

SURVIVAL OF THE FRAGILE

MUVINDU BINOY

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17.06.22 - 16.07.22

SASKIA FERNANDO GALLERY

In Muvindu Binoy's *Survival of the Fragile*, we encounter a language made of things. Muvindu enlists an object vocabulary lifted from roaming the streets and museums of Paris to poke holes in our false equation of fragility with weakness. He valorizes the fragment - the bits of *stuff* that show up in his work and glide through fields of colour: a white linen shirt, a wooden fence, a plinth on a tilted checkerboard floor. These *things* form the pictorial language Muvindu employs in his digital collage works. We might imagine them in a primary school reading primer - the word 'sex' in neat cursive denoting a marble couple locked in embrace, the word 'violence' to describe a bulletproof vest. In Muvindu's work, the visual fragment - the splice of a traditional landscape painting, the carcass of an antique urn - has more to say than the whole. Each time we sit with these works, something new appears, conjured out of depths of colour.

When Muvindu Binoy first began experimenting with digital collage, his laptop screen had a large circular cluster of dead pixels in the upper left-hand corner. The fragments of images that Muvindu was extracting from the internet were entering a slow orbit around this black void. In earlier bodies of work, Muvindu absorbed the pixel into his compositions by transforming it into a recurring halo, playing with the iconography of votive images. Throughout *Survival of The Fragile*, Muvindu dips into the reliquary of religious representation without intent to parody – from Christ's crown of thorns to the agonised face of the Madonna as she entombs her son. The artist sifts through this imagery in the same way he channels the internet as an archive for visuals, toying with the intertextuality that has always defined humanity.

In the *Survival* series, Muvindu returns to his hyperactive style of digital collage, saluting the analogue roots of collage through deliberately unfinished edges and dicey, flat compositions. Muvindu encodes his own system of meaning within these works: anthuriums are elevated from their decorative function in dusty government offices to powerful visual embodiments of androgyny. A gargoyle, decapitated models from a SKIMS ad, a Transformers toy, and the toothy grin of a yakka mask form part of a slowly expanding cast of characters in Muvindu's practice. He does not differentiate between the assigned value of the objects he incorporates, playing into the promiscuity of his sources: Pierre Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss* receives the same attention as a pair of well-oiled Doc Martens. In *Survival 03*, a tactical vest is fitted uneasily onto a woman from a colonial photograph. She is armed with a NERF gun, her head replaced by a monk's fan - a walking contradiction. Engulfing her in a shrine-like conclave are splices of the stickers defiling Parisian urban infrastructure - from telephone poles to seedy alleyways. *Survival 01* and *Survival 02* are bricolages of graffiti writing; Muvindu elevates vandalism to the status of Art with a capital A, resembling the newspaper cuttings in Cubist collages. Throughout these works, the circle appears - floating in the corner, nudging into a Persian carpet, infringing on a dreamy Renaissance sky.

Muvindu's circles find a precursor in John Baldessari, an American conceptual artist who used primary-coloured dots to blot out the faces in found photography works. Mimicking price stickers, Baldessari enacted the commodification of art. In *Survival of the Fragile*, Muvindu shifts the circles out from behind his figures, willing them to take up their own space in the composition and pay homage to the dead pixel he lost when he upgraded his laptop. They are filled in with midnight blues, olive greens, and pastel pinks. In the *Fragile* series, the circles appear within primordial landscapes, levitating within quiet pools of colour. Unfurling across these works is a visual ode to the physical body as the source of our ability to survive. Hovering into the frame are cement blocks, prickly reels of barbed wire, and jagged stones which crash into the monumental bodies that they encounter there. In a series celebrating human strength, we might expect to see depictions of brawny Uber-mensch or oily athletic builds; instead, the artist heroizes society's 'unfit' by magnifying them to a superhuman scale. As the free-floating bodies bend to counter the pressure of the cement blocks sinking into their tissue, their skin splits into stretch marks and their flesh gathers in cascading rolls. Their heads have already been lopped off. While Muvindu's earlier works starred predominantly airbrushed bodies – poreless and smooth, FaceTuned and Photoshopped – *Fragile* features fleshy, fully textured bodies. Muvindu drowns out the loud, high-chrome colour palette that usually defines his works and turns instead to a richer, whispering patina. The colours he works with are absorbed from the city of Paris: the omnipresent Tricolore, the flaking golden frames, and the billowing red drapery of palaces co-opted as art galleries. While earlier examples of Muvindu's work feature timestamps – a 50s couple typifying the American Dream, the piercing form of the Lotus Tower – *Fragile* depicts eternal landscapes. Unscathed and unmoving.

