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Socio-political art practice in Sri Lanka during the civil war and post-war era, with Jagath Weerasinghe's artworks based on paintings- A study

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Abstract:

This research delves into the eminent contemporary visual artist Jagath Weerasinghe's socio-political art practice based on painting during the civil war and post-war era in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Civil War began in 1983 and ended in 2009, fought primarily between the national government and the separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), with other belligerents joining in at different stages of the conflict. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political party and militant organization. All people from the majority and minority communities were immensely affected by the war; therefore, several artists of this period criticized the state's weaponization of nationalist and Sinhalese ethnic identity against the Tamil minority and socialist groups. Weerasinghe was one of those artists. He dubbed it the 90s trend and was disillusioned with its lack of political consciousness, and questioned its relevance in an era of extremist nationalism and discrimination within the country. He was able to root his work in more immediate social and political realities, while very few artists bring out creations in the prevailing socio-political climate of Sri Lanka, where political violence takes cover in religions. His creations encompass a wide range of subjects, from individual experiences to social commentary; they are created in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, installation, etc. The contemporary visionaries in Sri Lanka invite viewers to reflect on and interact with the intricacies of life and

identity on the island by providing deep insights into the culture and history of Sri Lanka as well as provoking the people to think about the cause for ethnic conflict and the need for peace. There had been a need to build up peace between communities. Therefore, Weerasinghe has been practicing socially and politically engaged artworks on memories of violence, militarism, destruction, and so on. In this context, a research question frames this paper: How Jagath Weerasinghe's art practice, based on painting, contributes to the country's peace by documenting the miseries of war. This research discusses how Weerasinghe's paintings ask questions about the miseries caused by war or perpetrated by the government, building peace in the war and post-war era.

Keywords: art practice, civil war, contemporary, painting, socio-political

Introduction

Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe was born in 1954 (71 years) in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, and is a foremost eminent contemporary artist and archaeologist. He has been an influential figure in the development of Sri Lankan contemporary art. He is one of the most significant artists living in an era of 'para-modernism' working in Sri Lanka today. He obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honors in Painting at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies, University of

Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, in 1981. In 1985, he received a Conservation of Wall Paintings from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome, which was followed in 1988 by a Conservation of Rock Art from the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles. In 1991, Weerasinghe obtained a Master of Fine Arts in Painting at the American University, Washington (Caroline Turner, 2001: 180).

He is a key player in the Colombo Biennial and co-founder of the experimental Theertha Artist Collective in 2000, and served as its chairman till 2017. Theertha continues to foster new artists and initiatives. Artists came from rural backgrounds and had faced or witnessed the violence of the Civil War. They are politically active since their early years, they shaped Theertha's anti-discrimination policy and commitment to integrating diverse voices, in opposition to the ethnic, religious, and political divisions rife in the country. Weerasinghe has been a significant driving force in the development of Sri Lankan art since the early 1990s. He is the Director of the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology at the University of Kelaniya. His diverse interests led him to also divert his attention to other related fields, such as the conservation of mural paintings. His interventions in heritage management have been widely recognized and he was actively engaged in art writing (artra.lk).

As well, he is considered a pioneer of Sri Lankan contemporary art. He exhibited artworks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, the Netherlands, Germany, and Japan. They have bravely captured some of the most difficult topics to revisit in modern Sri Lankan history, including the inhumanity of the protracted civil war, ethnic riots, and identity crisis of belonging to the majority Sinhalese.

Jagath Weerasinghe is well-known for his instrumental role in the 90s movement. A movement that focused on the conceptual and theoretical elements of visual arts and transformed Sri Lankan art into something that was socially and politically charged. After over 30 years of civil war in Sri Lanka, political protest in art became a way of

communicating the country's unrest and expressing Sri Lankans' personal and cultural histories. This 90s period was marked by conflict, which had a profound impact on both the country and its art scene, influencing Weerasinghe's artistic journey. The politically charged postmodernist turns in Sri Lankan art that began in the 1990s, often referred to as the 90s trend comprised a variety of anti-institutional responses to the prolonged civil war, discrimination, and other socio-political factors in the country. It has been considered contemporary Sri Lanka's primary avant-garde movement.

