contrast is the rich collection of texts in Anoli Perera, *H. A. Karunaratne* (Colombo: Taprobane Collection, 2018).

4. Jyoti Dhar, interview by author, Pepiliyana, March 2024.

5. H. A. Karunaratne attended the Government College of Fine Arts from 1952 to 1958.

6. Jyoti Dhar, interview by author, Pepiliyana, March 2024.

7. Lia Robinson, "Abstraction in Post-war Japanese Printmaking," *Insights*, The Koller Collection of Japanese & Asian Art, Koller Art Ventures, LLC, accessed November 26, 2024, https://www.asianartscollection.com/id/Abstraction-in-Post-war-Japanese-Printmaking/39.

8. 5th Tokyo International Print Biennale Exhibition, 1966.

9. Viranga, "A Painter in Retreat," *Ceylon Daily News*, November 1966.

10. "In Japan, in Zen Buddhism, you learn a lot about appreciation of the soul. That helps express yourself in an abstract way," he said. [Interviewee], interview by author, [place], March 2024.

11. De Kooning also made recipes from household materials and talked about painting the image that was called up within him.

12. There are many parallels that could be drawn between the embodied, instinctual, and energetic line-making in Karunaratne's and Pollock's work. Similar artists of the time, including Mexican muralists and printmakers who spent time in New York, also influenced both.

13. H. A. Karunaratne studied at the Graphic Arts department at Pratt Institute from 1965 to 1966.

14. Melissa Ho, accessed December 5, 2024, https://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s30255.pdf.

15. These include São Paulo in 1969, the Asian Art Biennial in 1981, and the Fukuoka Art Museum in 1985.

16. H. A. Karunaratne taught at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, University of Kelaniya, from 1975 to 1989 as a lecturer and established a printing press there.

17. Anoli Perera, "Modernist Master Spirit," *Sunday Leader*, August 31, 1997. Perera, who was also part of the "'90s trend" with Weerasinghe and Thenuwara, writes about how Karunaratne's work tries "to hide in the domain of metaphysicality."

18. He also made some figurative work; his early prints, which he gave philosophical titles, and his ceramics are examples.

19. [Author unknown], "You Look into a Dream," *The Island*, June 1997.

20. R. S. Karunaratne, "Karu Paints to Please Himself," Sunday Observer, May 9, 1993. The quoted line is "This an endless process," he says.



H. A. Karunaratne (b. 1929 - 2026) is widely considered the father of abstract art in Sri Lanka. Karunaratne exhibited masterful dexterity in exploring the interplay between diverse materials—ranging from fabric to metal—to evoke a sense of rhythm, energy, and dissonance. Karunaratne's distinctive artistic approach bears resemblance to American Abstract Expressionism and is deeply influenced by Buddhist and Zen philosophies. With a career spanning over six decades, Karunaratne is a distinguished artist and pedagogue renowned for his profound impact on abstract expressionism within the country's art institutions. His contribution to art has been recognized both in Sri Lanka and internationally. He has been honoured with the 'Kala Suri' by the Government of Sri Lanka and 'The Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays' by the Japanese government.

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