

THE SHRINE OF THE INNOCENTS

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The "Shrine of the Innocents" is a monument dedicated to the victims of torture and death by torture. The Ambilipitiya killings have been very much the object of discussion by the present regime. Between the period of 1994-97 newspapers highlighted the issue and interrogated the people involved in the killings to appease the victims' parents and bring some sort of reasoning to the political killings that went on between the years 1988-91. Why the monument is exclusively dedicated to the victims of Ambilipitiya is to fulfill an election promise of the People's Alliance government in 1994.

Jagath Weerasinghe is the delineator behind the conceptual design and the total matrix of the Shrine of the Innocents. Jagath is internationally recognized for his canvas art. Very modernist abstracts dealing with many of the political transitions that have occurred in the past few decades in Sri Lanka. Jagath is not only an artist but is also an archaeologist. A rare combination. This archaeological background propagated him to build a monument which has archaeological representation with personal narratives, his deep rootedness as an artist and at other times, and in my opinion at most times, the very personal narratives of Jagath within him.

As many will have something to say and write about the monument in the ensuing weeks, I shall try to reflect more on Jagath Weerasinghe as an individual, his vision and narratives in the context of what he has named "The Shrine of The Innocent." This reflection is done in three isolated phases—the Symbolic Representation of the Monument, the Ritual Meaning of the Monument, the Space Formation of the Monument.

Symbolic Representation

The monument is built to depict a grave, symbolically six feet under the earth. Inside the monument there are three main features. The central feature is a set of thirty eight terra cotta handmade heads on thirty eight concrete pillars. This represents the heads of the tortured and killed. At the base are handmade terra cotta—something to the effect of bones. Perhaps to represent bones and matter of the victims. To me the thirty-eight heads gave an eerie feeling as if I was walking into a graveyard with all the heads of the victims popping up from their graves.

The next is a huge sculptural work, a white mass facing the entryway. To Jagath this represents almost a linear picture of an archaeological landscape; almost an aerial photograph of an archaeological site.

Then there are the personal thoughts of the victims' parents in the form of poetry. These are hung, once again inscribed on terra cotta slates, on the two sides, inside of the entrance to the monument.

According to Jagath, this represents a modern day mirror wall linking up to archaeological evidence of the historic phase of King Kashyapa's kingdom. Kashyapa himself was a murderer but the *Kurutu Gi* or Sigiriya graffiti that is on the mirror wall does not reflect this fact, the father he killed or about the deaths at hands in the battlefields or how he ruled his kingdom. What it talks about is the beauty of the place and of the golden damsels of fresco figures. I suppose in using this technique Jagath tries to bring the parents and the people together. People who are so far apart from the pain of these people.

The monument is located on the way to the new parliament of Sri Lanka built by the UNP government. It is not located anywhere remotely close to the place where the victims lived. It does not reflect in that sense the livelihood of the victims. Thus, it is built out of context. Therefore, it was not built for them. It was built for a larger political ideology. For those who mitigated political violence and for the larger bourgeoisie, more specifically Colombo's elite.

Ritual Meaning

Jagath attempts to bring a lot of ritual meaning to the monument. He calls the monument a "shrine." Which denotes worshiping. What are we worshiping? There is also an altar-to-light lamps. A ritual among most people in the world to remember the dead. Two female goddesses in modern abstract art guard the entrance doorway. This maybe interpreted as to keep away the unholy spirits. Whose spirit?

However, to me this ritual performance, to share grief by lighting an oil lamp in the presence of the heads is going to be uneasy, with the victims' heads at your back while you are trying to make peace with the dead. Maybe it will be ritually very significant to the parents of the victims. But how much will it be ritually significant is questionable to those untouched by this grief.

Jagath uses the concept of the entire monument to represent an episode or as he says a "Jataka story" to represent many similar incidents that occurred during the past so many years.