He says, "If you look at society, it is a mess, but you can always make sense out of it. There is only one way, which is art, which is essentially my art; something that I produce is reality that I create. This is the only way I can make sense of a good reason to live. It is a tool that I have cultivated within myself to make sense of everything. Speaking of the role of art as a tool for social activism, I believe in the power of a person. I make art for myself and my friends and the people around me because I believe that you cannot save the world, but you can change yourself for what you believe and let others see that. We do not change ourselves or change the people we love. So, this is the political purpose of my art; it is to change the world, but I believe that changing the world happens on a very personal level. I do believe, however, that art can change society if done in a certain way. That is my conviction; I may be idealistic or fooled by my theories, but I believe in it. This is why I do not create works that just sell. I also use art as a key channel in a similar way to how politics and economics are used. This is where we conduct art programs with the participation of certain communities. That highlights the importance of public art as a tool for activism. I am not a modernist artist; I am a contemporary artist, as my work is mostly conceptual. I urge fellow artists to be more direct without hiding their stories under layers of abstraction. I think of myself as being part of the problem rather than completely pure. Technically, we are all part of this problem. In my opinion, the most necessary political action that can be taken is to interrogate the violence of religious institutions, which is what I am doing. 20th-century party politics: people killing in the name of politics claim it is in the name of

ignorance. Therefore, it cannot be a good thing. Thus, the main problem is pulling religion into politics. Without being aware of the violent procedures in which we are participating, we cannot change society. We have to pressurize the government to have a large and deep understanding of what participative democracy is believing that communities can push for meaningful change through unity. The fact is that we are all part of the problem, but we are also a possible solution. The problem is that people think they are not capable of violence when they are. There is an impulse for collective violence. Nationalism and racism are in the air we breathe; we are brought up like that in the country” (Jagath Weerasinghe, interview by Saskia, Colombo, 2023).

Weerasinghe’s reflections underscore the importance of art as a medium for addressing contemporary issues in Sri Lanka and beyond. By prioritizing authenticity and emotional resonance, he challenges both fellow artists and society to engage with the pressing challenges of our time. His work serves not only as a reflection of personal experiences but also as a catalyst for broader conversations about identity, politics, and the future of Sri Lanka.

Research Problem

The Sri Lankan civil war and its aftermath significantly shaped the country’s socio-political and cultural landscape. Amidst this backdrop, visual art became a powerful medium for expressing trauma, resistance, identity, and collective memory. However, there remains a critical gap in academic discourse concerning how contemporary Sri Lankan artists, particularly painters, responded to and engaged with these socio-political realities. One of the most prominent figures in this context is Jagath Weerasinghe, whose body of work serves as both a personal and political narrative of the times. Despite his influential role in initiating the "90s Art Trend" and framing the concept of the "artist as a social communicator," there is limited scholarly exploration that deeply analyzes his paintings as a form of socio-political commentary during and after the civil war. This research seeks to fill that gap by examining Weerasinghe’s visual

language, symbolism, and artistic strategies, aiming to understand how his paintings reflect, critique, and contribute to socio-political discourse in war-torn and post-war Sri Lanka.

Research Aim

This research aims to explore and critically examine the socio-political dimensions and expressions of art practice in Sri Lanka during the civil war and post-war era through a study of Jagath Weerasinghe's paintings, with a particular focus on how his works reflect and engage with the concept of war.

Research Objectives

The primary objective is to analyze how Weerasinghe’s art reflects and responds to issues such as violence, memory, identity, and nationalism. The secondary objectives are to investigate the role of painting as a medium for socio-political critique and public engagement in post-conflict Sri Lanka, to analyze the iconography, symbolism, and narrative strategies in Weerasinghe’s paintings concerning political violence and national trauma, to evaluate the impact of his artistic interventions on public discourse and reconciliation efforts in post-war Sri Lanka, to conduct a visual and thematic analysis of his selected paintings, and to identify key motifs and artistic techniques used to convey political and emotional responses to conflict.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and quantitative research approach with an interpretative, formative, explanatory, consensus discussion and visual analytical framework, aiming to explore the socio-political dimensions embedded in the visual art of Jagath Weerasinghe. It employs a case study method, focusing on a selected body of Weerasinghe’s paintings created during the civil war and post-war periods.

2. Data Collection Methods

a. Primary Data:

Visual Analysis of Artworks: A critical visual and thematic analysis of selected paintings by Jagath Weerasinghe will be conducted to identify recurring motifs, symbols, and socio-political commentary.

