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# PALA POTHUPITIYA'S ART EXHIBITION 'KATUGAHA AND MYTHICAL LANDSCAPES'

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## Introduction

The art exhibition titled 'Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes' by Pala Pothupitiya (born 1972) was held at the Saskia Fernando Gallery in Colombo from 16 to 30 of January 2011. The exhibition featured 21 paintings and two metal sculptures of mythical animals. This essay reviews the exhibition with a special focus on the paintings featured.

## Pala Pothupitiya and the 90s Art Movement

In order to engage in a comprehensive reading of Pothupitiya's collection, it is important to understand him in the context of developments in the Sri Lankan art scene. This could be done by outlining the characteristics of the 90s art movement (of which Pothupitiya is a member) and identifying the similarity Pothupitiya bears to the trends and themes of the 90s movements.

The art movement of the 90s marked the breaking away from the previously dominant artistic trend of the 43 Group. According to Jagath Weerasinghe, the artist of the 90s

movement appears as a "political individual" (81). As would be examined in detail later on, in the 'Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes' series Pothupitiya does not attempt to occupy an 'innocent' apolitical role, and clearly makes politically charged statements through his paintings.

Most of the artists belonging to the 90's movement have spent their younger years in rural parts of Sri Lanka. Having witnessed the social and political turmoil in their villages and hometowns, they continue to live with painful memories of conflict, violence and social turmoil. Similarly, Pothupitiya comes from Deniyaya, a rural area in the south of Sri Lanka, and since his childhood he witnessed the hostility between Tamils and Sinhalese in his village.

Another important feature of the 90s art movement is its tendency to represent the present, or the situation "now" and 'right here', to borrow Weerasinghe's terms (85). Instead of reproducing the much exhausted symbols of a far-off past

which they have not even lived to see, these artists express their engagement with the "current cultural moment" through their work (85), hence the visual representation of the landscape of postwar Jaffna in Pothupitiya's Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes series.

Having identified Pothupitiya's place in the Sri Lankan art scene, the review now progresses to examine the concept behind Pothupitiya's latest series of paintings.

## Concept Note: Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes

The 'Katugaha' or thorn tree defies any common definition of a tree. Fierce tiger and lion paws and teeth and numerous thorns curl upwards to form the roots, trunk and branches of the 'Katugaha' (see Annex 1, 2 and 8). It bears no fruit, only a mass of thorns capable of inflicting pain. At times it hardly looks like a tree because of the strange shape it takes. The Kathgaha grows in hell, a mythical landscape, where only the damned are made to suffer. The eerie landscape ridden with thorn trees in the paintings resembles the war-torn Jaffna peninsula. Pothupitiya says, "This is how I picture Jaffna." The palm trees in the background of some paintings suggest that they depict the landscape of Jaffna (Annex 7). Pothupitiya started working on the 'Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes' series after returning to Colombo from a visit to Jaffna in 2010. The curator's note written by Saskia Fernando (2011) says that the 'Katugaha' is 'obviously representative of the barren landscape between Vavuniya and Jaffna...' Relating the event that sparked this series of paintings Pothupitiya says, "Most people went to Jaffna after the war for enjoyment. I too went to Jaffna to enjoy, but I couldn't enjoy it". The artist found for himself that the image of a recovering, prospering, developing northern peninsula created in the media was only a myth. Instead, the destruction caused by years of armed conflict had turned the place into something of a hell. The landscape of Jaffna in the post-war context is portrayed as an embodiment of anguish, hatred and ongoing suffering in this series of paintings. All of them are in the form of mixed media on canvas.

