

The Sri Lankan artist who paints on actual maps

Pala Pothupitiye on how he depicts works stemming from wars and fights, over land and boundaries

HT48HRS_SPECIAL Updated: Jan 21, 2016 19:17 IST



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Pala Pothupitiye depicts works stemming from wars and fights, over land and boundaries on actual maps.

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Google’s clinically precise maps may have successfully replaced the good old atlas and hard copies of road maps during trips, but Sri Lankan artist Pala Pothupitiye still finds artistic inspiration in them. He has been using topographic sheets — actual maps as well as recreated ones — since his debut exhibition in 2003, to map the psychological and cultural framework of people living in the country.

Ahead of his maiden solo show in India, *Sri Sri Lanka: Mapping Post-Colonial Ceylon*, he admits to having an obsession with survey sheets: “In 2009, I worked on actual government-printed maps. This was right after the end of the 30-year Civil War in Sri Lanka. There was rampant bloodshed during those years. I decided to use the actual geopolitical maps to narrate how the identity of the land developed along with the boundaries, and how these boundaries led to conflicts and wars.”

The political artist, who has incorporated ideas of geography with the core of an individual, delves into his

personal experiences for his creations. His childhood was replete with “geographical conflicts” and the idea to explore the environment via maps stemmed from this thought. “I have experienced land conflicts in my childhood and youth. I have lost land to powerful people in my area, and saw how people were fighting for land. It was an era when we lived in constant fear that at any time, a bomb could blast in a bus stop due to terror attacks. We directly felt the repercussions of the war. Many of my schoolmates died during this period; some died during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising in 1965, and the ones who joined the military died in the Civil War,” he says.

Sri Sri Lanka, like most of his earlier works, is an extension of cartography — the practice of making maps. Interestingly, his recreation of the maps uses several media, including sculpture, painting and drawing, and features motifs like mythical creatures, animals, and so on.



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Explaining the imagery, Pothupitiye says, “Generally, the visuals talk about the economic, religious or colonial invasions or encounters. There are many fragmented claws and teeth giving a sense of ferocity. Some of it also represents a generalised perspective. For instance, there are imprints of Northern Hindu Tamil Tigers and the Southern Sinhala Buddhist Lions, who were fighting in the 30-year war in Sri Lanka. The tensions remain, and I depict the same.”

In the past, the 2010 Sovereign Asian Art Prize-winner has exhibited his map-works across Hong Kong, Pakistan, Germany and the UK. “I am not eager to have shows

around the world. I don't seek validity from showing in Europe and other countries. Winning the Sovereign Asian Art Prize for the Jaffna Map was a real turning point. It was unexpected, and brought a lot of attention to my ideas. I have used nearly all the prize money to build the Mullegama Art Center," the artist says, adding that he now intends to focus on working at the centre where he supports younger artists and provides visual art education to children for free.

He also recently started working with his father's mask collection. "Some were very old, maybe 200 years. We are studying them and will teach the techniques to the younger generation. We will look into how the techniques can be used in a contemporary context. You have to think of tradition as something living and evolving, rather than a refrigerated past," he says.



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Mumbai Gallery Weekend

Started in 2012, the Mumbai Gallery Weekend aims to promote conversations between galleries, artists and collectors in the city. This year, the event will be held over three days starting today (January 22). Galleries such as Chatterjee & Lal, Chemould Prescott Road, Gallery Maskara, Project 88 and Sakshi Gallery will host several exhibitions. Works by artists such as Jitish Kallat, Prajakta Potnis and Tanya Goel, among others, will be on view. You can participate in walkthroughs on January 23, where the artists themselves will lead groups through the exhibitions.

Must attend

What: Sri Sri Lanka: Mapping Post-Colonial Ceylon is part of the Mumbai Gallery Weekend and on view till February 20, from 11am to 7pm

Where: Tarq, Apollo Bunder

Call: 6615 0424