

Please note that this is an edited version of the conversation between Sanjana Hattotuwa (SH) and Gayan Prageeth (GP) which was originally conducted in Sinhala.

SH:

When Saskia sent me the catalogue for your exhibition, I was very keen to do this podcast. A lot of the works reminded me of your 2012-2013 exhibition, in particular, the bucket installations that exist in dialogue with the paintings. Now 9 years later, I see you exploring the same topics in your 'Eyes Only' exhibition. It was really interesting to see how you've developed the theme further since your last take on the theme. In English, 'Eyes Only' connotes something secretive, like a classified document. You take the direct English translation - meaning "only for the eyes." So in your title itself, there are multiple layers of meanings - what did you want to convey through this? How did you decide on this title?

GP:

The main objective of this title was to convey the idea of something being 'very secretive.' Our political system is shrouded in secrecy - the figureheads and ruling parties may change often, but what remains constant is the secretive nature of the government. Information is limited, and often outright hidden from the public. For example - if we take the Central Bank incident, we still don't know the full story despite the facade of a commission. All that reached the public were the tricklings of limited - very selective - information. Then the Easter Attacks happened, and the general public was met with even less information about the event.

SH:

Only a basic idea?

GP:

Yes, a basic idea. Anyone can say what they want about the incident - interpret it however they like, who did it, why they did it, who knew, but that is not the truth. The actual painful and unbearable reality of the incident is hidden from us - as has been the case with all ruling political parties.

SH:

Okay, I understand; but, if it is something unbearable, isn't it a good thing that it's being covered up?

GP:

No, how I see it we always have to face the truth. We can try to avoid it, but there always comes a time when we have to face it. For example, with COVID, Sri Lankan media always highlighted how we ranked in comparison to other countries in the world. Now we know what our real rank is - that is the truth. The media fails to mention the number of patients in comparison to the number of tests done - all we get is a number, without context or qualification. For example - 700 out of 3000 is a huge percentage compared to other countries. But, what the media feeds us is that whilst we *only* have 700, the USA has 90,000. So 'Eyes Only' attempts to illustrate this, the way we believe what we see - without thinking. The realities that we construct exist for our eyes only, with any use of our brains the facades fall apart...

SH: Okay.

GP: If we don't think for ourselves, what the media tells us will always seem nice.

SH: They are trying to create something that is not there?

GP: Yes they create a story and we are told not to think or question it. Whatever the ruling party, they are always guilty of that.

SH: Like an illusion from one angle?

GP: Yes.

SH:

In this catalogue, I also read about corruption, disappearances, and conflicts. Let me ask you something simple: in 2021, so many years after the end of the Civil War, why is it still important to discuss these issues? What relevance does it have to the art field?

GP:

I don't pretend that my artwork will directly change society. What I believe is that we always have to try and progress - from whatever our current situation is to be a better one. The weapon that I have to do this is art. Throughout my art, what I try to do is show the viewer how I view society - and in doing so invite discussion. There would of course be no immediate result, no marvellous change in society, but this is what I feel I need to do, that's my duty.

SH:

Let me ask you from a different angle. As an artist in a country where you don't see opportunities to discuss these topics - are you attempting to spark a discussion through your art?

GP:

Yes, I definitely want to build some discussion - that is definitely necessary. But that discussion seems unlikely in the current atmosphere - if it happens one day, that would be a positive, but if it doesn't, that is not the problem of the artist. I have already provided my contribution to the conversation.

SH:

Why?

GP:

Because the people who are exposed to my art - the art lovers and collectors - are already fully aware of the realities I express in my work. The audiences we are trying to reach lie outside of this group. Culturally, they have no interaction with galleries or any access to the articles and publications that cover our work. The

general public does not visit an art exhibition, go to a movie, or watch a tele-drama in order to solve their issues. I don't want to focus too much on *solving* issues - people need to be disciplined in the act of facing issues, understanding them, interpreting them. This might not be a successful endeavour, but my efforts as an artist will exist for the future. All the issues that I discuss in my works will continue to exist, and one day there will come a time when they can be talked about - openly and in every sector. The conversations will be preserved in my works - and therefore added to history. I wouldn't be the first artist to spark conversation long after I stop practicing, I am not sad about it.

SH:

Let's talk about the exhibition itself. Correct me if I'm mistaken, but you have used a very limited colour palette in your works. What is the reasoning behind that choice?

