

Life

# **‘I still feel like a refugee’: Artist explores displacement and identity in new exhibition inspired by return to native Sri Lanka**

Belfast-based multidisciplinary artist Anushiya Sundaralingam speaks to Sophie Clarke about returning to Sri Lanka for the first time in 30 years, the parallels she sees with Northern Ireland’s past and her new exhibition *Fragmented Crossings*

 Expand



Anushiya Sundaralingam, originally from Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, left the country in 1989 during the height of its civil conflict

By [Sophie Clarke](#)

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A Belfast-based artist has told of the parallels between the civil conflicts in Northern Ireland and her native Sri Lanka after returning to the country for the first time in 30 years.

Anushiya Sundaralingam, originally from Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, left the country in 1989 during the height of its civil conflict.

She has lived in Northern Ireland since 1995, graduating in Fine and Applied Arts from Ulster University in 1998.

“Whenever I came here, even though there was peace in Northern Ireland, there were still checkpoints like there were in Sri Lanka,” she recalls.



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“There are definitely parallels and similar problems which I’ve seen firsthand having worked with communities here - people from both places still have a lot of trauma.

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Belfast-based artist Anushiya Sundralingham (REX MEDIA)

“And it’s interesting because when people ask me where I’m from and I say Sri Lanka they immediately say, ‘Why are you here?’ because it’s like I moved from one conflict to another. But I feel like conflict is everywhere now, all around the world.

“People are constantly being displaced, which has a knock-on effect on things like identity, memory and culture, which is really unfair.”

These themes form the basis of Anushiya’s new exhibition *Fragmented Crossings*, which is inspired by her own personal experience.

Like many who fled, Anushiya left behind not just a homeland but also the possibility of a quick return, as Jaffna remained inaccessible for years due to heavy military operations.

When she could return in the mid-1990s, it was under dangerous circumstances, travelling by boat through conflict zones.

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Themes of memory, identity, culture and displacement form the basis of Anushiya's new exhibition *Fragmented Crossings*

“When I went back in 1995, the civil war in Sri Lanka was still ongoing and it was very difficult to make contact with your family, letters didn't reach them and nobody had a mobile.

“But I heard that my grandma, who I was very close to, was sick, so I took my son who was three and a half and went to Colombo and managed to meet a few people and travel with them.”

As a result of the war, all the main roads from Colombo to Jaffna had been destroyed, which meant Anushiya had to take multiple forms of transport.

“We travelled by van, minivan, tractor and bike,” she says.





Anushiya Sundaralingam working on her solo show at Queens Street Studio in east Belfast

“We didn’t know if we would make it. At the checkpoints, both army and Tamil Tigers searched us, and I remember at one point we had to get into a very small wooden boat and walk into the sea silently because the navy was nearby and could shell us. There was so much fear.

“I had no idea that was the journey I was going to go on, if I had I probably wouldn’t have gone.”

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When Anushiya returned to Sri Lanka in the mid-1990s, it was under dangerous circumstances, travelling by boat through conflict zones (Stephen S T Bradley)

The emotional weight of that experience has continually inspired and shaped Anushiya's work.

“When I got back from Sri Lanka, I knew I wanted to do more work that focused on what was going on there.

“And there was a fear because if what I was doing was seen as political work then I wouldn't be able to go back to my country.

“But now I don't see my work as political - I see it as documenting a story that people all around the world can relate to because it's happening everywhere.

“My work is about identity, culture, belonging and that feeling of not knowing where to call home.”