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## Challenging Elite Notions of ‘Excellence’ in Art

As with all artists of the 90s movement, Pothupitiya makes a serious attack on formerly established ideals of ‘superior art’. He says, “According to the European elite notion, an ‘artist’ is expected to create something unique each time, whereas in their notion a ‘craftsman’ is someone who produces the same thing over again. The Europeans used this stance to argue that their fine arts are far superior to the works of art produced in Asia.” According to Pothupitiya, this Euro-centric hegemonic notion of ‘what counts as art’ is seriously flawed (Liyanage 2003). He resists this elite notion by blurring the lines between art and crafts in his *Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes* series. Pothupitiya’s attempt to merge art and crafts is visible in his use of the line motif inspired by Sri Lankan traditional dancing costumes to which he had a direct lineage since childhood. The ‘Vaka deka’ (Annex 6) and ‘tiringa tale’ (Annex 1) motifs of traditional Sinhala art are present in his current series. Descending from a family of traditional Sri Lankan dancing, the artist has expressed his own identity through the paintings by incorporating aspects of local craftmaking into the paintings. In his former exhibition titled *Ancestral Dress + My ID* (2007-2008) Pothupitiya clearly placed his identity in the midst of his ancestry of traditional dancing (Perera 2008). He learned jewelry design and embroidery in Pakistan in 2006, and has been influenced by Anoli Perera’s art work contains knitting and sewing. This aspect of Pothupitiya’s background may have also motivated him to incorporate weaving patterns into his current series of paintings. Perhaps the line motif in the paintings emerges from Pothupitiya’s attempt to show the laborious tasks involved in making local crafts (see annex 3). While the hundreds of subtle lines that intricately weave the images closely resemble the patient weaving, stitching, and etching work that goes into making local crafts, they also bear evidence for Pothupitiya’s desire to validate local craft-making as a form of art that deserves recognition by society.

### Themes of the *Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes* Series

#### *Geopolitics*

Exploring the area of geopolitics has been a recurrent feature in Pothupitiya’s recent works. The ‘*Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes*’ series has grown from the artist’s enduring engagement with the theme of geopolitics. According to the artist the civil war which lasted in Sri Lanka could be identified as a conflict over rights to land. Pothupitiya says, “

People killed each other over the rights to control land”. Although the expression of themes related to geopolitics emerges as a recent phenomenon in Pothupitiya’s work, the preoccupation with social turmoil arising from the civil war is certainly not a new phenomenon in his consciousness. Since his childhood he witnessed the contempt with which his Sinhalese neighbors used to treat the Tamil labourers working in the plantations of Deniyaya. “When we were young, we were asked to keep away from the Tamils because they were considered to be lower than us... when we go to school, the Tamil children would go for work in nearby plantations” Pothupitiya recalls with a deep sense of injustice. Having lived to see the initial phase, the climax as well as the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, it comes as an inevitable fact that Pothupitiya’s work contains images of pain and suffering associated with the struggle for power over land. To signify the geopolitical references in his current series, the artist has drawn parts of a map into the mythical landscape (Annex 9).

The geopolitical inferences in the paintings are not limited to the boundaries of Sri Lanka. By bringing in Chinese (i.e., dragon in Annex 4) and Indian (i.e. Hanuma’s mace in Annex 6) symbols, the artist subtly portrays the growing influence of regionally dominant Chinese and Indian politics on Sri Lanka.

#### *Power*

A theme closely related to geopolitics is power. This overarching theme of power occupies an important place in the politics of the ‘*Katugaha and Mythical Landscape*’ series. Pothupitiya has broken of power relationships in its various forms. He says, “The crisis is a result of conflict between the powerful class of the North and the powerful class of the South of Sri Lanka”. The tiger and lion paws engaged in a wrestle with one another is reminiscent of the armed struggle between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government forces which lasted for almost three decades. Just as the two parties fought for power to rule men and land in the North of Sri Lanka, the tiger and lion paws on Pothupitiya’s canvas are wrapped in an incessant battle to defeat one another. This fierce wrestle only makes the vicious *Katugaha* grow taller and scarier, adding to the fearful atmosphere of the surrounding landscape.

In *Katugaha + Mythical Landscapes III* (Annex 6) Pothupitiya has painted the thorns of the *katugaha* with the colours of the Buddhist flag. By doing so, he heavily criticizes the exertion of cultural and ideological hegemony of the

majority over the minorities of Sri Lanka. The artist has incorporated Sinhala art motifs like the 'vaka deka' into the mass of thorns to create a sense of the ideological hegemony of the majority. The overall silhouette of this particular painting resembles the 'yagadawa,' which is believed to be the weapon of the mythical character, Hanuma.