Interviews (if accessible): Semi-structured interviews with Jagath Weerasinghe, curators, or contemporaries in the Sri Lankan art scene may be conducted to gather first-hand insights into the artist's intentions, influences, and political positioning.

b. Secondary Data:

Literature Review: Scholarly articles, exhibition catalogs, books, magazines, journals, and essays on Jagath Weerasinghe, Sri Lankan contemporary art, and post-conflict cultural expression will be analyzed.

Media Sources: Newspaper articles, exhibition reviews, website, and art criticism relevant to the socio-political context of the civil war and post-war era will be examined.

3. Scope and Limitations: The study is limited to selected paintings by Jagath Weerasinghe that directly engage with socio-political themes from the civil war and post-war period.

Concepts and Themes

In his work, Jagath Weerasinghe explores the possibilities of producing art that is reflective of broad political and social implications within a deeply sensitive and personal context. As well as his work is both an aesthetic experience and a social critique of the violence and inhumanity experienced by Sri Lankans during the country's civil war of the late 20th century. This combination of personal experience and social awareness makes his work so impactful and radical.

In Sri Lanka, Weerasinghe is part of the dominant cultural group of the Sinhalese, which was the force executing the genocide against the minority Tamils during the civil war being fought during his early years. However, the artist was abducted and tortured by Sri Lankan government agents during the 1970s, which gave him direct personal experience

of the inhumanity and brutality the regime of his country was sponsoring.

His art is deeply informed by his society's actions. His work continuously examines and critiques Sri Lankan anxieties, responding to collective attitudes—as he identifies them, taking themes such as nationhood, cultural identity, history, religion, inhumanity, cruelty, racism, separatism, casteism, corruption, sexuality, genocide, social calamities, violence, personal pains, migration, memories, militarization, and confrontation for commentary. However, the core themes listed above never leave any of his work.

It has been marked by a frenzied, passionate expressiveness and a pervasive sense of horror and tragedy that displays an urgent concern for the human condition. His work reflects his unresolved dialogue with his subjects and delving into Sri Lanka's political climate. He critiques the rise of ethno-nationalism by arguing that many politicians leverage nationalism for power. He notes that the previous Rajapaksa government embodied a more profound nationalist sentiment, which has led to exclusionary policies. This has contributed to a fragmented societal landscape where citizens feel disillusioned and marginalized.

Weerasinghe's works are in the context of his religion, Buddhism, and the violence experienced due to cultural tensions. Since the early 1990s, his socially engaged art practice has contributed to the development of Sri Lankan contemporary art. Though he works in multiple media, there is a consistency with his use of gestural and expressionist marks to express physical violence. Through his body of work, he hopes to create an aesthetic framework that sparks conversation and change against past, present, and future violence. In this way, he is not just an artist but a social activist. His work is the vehicle through which he fights power imbalance and destructive discourse in search of peace.

Drawings and paintings that the artist employs in his rhetoric against violent present intertwine leitmotif elements such as army shoes, helmets, guns, knives, broken stupas, deformed

dead bodies, decapitated heads, handcuffs, feet, legs, clouds, camouflages, micks, snakes, and so on.

Color Selection and Techniques

He presents his idea through the medium of acrylic and oil paintings on canvas, as well as watercolor on board and mixed media. We can see thick use of paint and bold brush strokes in his paintings. There are no details, it is very abstract and semi-figurative. He mostly uses direct colors from the palette on a white background. They are very expressive drips of vibrant colors such as red, crimson, lemon yellow, yellow ocher, blue, black, and white on a smooth and textured surface, abstracting the figure of a beloved national symbol. His paintings speak for humanity. Correct colors are used according to the circumstances. Saffron is often used to depict Buddhist nationalism. The composition and combination of his work as an artist and an archeologist are visible on paper and canvas for the observers. Being a conceptual artist, he also emphasized the use of different tools to create the type of work that he does symbolically.

He says, “What I use more extensively in my work are metaphors. For example, when monks become violent, it is as if the knives in our kitchen turn yellow. Which is why in one of my collections, I have depicted a series of kitchen knives in different colors to depict their metaphorical connotations. I also use the idea of juxtapositions to highlight the various levels and angles of my work” (Jagath Weerasinghe, interview by Saskia, Colombo, 2023).

