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Painting War could be the genitor of new motifs, as it has proved for some Sri Lankan artists.

The recently concluded fifth edition of India Art Fair in Delhi attracted admirers and critics, collectors and sellers, art neophytes and art veterans, literati and glitterati. The mammoth scale rendered it impossible to be through with the entire ensemble on display in the given three days. However, some new works of art, in the thicket of old and celebrated ones, could gain attention especially when the news reports of high price and maximum selling reached the audience.

The installation of Anoli Perera titled 'Blue Cupboard' was one of the new works which assumed higher significance before the fair ended. 'Blue Cupboard,' in addition to the attractive élan and finesse of art in it, also holds a key to unlock the political debates emerging from contemporary visual art in Sri Lanka.

Artistic uprising

War could devastate a society, solidify new stereotypes and numb the body of civil society. War could be the genitor of new motifs for the work of art too. The civil war in Sri Lanka, which allegedly amounted to ethnic cleansing, became a muse for contemporary visual artists in the decade of the 1990s. The phenomenon is more intelligible when it is perceived through the journey of the 50-year-old artist Anoli Perera, who began her tryst with art with her series titled 'Aditi' in the late 1990s in a backdrop of watershed in the art scene of Sri Lanka. The art historian and artist Jagath Weerasinghe considered it invasion of small town artists in the elite sphere of Sri Lankan visual art.

The historical change shifted the artistic focus from conventional idyllic aesthetics to the 20 century Sri Lanka of political upheavals. The post card images of Sri Lanka were replaced by the aesthetics of ordinary, mundane, real and violent.

Jagath Weerasinghe and T. Shanathana were a couple of leading artists in the changed art scenario. The range of Weerasinghe's works (^)ored motives of masculinity and

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etailed descriptions of ethnicity in Jaffna. Among the female artists were Vasuki

Jeyashankar from Jaffna and the non-resident Sri Lankan Tamil artist R. Vaidehi in addition

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In the artistic creations of Banda Mahipati (Numbered, 2009), Kotagedara Pushpakumara (Goodwill Hardware, 2009), and Chandragupta Thenuwara (Black Paintings, 2010). The artistic fermentation of the 1990s culminated in a historically important exhibition famously known as Aham-Puram exhibition (a Tamil parallel for inner-outer/ personal-public) at the Jaffna Public Library in 2004. The Sri Lankan army had destroyed the public library in 1984.

The exhibition made manifold political statements, by choosing the library as a site and putting together the visual arts of Sinhala and Tamil artists together.

An exhibition titled Narratives of Resistance at Espace Gallery in New Delhi in December 2012 put together the works of Jagath Weerasinghe, and two young artists Pala Pothupitiye and Anura Krishantha. Weerasinghe's works 'Patient' and 'Soldier,' underlined the deceitful usage of Sinhala Buddhism in the backdrop of civil war.

Located in the historical trajectory of contemporary visual art of Sri Lanka, the solo show of Anoli Perera titled 'Memory Keeper Series' encapsulated a feminine urge to historicise emotion and memory. The show at 'Shrine Empire' gallery in Delhi was a point of attraction for the art lovers in Delhi for a fortnight in February 2013.

Most important in this exhibition was the Swarnabhumi series by Anoli Perera, which showed the apparently harmless Buddhist symbols, metamorphosed into weapons of genocide. 'The Ghosts of Swarnabhumi' in this series reminded that women will reproduce the politically tabooed and thus the collusion between Sinhala Buddhism and state sponsored massacres will be revealed.

It is true that mere artistic representation does not guarantee alteration in the politics of religion. Art and aesthetics may not necessarily offer a moment for concrete redemption. It however augurs well for a holistic attempt at writing the social history of the unsavoury events. In the region of South Asia, where intolerance to critical thinking is the abiding principle, it is heartening that art and aesthetics share the concerns of civil society and sensitive intelligentsia. The contemporary visual art of Sri Lanka, does offer a chance to moot for an artistic movement.

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