The theme of power emerges through this series of paintings in other forms as well. *Katugaha + Mythical Landscapes 1* (Annex 5) contains the image of a Shiva Linga. It could also be seen as the police baton. God Shiva is considered to be the god of power in Hinduism. The Shiva Linga is an object of worship for the Tamils, and a possible symbol for male dominance in society. The police baton speaks for the state's authority over the lives of all people. In bringing these two symbols to stand for one another in a single painting, the artist has identified points of power concentration, and commented on the command they exert over their, women and anyone who disagrees with the agenda of the state.

### *Suffering in the Postwar Context*

The war waged by humans against humans has dehumanized the atmosphere. There are no images of people to be seen in any of the paintings, except in *Katugaha + Mythical Landscapes XIX* (Annex 10), where a faint silhouette of a man clad in the Sinhalese national costume is seen calmly meditating under a thorn tree. Explaining this picture, Pothupitiya says, "Those who are responsible for the crisis are now meditating." The Sinhalese national costume clearly reflects the artist's opinion about some of the perpetrators of the social and political crisis. The human figure in a meditating posture is carefully camouflaged into the background of the painting, and is not immediately visible to the audience. Pothupitiya has placed the culprits of chaos in a discrete position, while devoting a more prominent place on the canvas to depict the suffering in the postwar atmosphere. This seems like an allusion to the reality of how culprits of massive social disorder soon go invisible, leaving behind the victims' suffering to be visible. Especially in a postwar context the culprits of chaos occupy a rather insignificant place in the minds of a people struggling to recover from the agony of the past.

Several paintings in this series portray images of plantain trees caught up in the wrestle between the tigers and lions (Annex 11). According to the artist, this is a representation of the destruction of the cultural symbols belonging to both the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The plantain tree is an important

aspect in Hindu as well as Buddhist rituals. It is used in religious and non-religious rituals of the Sinhalese and Tamil people. This symbolism is used by the artist to illustrate how the war has been mutually destructive for both the Sinhalese as well as Tamil communities.

The appearance of the mythical landscape on Pothupitiya's paintings closely resembles the ruined and empty buildings, burnt trees, vast stretches of scarcely populated land, and the lack of plant and animal life in the actual postwar Jaffna. The threat on life has been further conveyed through the symbolism of condoms and bullets seen in two paintings (Annex 4 and 5). Although the war has officially come to an end, the damage it has caused to society continues to lurk in people's collective memory. The frustration ensuing from years of conflict and the shock experienced by people in the post-war context has been clearly detailed in the paintings. The artist's choice of colours has been helpful in this endeavour. According to the artist, colours like black and gray have been used widely in the paintings because they signify the remains of something that has been burnt down. Belonging to a generation of artists who visually represent their existence in their contemporary cultural moment, Pothupitiya has depicted the slings of suffering and pain in postwar Jaffna. The fact that the artist sees himself as being enmeshed in the contemporary social chaos deserves attention. He says, "I live within the chaos/confusion and not outside it." This is an important feature that is often shared by artists of the 90s movement. In their "issues-driven art" (Weerasinghe), artists of the 90s movement see themselves as being part of the issue they portray.

Pothupitiya has been successful in communicating the concept on which the 'Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes' series is based. Yet, the artist's interpretation was essential to recognize some of the themes in the paintings. Themes such as geopolitics could not have been identified without the artist's explanation. However, this is not a reason to devalue Pothupitiya's paintings in this series, but a point to understand the importance of the artist's own interpretation of his imagination and lines of thought pictured on the canvas.

### *Conclusion*

The terror-struck surreal landscapes in Pothupitiya's paintings ring a note of nostalgia and express a yearning for harmony in society. Like most para-modern artists of his generation Pothupitiya has enthusiastically engaged in representing the existing moment of the social reality available to him.