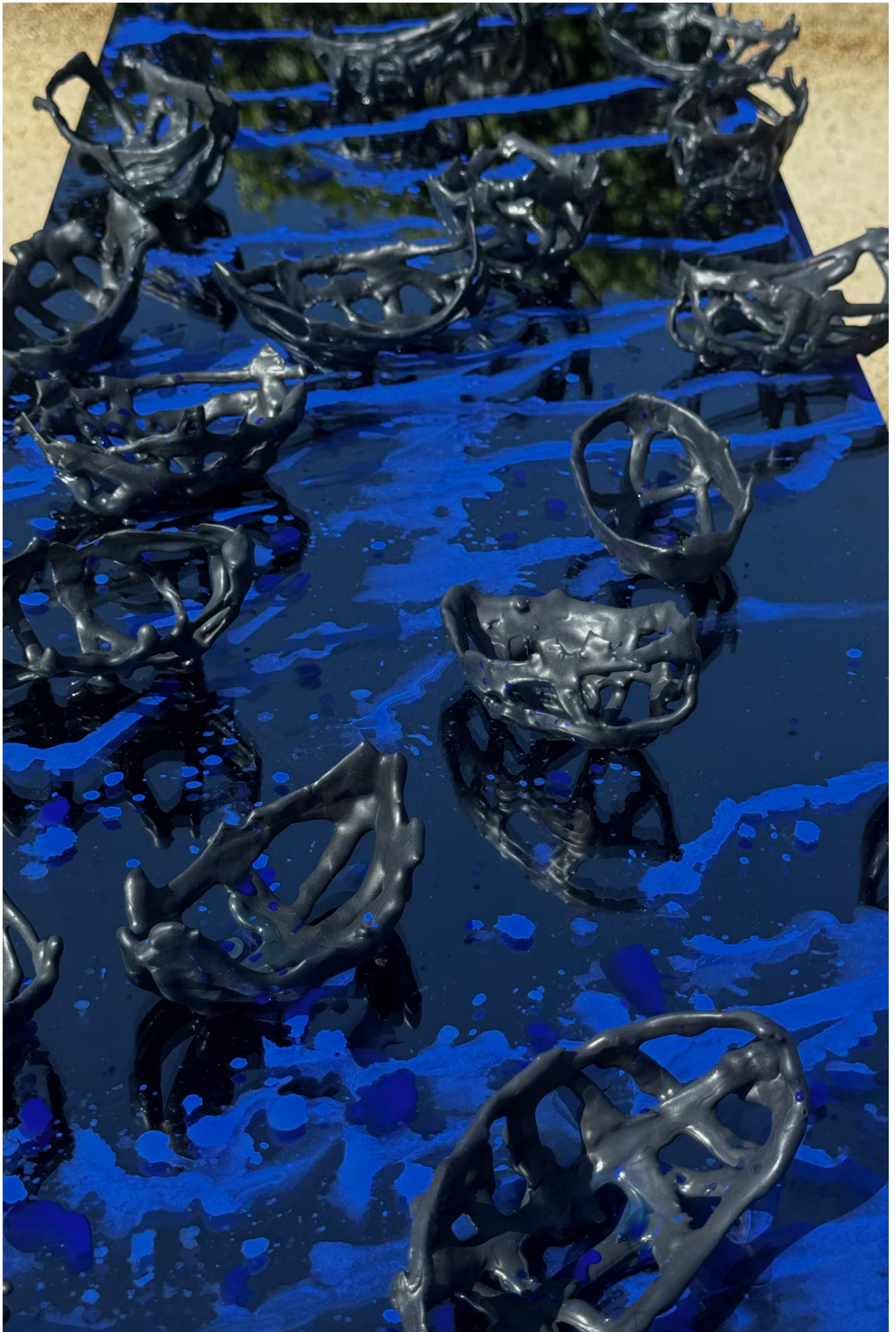
Anushiya admits that despite 30 years passing, when she returned to Sri Lanka in March this year for a three-week residency, many of the fears she experienced in 1995 resurfaced

Anushiya admits that despite 30 years passing, when she returned to Sri Lanka in March this year for a three-week residency, many of the fears she experienced in 1995 resurfaced.

“This time definitely felt more peaceful but there was still a fear, grief, anxiety and guilt.

“Walking through places shaped by conflict stirred feelings I hadn’t felt in years. While I was returning to my home, I didn’t feel at home there anymore.

“For a long time after the conflict ended in Sri Lanka, people asked me why I didn’t go back or why I hadn’t visited and I think it was maybe from the trauma - I gave excuses all the time not to go.



Some of the work from artist Anushiya Sundaralingam's new exhibition *Fragmented Crossings*



“I just kept thinking, ‘If I go back, how am I going to survive?’ The country’s changed, the currency has changed, the people have changed.

“But I think because this time round I was going for work, that’s what gave me the strength to go back.”

While there, Anushiya collaborated with University of Jaffna art history students, who worked with her to make an installation with locally sourced banana tree fibres, which have been brought to Belfast to recreate the installation in Fragmented Crossings.

Revisiting crafts rooted in her memories, such as traditional banana fibre and palmyra leaf weaving, she also had the opportunity to retrace parts of her childhood, revisiting family and friends, her old school, former classmates and temples.



While in Sri Lanka Anushiya collaborated with University of Jaffna art history students, who worked with her to make an installation with locally sourced banana tree fibres



“It wasn’t just a return - it was a full-circle experience,” she said.

“I stood again on the same soil I left three decades ago. I revisited family homes, connected with local artists and discovered pieces of myself I thought I had buried.”

The exhibition will aim to capture Anushiya’s return home, by combining sculpture, print, drawing, and installation, with a key symbol throughout it being boats made of wax and paper, banana fibre and of glass and bronze.

“The boats became a symbol of leaving, but also of return,” she explains.

“I’m still carrying the same questions in my work that I had 30 years ago, only now I can see how they’ve evolved.

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The exhibition will aim to capture Anushiya's return home, by combining sculpture, print, drawing, and installation (Stephen S T Bradley)

"I thought I had moved on, but I'm still creating work with the same

theme. It's all still there - those memories, those movements.

“Now for this exhibition I'm bringing everything together - old prints, collage, drawings, textiles, bronze, banana fibre - reworking, reconnecting - returning.”

As Anushiya prepares to launch her exhibition in Belfast, she hopes people connect with her experience.

“I want people to understand what is going on and empathise with those affected.





As Anushiya prepares to launch her exhibition in Belfast, she hopes people connect with her experience

“It’s not just my story. It’s happening all over the world - you only have to look at the news today.



“I still feel like a refugee. Even now, people ask me here and in Sri Lanka, ‘Where are you from?’ and I’m not sure how to answer. I think we just adapt.

“My work has become a way of processing that - my story, and others.”

Anushiya visited her homeland this year through the British Council’s Connections Through Culture Grants.

**Fragmented Crossings opens at Queen Street Studios on August 14 and will run until September 18.**

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exhibition



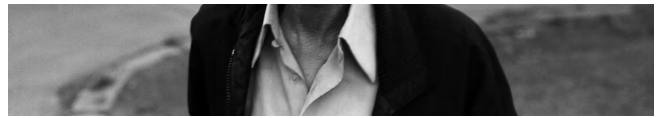
**Sophie Clarke**

Sophie is a features reporter for The Irish News covering art, comedy, theatre, food, music and more





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