



Vol. 05. No. 36

Sunday 19 February 2012



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History, myth, imagination and the work of Anoli Perera

Kuveni, the Queen of Lanka- An exhibition by Anoli Perera. Curated by Annoushka Hempel and held at Hempel Galleries

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Anoli Perera's current series of paintings called Kuveni is located within and at the intersections of history, myth and imagination; this is not to say that these specific domains are protected by watertight boundaries. If at all, they typify the kind of boundaries that are in a constant state of flux and redefinition, allowing avenues of interjection into each other and overlapping as well as multiple ways of interpreting, recasting and rethinking. That is precisely why art, and in this case the work of Anoli Perera, would find a welcoming and nurturing home in the domains of history, myth and imagination.

Formerly at least, if history is an aggregate, a record or a narrative description of past events albeit with interpretive infusions seeping into the master narrative through the perceptions of writers, myth is not just any story of an event that may or may not have happened in the past as popular perception would allow us to believe. Myth after all is not that simple. It is a reference to a particular event, though the forms of reference might seem unreal. As Roland Barthes notes in his essay, *Myth Today*, "myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a sign" (1993: 109). Imagination on the other hand, is the formation of images in the mind that are not perceived as real, and is not present to the senses. Reading through Perera's present series of work, it is clear why she opted to locate her work in the midst of such a vast landscape of interpretative possibilities; it would allow her ideas ample and often limitless space to travel through until they blossom at the culmination of that mental process.



Anoli Perera

Mythical moment

However, by taking the mythological character of Kuveni as the central figure in the imaginary landscapes she paints, she has self-consciously anchored herself to a particular historical or mythical moment though its details may be lost in the mists of the past, which can only be resurrected through imagination as the possibilities of formal historiography have by now exhausted their potential. On the other hand, some renditions of her imagery are rooted very much in contemporary times and moods, which I will comment on later. Nevertheless, the story of Kuveni occupies an ambiguous aspect of the memory of the Sinhalese; it is both present and absent at the same time. It is part of the larger narrative of the peopling of Lanka, and in particular the original myth of the Sinhalese which amalgamates stories of bestiality, incest, valour, conquest, order, betrayal, exploration and many more dynamics. Perera has already outlined the basic facets of this omnipresent myth in her concept note. As such, I will not reproduce it in detail here. Nevertheless, let me refer to some of its narrative strains that would help further this discussion. The original myth deals with the expedition of Lanka of a troubled young prince, Vijaya who was exiled by his father as he and his followers were being a public nuisance. According to the myth, Vijaya's father, King Sinhabahu killed his own father who was a lion, and married his sister, Sinha Seevali. Vijaya was their son. The well-known stage drama *Sinha Bahu* by Ediriweera Sarachchandra that was first produced in the 1960s deals with this local epic with a focus on Vijaya's father. These aspects of the myth structure unfolds much the same way as Perera's images in the imaginary landscapes she has painted, emerging from unclear corners into more clearly defined spaces.

But in the original myth, despite the multiple layers of pain, violence and abnormality of his mythical ancestry, Vijaya was the ultimate hero. When he was set afloat, Mahawamsa, the historical chronicle of the Sinhalese written in Pali in the fifth century, narrates that Gods took a decision to ensure his safety and that of his followers as they were destined to be the rulers of the land where the Buddha's dhamma would ultimately prevail. In effect, the gods opted to overlook his past in the context of the future of the land he was about to conquer. In that sense the erasure of the past and the tolerance of a violent present with regard to Vijaya was a forgone divine conclusion. In this context, in the myth as well as in its numerous reproductions, Vijaya's violence is not seen as an issue; in the same sense, Kuveni's personality and her role in the peopling of the land conveniently vanishes beyond the margins of the master-narrative.

It is in this context that Perera's paintings revisit the myth with different points of reference. Instead of Vijaya, she has privileged Kuveni, the forgotten, betrayed and scorned woman in the Sinhala myth of origin who is also the mother of the Pulindas, better known as the Veddas or the indigenous people of Lanka; the children that Vijaya disowned. In Perera's paintings, Kuveni's children are in the shadows as veritable ghosts or they do not exist at all, very similar to the marginal and almost erased existence of the Veddas today. What dominates her landscapes is Kuveni herself as the centre of attention and Vijaya and his seven hundred followers in the form of sea serpents emerging out of the ocean and usually from the borders of the paintings. Through this iconographic device Perera denotes both a rebirth of Vijaya and his men through the sea and creeping into land as well as a clear reference to the violence linked to their collective selves before and after their arrival in Lanka.

Barthes notes that "mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication" (1993: 110). He further suggest that "it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presupposes a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance" (Barthes 1993: 110). In this context, Perera is using material that has been used before to ensure communicability; examples for this are the myth itself as well as the dominant meanings of the iconographic devices, sea serpents being just one of them. Kuveni is always in portrait though without facial features, a reference to her erasure from Sinhala memory as well as her existence in the margins in the original myth. But in Perera's work, she exists nevertheless very prominently as a woman signified in the Barthesian sense through the embroidery designs covering her face, very prominent renditions of hair as well as virginal forms that appear at different junctures. In addition to the power of her desires as a woman, Perera's

Kuveni is also armed with a variety of weapons, which are both beautiful and dangerous. Because they are beautiful their inherent danger is camouflaged; nothing is what they seem to be. The sea serpents also have no eyes; their ferocity and potential for violence is signified through their protruding tongues, sea serpent heads and inbuilt weapons.

Sri Lankan artists

In addition to anchoring her work to a mythic time, Perera also links it to contemporary times. The mythical creatures known as ligers, combining features of lions and tigers, crawls across Perera's mythical landscapes, among Vijaya, Kuveni and their respective followers. These creatures have been created, nurtured, named and let loose on the local visual art scene by a group of contemporary Sri Lankan artists. Blind, but with an inbuilt sense of ferocity, ligers are willing to act according to the bidding of anyone who has the power. Vijaya in his own time was one such person with power. But then, such authority figures who control violence are also in our midst today. One painting depicts a group of soldiers in the contemporary sense climbing a net in Ninja-like fashion to invade Kuveni's face. In this extended context where the mythic seamlessly blends into the more contemporary Perera's work disrupts the divisions that separate different times or epochs and collapse temporality into a single zone. In this context, one is never quite sure if Perera's ligers or the Ninja-like soldiers are referring to the mythic times of Kuveni or more contemporary politics. When it comes to structures and the politics of violence, both times have uncanny similarities. Besides, unlike formal historiography, art does not have to resolve such contradictions; this is a possibility that Perera quite unapologetically exploits to the extents possible.

Finally, once the narratives of Perera's work have been placed in context, one still needs to deal with the cultural value and aesthetic sensibility of her imagery. In this context, though her paintings depict what might ordinarily be called violent, sad and unnatural circumstances though in myth, they are also intricate and beautiful. That particular methodology can make violence even of contemporary times palatable. One can look at them and remind ourselves of the violence of our present or the contradictions of our present. Alternatively, in the Barthesian sense, by "discounting their substance" (1993: 110), one can imagine a perfect world where both myth and reality have been suspended and contradictions do not exist. There, only beauty prevails. In the end, precisely due to its multiple locations and contexts, how one reads Perera's work will solely depend on the relative enlightenment of the consumers and how their individual tastes have been structured.

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