He creates expressive and fervently composed black line drawings that combine and overlay political satire with the anxiety of the individual. Many of his paintings are in black and white because these lend themselves to what he has to say. He says, “It also comes from my childhood, I used charcoal to brush my teeth and used charcoal to paint on walls, much to the annoyance of my father because we were living in a rented house, and he had to clean the walls. I was breaking a law given to me by my father and attacking the system. I am a black and white graffiti artist at heart.” (Jagath Weerasinghe, interview by K. Mathiskumar, Colombo, October 10, 2024.) In more paintings, the backgrounds were

left white; only some areas were painted. His colors and lines are spontaneous, as well as lines that are not fine. One figure is mingled with another; all elements are messed up.

His expressive, neo-romantic paintings reflect on the island’s painful history and articulate the horrors of political violence, displacement, and national genocide. He draws parallels between mundane objects/materials and violence; an evolution of this form of narrative and hidden ironies are continuously present in his work.

Art works on miseries and calamities

Jagath Weerasinghe's art practice is socially involved and reflects on the genocide and political violence that have endured since the 1980s in Sri Lanka.

‘Dances of Shiva Paintings (2016-Present)’ - These paintings take inspiration from the dances of the Hindu God Shiva. Weerasinghe's thick use of acrylic paint and expressive brush strokes captures the movement of Shiva as he quells toxic and hostile worldviews. Expressive drips of vibrant red, yellow, and black paint smother the canvas, abstracting the figure of a beloved national symbol. By capturing the intense narrative of Shiva destroying a world to create a world, he examines the push and pull between Sri Lanka's religious violence and the limitations of institutionalized devotion. Dances of Shiva are devotional but at the same time, it can be used for religious violence, according to him.

‘In Discovery of Histories’ - In this work, Weerasinghe revisits the recurring motif of the ruined stupa, which symbolizes his disillusionment with how Buddhism’s peaceful teachings have been co-opted to justify violence. That motif of the ‘ruined’ stupa has been a recurrent motif throughout his practice. However, he reimagines the stupa as a symbol of optimism and strength. He represents the stupa as a relic rising tall against the sky, its ancient form a testament to the passage of time and the possibility of a new beginning. This reimagined stupa serves as an emblem of possibility, calling for a rethinking of historical trajectories and the construction of a new political order in Sri Lanka—

one that transcends ethnic divisions and attempts to reconcile the lingering scars of the past.

‘Broken Stupa—Explorers Have Eyes and Guns’ - In this series, he reimagines the stupa as a symbol of enduring resilience, urging a re-examination of history and a collective effort to reclaim narratives for a more inclusive future. Broken Stupa is not the only work of Jagath in which he projects the disorientations of the present he lives in through the past, through archaeological, architectural, and art historical forms provided to him through his past, which certainly influences his sense of identity.

‘Who are you, soldier?’ - In this evocative series, Jagath Weerasinghe speaks about the thousands of young men who joined the Sri Lankan military forces during the 30-year war the country experienced. Young men from primarily rural communities turned to the forces for steady employment. By raising the question, the artist is revealing how a society makes a young man a ‘soldier’ and a ‘war hero’ but robs him of his identity. Although they fight, they are not killing machines; they are humans like him. Ordinary young men. Jagath complicates the idea that the military should be seen only as perpetrators of war and violence. Instead, he chooses to depict them as victims of a violent system, deprived of their identities and their right to be with better futures.

‘Celestial Violence’—This is a series of paintings Jagath painted in response to the rising nationalistic fervor he experienced in the country. According to him, the island with a so-called ‘Buddhist’ majority had experienced cycles of violence that sat at odds with the philosophy of non-violence. Jagath also realizes that people try to justify and rationalize this paradox by always invoking narratives of a grand past, heavenly intervention, etc. So, in this series, the violence, symbolized by the knives that were often used as weapons in riots, became a means to an end—a way of making a heavenly paradise on the island.

‘With or Without Me/aning’—A combination of painting, drawing, and installation work as a philosophical expression of the transitory nature of being. In perhaps his least political works to date, the series combines narratives of tradition,

social norms, and most of all, change. The relevance of each work, from its inherent meaning to its relation with the others, presents a new dimension in Weerasinghe’s oeuvre. His painting *Unfinished Landscape*, based on the story of those crossing the waters in Nandikadal at the very final stages of the war, contrasts with his drawings of deconstructed traditional forms and elements, thereby extracting and confronting both his role as an archaeologist and resistance of a society to change in the history of Sri Lanka. Weerasinghe’s drawings expose his romantic, poetic side; often completed during his travels, they become delicate, erotic depictions created in transit and coincidentally representative of a new stage in his life.