The deliberate ambiguity of these figures (what parts of the human body are we looking at here?) forces us as viewers to contort our own bodies to take in what we are seeing instead of expecting the work to reveal

itself to us. In doing this, Muvindu embeds his narrative in the physical experience of viewing these works. Industrial blocks, rocks, and spools of barbed wire are the stuff of barriers and obstacles - symbols of the toxic machismo that the artist incorporates throughout *Survival of the Fragile* to suggest that virility possesses its own kind of weakness. The bodies of the 'fragile' stretch to accommodate their experiences while the hardened and apparently indomitable among us shatter under the pressure, splintering due to self-imposed rigidity. Muvindu believes that the paradox between the fragile and the 'fit' is more evident than ever in Sri Lanka's ongoing political crisis. GotaGoGama operates as both an 'agitation site' and a platform for artistic expression, complete with murals, participatory art works, assemblages, and performance pieces. The people persevere, whilst the hardline government falls to bits around us - unable to withstand the pressure, unable to bend and accommodate the needs of the people. Lawyers use their bodies as barriers to protect protestors whilst the police rely on man-made shields and barricades to cower away from peaceful demonstrators. It is the collapse of this regime of strongmen - the Rajapaksas and their lackeys - that Muvindu presages in *Death of a Regime*. Muvindu combines a candy-coloured bouncy castle, tubby cargo planes, and a wailing woman, setting them together in a curious dialogue. In the foreground, plasticky anthuriums spring profusely from the neck of a tactical vest. From a piece of armour that we associate with moments of death and destruction, life persists.

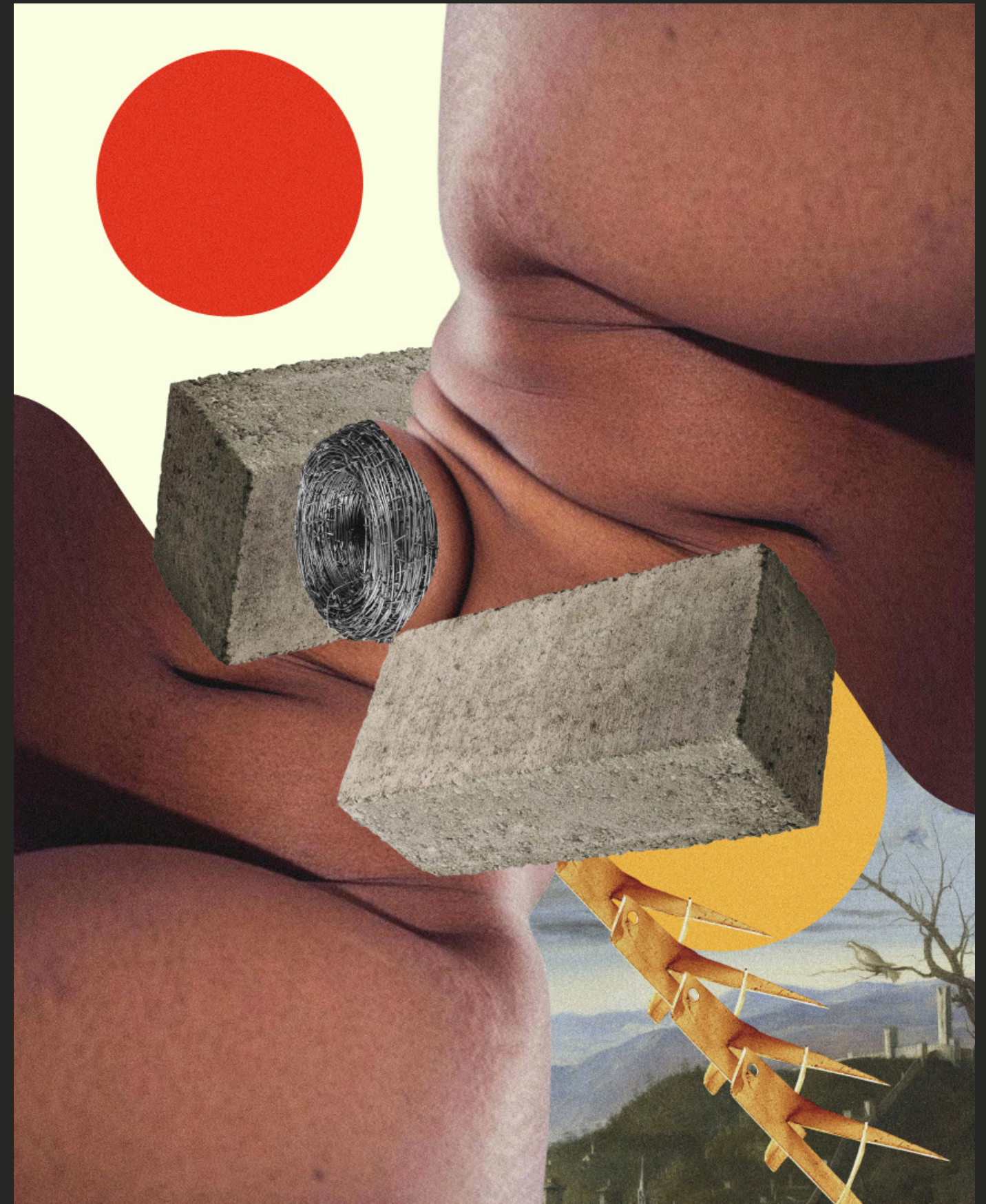
Couched in this rich set of ciphers is Muvindu's activist edge. In the pair of *They Knew!* works, his monochrome dots reappear – this time, he contracts them into small, white, specks which block out the eyes of the police officers in the photographs from the 2019 Easter Attacks. The artist manipulates these photographs by using them to overlay classical biblical paintings depicting the murder of Christ. The 'Scene of the Crime' tape that winds around *They Knew! 01* refers to both the killing at Golgotha and the murders that occurred in churches and hotels across the country on the 21st of April 2019. Muvindu Binoy uses the dots to anonymise the authority figures in these works so as not to vilify them as individuals, and instead critique the government that they uphold - the government that knew. As protests continue at sites like GotaGoGama, it is this same government that the country begins to come together to question the crimes and legitimacy of.