However, it is important to note that this series of paintings cannot be understood in depth without the artist's interpretation of the related themes and concepts. When there is a gap between the end production which communicates an idea and the audience who is expected to receive that idea, one would expect the curation to play a greater role in communicating the artist's intentions to the public. However, it seemed as though the curation has somewhat failed in this respect. Although the curator's note in the exhibition provided some information about the artist and his current series, it had several printing mistakes, and one of the reproductions of paintings had been printed up-side-down on the catalogue.

Furthermore, the placement of the exhibits in their respective positions had not been done in consultation with the artist. Thus, the overall presentation of the exhibition was rather unsatisfactory.

Although the artist has attempted to create an attractive visual impression through his paintings, the audience can hardly escape the melancholic, eerie atmosphere portrayed in them.

This seriously limits the artist's chances of selling his paintings to collectors. Pothupitiya is aware of this, and nonetheless, compromises on the success of his paintings in the art market in order to express the concepts and themes which he strongly feels should be expressed. Thus, the 'Katugaha and Mythical Landscapes' series comes to the audience as a collection of art charged with the emotions and political attitudes of an artist who lives and deals with the continuous legacy of war and the hope for a more peaceful future.

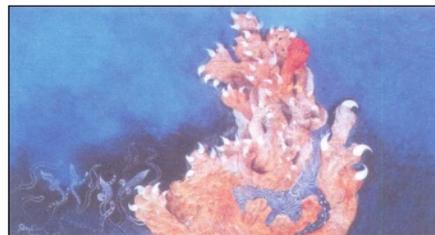
*Reference*

Liyanage, J. 2003, 'Pala and Menika: "Unmoderning" contemporary Art. <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2003/08/24/fea12.html>.  
 Perera, A. 2008. *Pala Pothupitiya's Art*, curator's note, Theertha International Artists' Collective, .  
 Weerasinghe, J. 2005. "Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka", in C. Turner ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and Pacific*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 80-93. ■

**Annexes**



Annex 1  
**Katugaha+Mythical Landscapes XIII**  
 Mixed media on canvas, 30cm 55cm



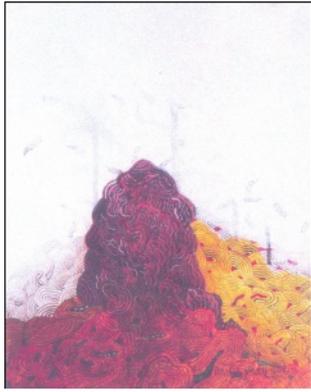
Annex 2  
**Katugaha + Mythical Landscapes XII** Mixed media on canvas. 30cm 55cm



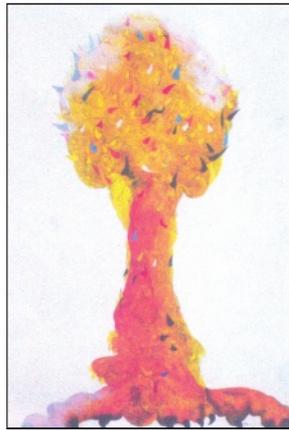
Annex 5  
**Katugaha + Mythical Landscapes I**  
 Mixed media on canvas, 81cm 56cm



Annex 4  
**Katugaha + Mythical landscape II**  
 Mixed media on canvas, 81cm 56cm



Annex 7  
**Katugaha +  
Mythical  
landscapes XI**  
Mixed media on  
canvas, 29cm 22cm



Annex 6  
**Katugaha +  
Mythical  
landscapes III**  
Mixed media on  
canvas, 81 cm  
56cm



Annex 9  
**Katugaha + Mythical landscape XIV**  
Mixed media on canvas, 46cm 92cm



Annex 10



Annex 8  
**Katugaha + Mythical landscapes IV**  
Mixed media on canvas, 56cm 81cm



Annex 3  
**Katugaha + Mythical Landscapes V**  
Mixed media on canvas, 22cm 29cm



Annex 11