‘Belief: The Promise of Absence’ - These works are about social calamities and personal pains. Currently, the world is experiencing a major civilizational crisis played out as mass migration—millions of people are forced to leave behind their “lives” and “memories.” These works are trying to take an intimate engagement with the suffering—ontological anxieties of the individual caught in a crisis that is global and local at the same time. For everyone who has ‘left a place,’ there are so many others who are ‘left behind.’

‘April Works: Backpacks, Bombs, and Borders’ - In this series, created between April/May 2019, Weerasinghe responds to the Easter Attacks that occurred in Sri Lanka. In Los Angeles during this time, he began a smaller series of work on paper and installation in response to news of the attacks.

‘Long neck’—This series continued over a long time and is a continued meditation over the impact of violence on human nature. Violence changes people inside. It warps the human psyche. We cannot see this as it is not a physical contortion. Jagath started drawing physically warped human figures to illustrate this contortion in the human psyche. He started the series in the 80s when Sri Lanka experienced much violence in the North and the South through civil wars and youth insurrections. As people began to experience unending violence, they became used to it. Violence got normalized.

Weerasinghe's works are deeply autobiographical, often positioning himself as both a helpless bystander who passively observes the unfolding chaos and the victim within a flawed system that mobilizes religious fervor and rhetoric to perpetuate violence. While the artist's early works were marked by an inability to comprehend the brutal violence and bloodshed that defined Sri Lanka's post-independence landscape and the guilt of witnessing ethno-nationalist violence unfold, *Discovery of Histories* shifts focus to the underlying forces that drive such violence. The artist's gestural language, once dominated by youthful anger and righteous frustration, now captures the disarray and confusion that have characterized his attempt to rationalize the seemingly irreconcilable political and social dilemmas. His works no longer merely reflect disillusionment but evolve into an observation of the systemic issues that perpetuate extremism and violence, offering a critical view of the forces shaping contemporary global conflicts.

Conclusion

Jagath Weerasinghe is an artist often known for his socially and politically conceptual paintings. His reflections underscore the importance of art as a medium for addressing contemporary issues in Sri Lanka. He mainly questions social calamities and personal pains with art at all.

Contemporary art is mostly conceptual, and those concepts may be an artist's own experience or a basis for socio-political issues. Weerasinghe's art practice is more conceptual and symbolic. Through his art of painting, he reveals his own painful experience gained from war; on the other hand, he provokes people to think about the need for peace after the post-war era. Further, he manipulates his art as a tool for social reform and political criticism. During the war, his art practice was kept as a documentary of war crimes and genocide. In the post-war era, they question about the purpose of war and justice for the victims. After the war, there is a need for harmony among Sri Lankan nationals; thus, art should pave the way for peace and harmony. Artists have a significant role in society; they deserve to provoke people to

build up peace among diversity by exhibiting art and discussing it with the audience. According to my understanding, his art practice raises a voice for peace and justice.

Weerasinghe's artworks, based on painting, make a noticeable, worthy contribution to Sri Lankan art history. His colors and lines are handled very symbolically as well as they profoundly express his frustration and aggression towards violence. He manipulated innovative mediums and techniques instead of traditional ones. His profound understanding of art and medium paves the way for young emerging artists to create meaningful artworks. With his art, he has recorded and documented the places and times where genocides and riots took place. Besides, he has criticized and questioned the government's action. Even though he is from the majority community of Sinhalese, he keeps his voice against killing and riots over the minority; it shows that his art is for society and humanity.

While the UNHRC's investigations taking place into the genocide perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government during the last war and the crimes committed in Sri Lanka are currently the focus of attention at the international level, artists like Weerasinghe, who conduct exhibitions in Colombo and abroad, are seen as adding more strength to these investigations. I consider him an artist and civil rights activist; this is a significant contribution to society. His wider body of work includes paintings as well as sculptures, drawings, public monuments, curatorial and collaborative projects, all of which are informed directly by his activism. He exposes his opposition to violence through his art practice forever.

I hope Weerasinghe will continue his humanitarian mission through his art practice, questioning the ongoing socio-political system in Sri Lanka, to achieve a fairer society. Art is important to communities in many ways. Artists can transcend and perhaps even change society as well as reflect its tragedies. Besides, his art practice makes a significant contribution to peace and social justice in Sri Lanka.

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