In the last room of the gallery the monochrome circles slink away and Muvindu silences his signature irony. Instead, spotlighted against dark, grey walls, Muvindu Binoy slips into the role of an activist artist through a series of graphics depicting figurative scenes from GotaGoGama. Muvindu demonstrates his ability to bound between mediums, ditching digital collage in favour of cogent, almost pulsating landscapes. He allows the moment to speak for itself, not filtered through symbols and things, and instead filtered through a different kind of technology: AI. Marxist-Historian Eric Hobsbawm lauded history as a 'protest against forgetting,' Muvindu's *Protest in Colour* series shows how art can enact this same refusal. Muvindu began by feeding widely circulated photographs from GotaGoGama into complicated AI technology. The process was arduous and overly technical and Muvindu soon realised he could produce the same effect using an app on his iPhone. Muvindu generated over two-hundred versions of each photograph, slowly whittling the number down until he was left with around five of each. He then manually layered the five on top of each other to create emotive blurs of colour; figures, and shadows which resemble the gestural brush strokes of paintings. While the founders of photomontage and appropriative techniques were resisting an age of mechanical reproduction by mocking its processes, Muvindu performs the twenty-first century equivalent by returning his hand as the maker to a work in a world where artwork is increasingly generated by AI. In *Protest in Colour X*, the final product evokes the same forms and colours of Eugene Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People - a painting that allegorizes freedom and illustrates the fall of a corrupt regime, a painting about the kind of revolution we are witnessing in Sri Lanka today. In *Protest in Colour V*, Muvindu uses the image of Jehan Appuhami, the Sri Lankan actor who walked for three days from St. Sebastian's Church, the site of one of the 2019 explosions, to the Galle Face Green. He covered a distance of forty kilometres – all while being barefoot and carrying a wooden cross on his back. Appuhami called for justice for the victims of the attacks, through these powerful works, Muvindu does the same. Social media is saturated with images from the protests: reposted on Instagram, shared on Facebook, forwarded on WhatsApp. This ties them to temporality, giving them an expiry date at which point they are interred in the internet's vast cemetery. Refusing this consignment to oblivion, Muvindu immortalises these events and these new makers of history – those who are not afraid to be vulnerable, whose fragility becomes their strength. The small size of these works, framed in and set back, draws viewers into these congealed moments - frozen in amber and flushed in a dusty pink and purple haze. Muvindu Binoy gives them permanence.





