
SHANAATHANAN: 'LOCATING THE SELF'

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On 6 January 2006, an exhibition of work by T. Shanaathanan, titled 'Locating the Self,' opened at Paradise Road Galleries. The artist's preface to the gallery catalogue introduces this show of mixed-media work on paper in relation to the themes of physical location, displacement, war, and personal identity. Shanaathanan writes: "There is an interdependency between the location and the ways in which one identifies and feels his/her own self. Self is a construction of its location, the location is an expanded reflection or projection of self. ... Through destruction, displacement and migration, the war destroyed, dismantled and disturbed the layers of physical and psychological connections, which one cultivated with his/her immediate surroundings over the period of time."¹ The works on display at Paradise Road Galleries form part of two series, 'High Security Zones in North-East' and 'Diaspora' (<http://shanaathanan.blogspot.com>).

These are visually demanding works, made so in part by the combinations of media used by the artist. Shanaathanan's paintings are constructed through paint on paper and canvas used in combination with pieces of metal and cloth attached to, and built into, these arresting pieces. This use of mixed media brings the works alive in three dimensions, as does the artist's choice to build up certain portions of the canvas with reinforced ridges and sutures, creating a topography upon the surface of the paintings. Moreover, the fragments of metal and cloth used within Shanaathanan's works evoke a series of powerful associations related to the personal experience of landscape and territory. Scraps of human memory, traces of land once known, and the signs of destructive technology are woven into Shanaathanan's paintings of human figures.

One of the striking features of many of these works is the mottled and paint-marked character of the paper on which the artist's cartographic meditations occur. By forcibly creating such a visual field, suggestive of antique maps marked by the natural spoilage of time, the very background of Shanaathanan's work communicates a painful irony about landscapes of a recent past too quickly rendered obsolete by the unnatural forces of war and migration. In two particularly

striking pieces (Kanthari 2005 & Untitled II 2005) female figures are composed within the cartographic lines, their bodies marked by the fissures and divisions of territory. Both figures signal the impact of war upon the generations. In 'Kanthari' the multi-breasted, many-armed, woman nurses a series of infants, her visage effaced by a striking metallic suturing, evocative also of rounds of ammunition. A woman of similar endowments inhabits 'Untitled II.' Her many breasts and marked skin suggest something like a goddess of fertility, yet we find skin jarringly overlaid by the word 'mines,' and by what appear to be signs of puncture, where we might expect the reassurance of auspicious symbols.

Men, too, exist in relation to Shanaathanan's fractured landscapes. 'Vamana' (2004) is framed by the figure of a man in motion, his body bisected by a strikingly raised and sutured boundary marker. The weighting of the body suggests his movement forward into another landscape, riven less by fissures and fragments. Despite his bifurcation, there are sufficient continuities between both the landscapes inhabited by this figure to understand him as, at least, a gesture towards the possibility of continued or renewed habitation within a land of familiarity. Other figures, however, offer no such consolation. In 'Migration' (2005), for instance, a man is depicted poised for flight, his wings a strikingly mixed evocation of organs and topography: does he draw breath from the land carried with(in) himself? The pair of paintings titled 'Inner Circuit I' and 'Inner Circuit II' (both 2005) offer further meditations on the problem of human functioning within the context of uprooting. 'Inner Circuit I' presents a physical organ, the heart, embedded within one of Shanaathanan's cartographic landscapes, its arteries and veins active within a field framed by barbed wire. 'Inner Circuit II,' however, offers an entire faceless male figure, detached from all landscape, his circuitry elaborate but abstract; separated from his vital organs with surround him externally. This man occupies a sea-like space, akin to that of 'Migration,' further suggesting the severance of man from the land.

Two of the artist's earlier male figures also address problems of loss, transition, and the role of place in memory. In both

'Dislocation I' (2003) and 'Entangled' (2004) human figures frame – and embrace -- fragments of landscape from which they are visually divided through horizontal lines within the compositions. 'Dislocation I' is particularly explicit: a man with arms in motion encompasses jigsaw pieces marked as damaged land. These pieces evoke the landscape depicted in the lower portion of the painting, from which the male figure is sharply separated by raised boundary markers constructed on the surface of the work. 'Dislocation I' and 'Entangled' are brutally explicit in their depiction of rupture and its aftermath. In 'Grandma's Courtyard II' (2004), however, separation and memory are elegiac. This is a haunting piece made so by careful use of color in the representation of remembrance. A darkly colored figure seated on a garden swing observes land portrayed in soft romantic colors. This sharply contrasted coloration conveys the remembrance of things past from the dark and painful position of the present. Of all the mixed-media paintings

displayed within this exhibit, only 'Grandma's Courtyard II' brings Shanaathanan's cartographic meditations to life in soft colours with the addition of unthreatening textures and fabrics. This gentle sensuality is undone, however, by the small yet powerfully dark figure that observes the scene.

Shanaathanan's work makes powerful use of varied surfaces, textures, and media to arrest the eye and provoke strong reactions in the viewer. These are unsettling, haunting paintings by an artist of great skill and complex vision, who is Lecturer in Art History in the Department of Fine Arts and the University of Jaffna. It is deeply saddening to see them now, as each day in the island brings further news of violence, the rupture of homes and families, and the need to grapple anew with the horrors of displacement and migration. ■

1 *'Locating the Self' Exhibition of Paintings: Shanaathanan. Colombo: Paradise Road Galleries 2006.*

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