Space Formation

I was never trained in built environment. However, I have been influenced from childhood about buildings and their transformations, change of physical landscape and now even more on general architecture. Thus, as a laymen I can say this much on the building. "The void which is open to the sky is exuberating, giving a sense of peaceful meditation. The colours set my mood. I do not feel it represent, a monument dedicated to victims of tragedy until I see the heads on the pillars. My mood changes then to restlessness."

From the entrance way you could see the white sculpture. Hence I did not feel surprised, only the feeling that I must go near it to take in the details. Between them exists a cloistered set of terraced steps facing the monument. You go out and you see the criss-crossed wooden tower. Jagath tells me it may be taken to represent a funeral pyre or prison. I could not make any judgements.

The whole structure is paved in green. I wonder why? Maybe it should have been left with soil on it. Bare. The greenery somehow does not do justice to its purpose. However, it enhances its physical appearance. You know, like an ugly naked woman covered in a crumpled golden foil frock.

Jagath's central issue revolves and reverberates on the injustices caused by political violence. His attempt at creating awareness is profound. But to what extent? Obviously, as I pointed out before, this is a monument built with a political motive. Who will patronize it? Colombo's socialite-bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeoisie. Will they understand the grief? I don't think I can feel the pain or the extent of pain that these parents have gone through and here I am more exposed to the concept than others around me. I know Jagath does not agree with me on this point. To him pain can be felt and shared.

"The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by idea), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unit), and volume in perpetual disintegration" (Foucault 1977:148). The lack of a body to cope with death: This is what he tries to achieve with the monument—a compromise justice? forgiveness? A metaphoric representation. "Such symbolic indicators would help put an end to that terrible and traumatic experience only the kin of disappeared persons would truly experience" (Perera 1999:6). An experience few would understand.

"It is considered mandatory for the maintenance of a viable world, an individual or species personality, or even the fate of one's soul, that man acquires knowledge" (ed. Fogelson and Adams 1977:120). Jagath's personality is strongly reflected in the monument. To really understand all that is said above one must know Jagath. Explanations are difficult without him. In that sense Jagath is the key informant, not the victims represented in the monument nor their parents. "The public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and the servilities of the other" (Wolf 1977:162). He has connected both his private world with public culture.

"It seems clear that conscience is inextricably linked with ethics and ethics with culture" (Obeyesekere 1990:188). Jagath's conscience: deep; wide and far outreaching. There is no superficial vibe on him. I think as an individual, he has a lot of vision. A vision for a better political ideology and for peace. Perhaps they are not always depicted and interpreted in his paintings or even in this monument. But is hidden within him. I do believe Jagath has a deeper meaning and motive in his "actions." A psychic structure of the long run exercises a hold on the imagination of people because it is constitutive of a variety of domains and straddles different, even contradictory, universes of meaning and experiences such as those born of

psyche, bios, cosmos, and polis. Interpretation unfolds these universes of meaning but is always incomplete, always tentative, since acts of interpretation, whether those of the anthropologist or native, are themselves conditioned by time, place, and history (Obeyesekere 1990:202). As Obeyesekere points above, I believe this monument is very much conditioned by time, space and history in relation to Jagath Weerasinghe.

What is left is a question of awareness. How aware are we of the happenings in and around us? Perhaps this monument is a new beginning. Access to a different culture that we ourselves have created and in the process, have chosen to forget the atrocities that were there on both sides of the divide. "We have to 'remind' ourselves about our inarticulacy, as it were. Even if it is axiomatic that humans are self-interpreting beings, we are left with a question of self-interpretation, and—not less important from the point of view of the student of culture—the limits of expression and the significance of silence" (Hastrup 1995:99). We must not limit ourselves and set boundaries to this interpretation of the known and the unknown detained in time.

I like to leave you with T. S. Elliot's poem *Burnt Norton* :

Time past and time future
 Allow but a little consciousness.
 To be conscious is not to be in time
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.
 Only through time is time conquered.

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