Fragile 06, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 112cmx140cm, Edition of 5



Fragile 02, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 140cmx112cm, Edition of 5



Fragile 04, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 140cm x 112cm, Edition of 5



Fragile 01, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 140cm x 112cm, Edition of 5



Fragile 05, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 140cmx112cm, Edition of 5





Survival 01, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 101 cmx76cm, Edition of 5





Death of a Regime , 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 61cmx76cm, Edition of 5



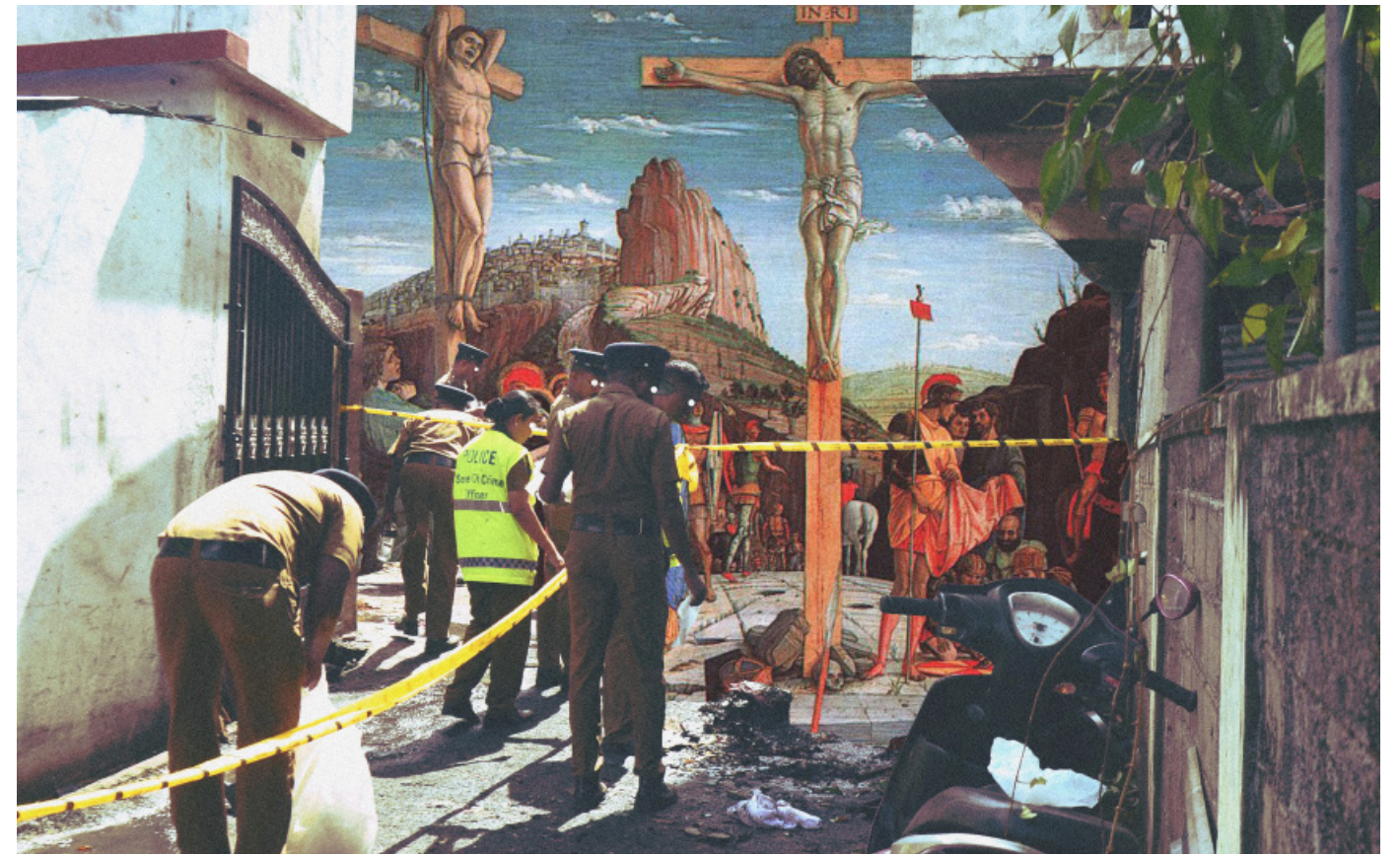
Startled , 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 137cmx122cm, Edition of 5