GP:

There are two sides to my choice: one is conceptual, and the other is technical. I am a firm believer in the beauty of the art or the painting as an object, I try to stick to correct techniques and proven concepts when creating these works. Some artists place the concept above the technical aspect of the work, I like to balance both. I studied at the university for five years and still enjoy working technically, using the tools I acquired to create visually beautiful works. In my Extravagance exhibition, I wanted to convey a festive theme through the colours.

SH:

Yes that happened in 2015, in a totally different political background...

GP:

Correct, and at that point I utilised a lot of visually attractive colours all the time. Then in my exhibition titled 1983, I used a lot of black and white, and very few other colours. I have always enjoyed working with black, but never got the proper chance to do so. With more study and experience, I am now able to use it at the correct time and with greater efficacy.

SH:

Definitely, it has worked for this exhibition.

GP:

Speaking of the use of colours, there are two works in particular that use colour to convey a specific message - one with butterflies and the other with fish floating dreamily around a chair. The chair is painted in gold to connote leadership - a kind of pretended sense of regality. I wanted to show how in our current political system, all the power is concentrated in one person, and those who surround him live a very colourful life; but for those outside of the inner circle, we are left in darkness.

SH:

The next thing I would like to talk about are the paintings which feature a lifeless ground placed below a floating object. Can you explain these works to me? What is the meaning behind them?

GP:

In my 3rd year of university, whilst the civil war was still ongoing, I attended an event for the liberation of the eastern province at Independence Square. At this point, everything was about numbers. If it was said that 70 Sri Lankan soldiers and 150 terrorists died, there was rejoice that the other side had more. People forgot that it was all humans who died, not just numbers, each represented a life lost. If more Sinhala soldiers died, people would be upset - no one thought of the total lives lost.

During rehearsals for the celebration at Independence Square, fighter jets flew over the university. We were in the studio, and had no prior warning. The noise was terrifying, it reached a pitch that was almost deafening. We thought it was a blast at first. I had never felt such fear. Even after we figured out that it was just a rehearsal, the fear remained in our bodies. This made me think of the people actually living in the warzone, where the danger of being bombed was not only real, but constant. I later incorporated this experience with the sound of the jets into a project for university. During the 'Eyes Only' exhibition, I retold this story and the gallery staff said that they had felt the same during the Independence Day rehearsals this year.

SH:

Being from Ratmalana, I have grown accustomed to the roar of jets being so close to the airport, it was nothing new.

GP:

Being from Horana, it was a totally new experience. I translated my fear in that moment into the scarred, burnt landscape that you see in these paintings.

SH:

Of course I understood that...

GP:

I did the works on plywood, painting the sky dark and covering it with smoke, using kerosene to burn the plywood completely, upping the smoky effect. I covered the ground with symbols that I burnt into the surface: cyanide to represent the LTTE, an army tag to represent the army, and an ID card to represent the general public. The composition of the ground was taken from the view of the Dadalla cemetery that you get from the Galle road. I think it is important to note that in using the word 'lifeless,' I am referring to the feelings of people. We are all trying to be happy, we spend so much of our limited time on earth trying to be happy. But for the majority of people, it is not a question of happiness, but of surviving day to day. People move around like mindless zombies, all their energy and passions have been sapped out of them. You can't call that living. That is the legacy of the war. Out of obligation and tradition people visit the temple on poya days and make kiribath for the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, but these actions are executed without any thought, just for the sake of having done them. We have kiribath when

someone dies, when someone is born, when someone has a problem, when something good happens. We don't think - we just do for the sake of doing.

SH:

Yes, in English you call it a Robotic life...

GP:

Correct. Robotic. Like someone is controlling us.

SH:

Exactly... Gayan I'd like to focus on one painting: Dried Lotus Seedpod Without Fertility. My interpretation of it is that there are multiple meanings behind this work. Firstly, on a literal level, it is a dead lotus flower set against a void. It could also be a dead sperm - something that should connote life and abundance, but that is stripped of that life giving power and is therefore lifeless, like a dead flower. I think some of the meaning comes from 'Anguththara Nikaya.' What is the meaning behind this? You use the lotus flower frequently throughout the 'Eyes Only' series. What does it symbolize to you?

GP:

The lotus is a visual metaphor for the political climate of Sri Lanka.

SH:

Right, that is clear to me...

GP:

In the work you are talking about, all of the symbolism that you mentioned are implicit in the work. Some of what you've brought up I had not even thought about - but that's the thing about art, it is up for you to add your own interpretation which then becomes part of the work. My main aim was to portray how after obtaining power, the government's next step would be to plant seeds for the future. However, there is no fertile ground for these plans or ideas - the earth is scorched and beaten, unable to host life. For a lotus to grow, there should be water and mud but what they are left with is a dry and arid landscape. The artifice of progress remains - the lotus pod hovers above a table, representing the festivities that surround the idea of development. But the pod cannot even sit on the table, it is not practical nor useful to the people, it is merely for show.

SH:

Let's go to another painting now. The titular painting 'Eyes Only' shows a church after the Easter Sunday attacks. What do you call the lattice that covers it in Sinhala? You have created it from a combination of triangles. What is the meaning behind these?

GP:

The pyramid is one of the most powerful geometric shapes in art, but also in subjects like math. We see it embodied in compositions throughout art history: in the Mona Lisa or in the seated sculptures of Lord Buddha. The strength of the

pyramidal structure was proven during the Tsunami when buildings were demolished but the seated sculptures of Buddha stayed intact. People thought it was divine intervention, but it was because of the shape itself. This is what I wanted to show: the power of the triangle - an unbreakable shape. The lattice hinders our vision: attempting to show how the realities of the Easter Sunday attack are blocked from our view by the government. I've used this motif in my previous exhibitions. I painted an image of the parliament, covering it with the same lattice structure in order to show how the inner activities of the parliament are hidden from the general public.

SH:

That is clear. Let's move on to Misplaced I and II. The works consist of bottles filled with portraits of people who have passed away. I noticed that both works feature 56 faces, is there a reason for this?

GP:

Actually no.

SH:

I instantly thought of Galoya in 1956. Because it was in the '56 that the first pogrom against Tamils took place. Also, as far as I know, it was also in '56 that SWRD [Bandaranaike] through the SLFP employed racism in the political landscape, for that year's election.

GP:

That is a really good point. I didn't have that in mind when I created it, but if you can read into it like that, then do so. An artist should not get involved in reading a piece, the art enthusiast should get the opportunity to read it themselves, the work is then layered with that interpretation too. Your idea is really interesting, thank you very much for it.

SH:

Different individuals can have different ideas.

GP:

Of course, and that is something that I expect when I create - it brings me happiness if you are able to read something new into my work, if people can bring their own knowledge into the conversation and extend the meaning of the piece. I am very happy when that occurs.

Shall I talk about the meaning of the work?

SH:

Please do.

GP:

In Misplaced I and II, I displayed faces in small glass bottles. In rural areas of Sri Lanka, people believe in the existence of demons and bad spirits. These unseen forces are believed to be the reason for the disruptions in the day to day peaceful lifestyles of a household. To get rid of their presence, a 'thovil' is performed, this is a ritual in which the spirit is captured, trapped inside these glass bottles and finally thrown into a lake. They are 'misplaced,' their presence gotten rid of, and the family allowed to continue unhindered by them. The parallels of this tradition and our political system are eerie.

SH:

Like the catalogue says, individuals are regularly and systematically made to disappear, an atrocity that you have depicted through this piece.

GP:

Correct, no matter how much the general public disagrees with something, the country is run according to the likes and dislikes of the ruler. Anyone who expresses discontent, or attempts to disrupt the system, is seen as a threat - just like the spirits I talked about earlier. The best example is Prageeth Eknaligoda - we still don't know what happened to him. The same thing happens to demons and spirits. They are thrown away into a lake, and the chapter is closed - meant to be forgotten. We know about Prageeth because he used to work in the media - there are so many more incidents that we do not even know about, that have been totally hidden from us. There are still people missing from the JVP riots, there are people from my own hometown who we still don't know what happened to.

SH:

You can look at it from two perspectives: there are people like Prageeth who were forcefully disappeared and, like the word 'Misplaced,' which means lost, people who we don't even know about.

GP:

Yes that's true.

SH:

Let's move to another topic. I want to talk to you about the Fifth Dream. Is it a donkey?

GP:

It's actually two conjoined horses. When I joined the two, it was challenging for me to connect the horses anatomically accurately.

SH:

I am not trying to point out any weaknesses...