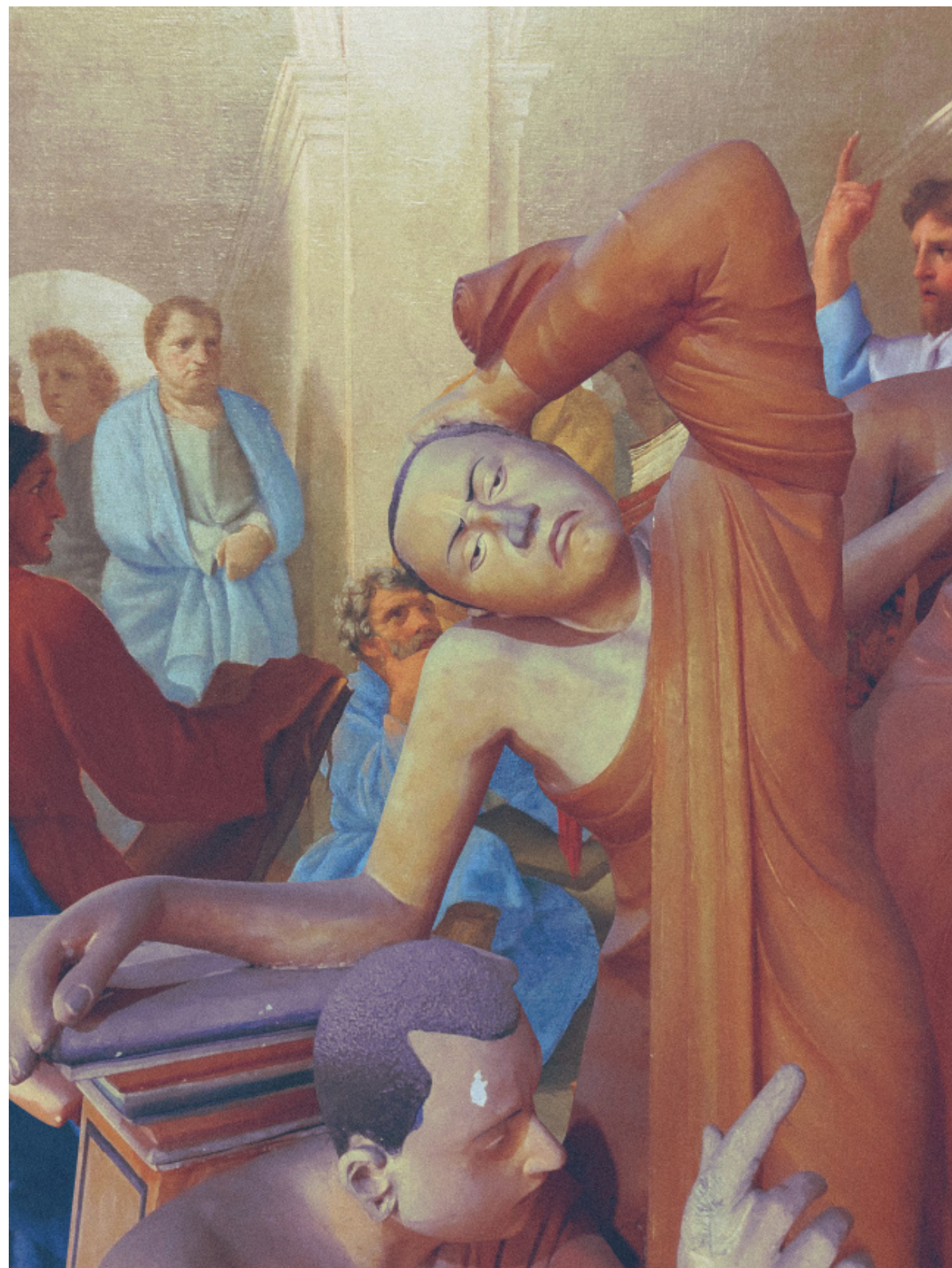
Immoral Crisis , 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 137cmx122cm, Edition of 5



They knew! 01, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo, 30cmx22cm, Edition of 5



They Knew! 02, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 22cmx30cm, Edition of 5



Untitled 01, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 30cmx22cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 01, 2022 Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 02, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 03, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 04, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 09, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 06, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 07, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 08, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour 10, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 19cmx31cm, Edition of 5



Protest in Colour V, 2022, Giclée Print on Archival Photo Paper, 31x19 cm, Edition of 5

MUVINDU BINOY b.1989

Solo Exhibitions

2020 Last Page of the Text Book | Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka

2019 God is a Mesh | Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka

2016 Divine Thru | Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka

2015 The Holy Merchandise | Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Group Exhibitions

2019 Ellipsis: Between Word & Image | Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur, India

2018 Embodying Power | Sapumal Foundation, Colombo, Sri Lanka

2017 Cinnamon Colomboscope: Re/Evolution | Colombo, Sri Lanka

2016 Conceiving Virtual Space | Art Space Sri Lanka

2016 Colombo Art Biennale: Conceiving Space | Colombo, Sri Lanka

2016 Cinnamon Colomboscope: Testing Grounds | Former General Post Office, Colombo, Sri Lanka

2015 Cinnamon Colomboscope: Shadowscenes | Rio Hotel and Cinema, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Residencies

2021 Cité Internationales des Arts | Paris, France

2019 Ya Connect Artist-in-Residence | Hatch, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Credits

Essay by Shakuntala Fernandopulle

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