GP:

Yes, but I want to mention it because it was something that I had to keep coming back to in order to perfect. Even when I thought I had completed the painting, I came back to it in order to slightly change the shape. It is a white horse set against a

black background. As someone who voted for the 'Yahapalan' government, I am still happy about my choice. However, the expectation was that they will work together using one head - despite their different party backgrounds. We were quickly disillusioned, they acted as two heads constantly pulling in different directions. They merely acted like an unified entity. I initially wanted to title this image 'Yaha Palanaya,' but now with our current government, the same metaphor applies.

SH:

Absolutely. I interpreted this as 'Janus,' the Greek god with two faces, each looking a different direction. I thought that one side was our prime minister and the other was our president.

GP:

You can interpret it like that as well. King Kosol had a dream about a horse with two heads who eats from both sides. I have worked with the imagery of Janus for an exhibition I did at Paradise Road.

SH:

I remember that. Next I would like to focus on the dishes. You titled the work "Bitter Kitchen.." and they are quite beautiful works. In Bitter Kitchen IX, you've depicted the moment when a chair was thrown in parliament. That really caught my eye. However, why are the figures headless?

GP:

If they had used their heads, they would not have thrown that chair. The issue at hand should have been dealt with using their brains, not their bodies. They represent the Sri Lankan community - they should have used their head. If you wanted to solve issues physically, you should go into a sport like boxing.

SH:

That's clear to me. What's the meaning behind the title of this work?

GP:

The act of cooking and the act of eating are both enjoyable experiences that we spend with our loved ones. In this kitchen, I have contrasted the warmth and safety of a kitchen with the horrific acts of events like the burning down of the Jaffna library. The stain of these acts have left the food bitter and inedible.

SH:

Exactly, as though the ingredients used are disgusting.

GP:

Yes, exactly. The parliament fights, the Easter attacks, the burning down of the library, these are the ingredients that make up our meal. I even have an iconic image of a derelict Fort station - these events have left the meals bitter.

SH:

The classic image of the burnt Peugeot 504. Finally, your work discusses the prison riots. You have filled the letters that make up the words "Prisoners are Human Beings" with charcoal and bullets. I understand the use of bullets, but why charcoal?

GP:

Because human beings have been turned into nothing but charcoal. My personal belief is that once someone has been sentenced to prison, there is no reason to punish them further. For example, in our society drinking arrack is considered bad. What they should do then is simply stop producing arrack instead of lecturing the public about the negative effects of arrack on one's health and financial situation. That never happens. Take something like stealing, people steal because they have nothing, they need to steal to survive. In school, when we are unable to give the correct answer, we are simply marked wrong - there is no further punishing. Likewise, putting the perpetrator in jail is marking them wrong, they shouldn't be punished a second time.

SH:

You mean in an inhuman way?

GP:

Exactly. I believe in Restorative Justice. In Norway, a gunman killed a group of people on an island - instead of continually punishing him, the system works to bring him back into society, he is not defined by his faults, but by his capacity to fix himself. We don't do that here - we lock prisoners up, making life difficult not just for them but for their entire families. We even humiliate them by publishing their photos.

I previously painted a piece related to the Welikada incident: I painted the main gate of the prison and placed triangles in front of it, captioning it "Prisoners are Human Beings." Like with Eyes Only, I wanted to show that yet again the authorities hid what happened from the public eye. I felt that the incident was not talked about enough, and the underlying issue was not resolved. I wanted to try again.

SH:

Finally, this exhibition abounds with meaning: you discuss broad issues such as the current political system and religion, but also topical, particular issues such the beautification of Colombo. What was the main objective guiding you through your creation of the 'Eyes Only' exhibition?

GP:

An objective that I always have is to enjoy the cathartic process of painting. It's not always about enjoyment - I feel it is my duty to paint these truths, this is my way of giving back to society. In the same way a person can properly dispose of a toffee wrapper they found on the road, this is my way of contributing to society and attempting to make it a better place. I want to create a discussion - this can be done

through a multitude of tools, from movies and music, to journals and poetry. I do it through art. When Picasso drew Avignoni Kisasszonyok, he did not immediately show it to the world, and when he did people did not understand it. But now, its meanings are clear. Another example is Van Gogh - he was misunderstood in his time, but look how much that has changed. My works may not be talked about now, but one day they will spark conversation.

SH:

Thank you very much Gayan, I wish you all the very best and thanks for joining.

GP:

Thank you very much for having me and for exploring my works in such depth. I appreciated how you decoded works further than even I intended, that is how I know my works are successful.