

FABRICATED WOMAN: WOMEN ARTISTS PLAYING THE MALE GAZE

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In private Natasha (just Natasha) confides that she is a smart and savvy woman. Because she knows that neither trait is particularly bankable when advertised she keeps them a secret most of the time. Around her workplace intellectual dishonesty is lucrative. Credible stupidity is a sign of utmost professionalism. Asking questions can make a lot of people feel insecure. People appreciate Natasha's naivete and show her as much by padding her purse and sending her on shopping sprees. Some people fall in love with Natasha. These people don't understand that she is a character created for the sole purpose of making money. These people are stupider than she is pretending to be. Natasha whose real name is Deborah Rowe, works as a stripper in Washington DC.

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She is also a documentary filmmaker producing a movie that will be "a dissertation on stripping... definitely not some fucking cock-tease that caters to men". Contrary to what a feminists said, Natasha believes that women are powerful with their clothes off. And stripping, women taking their clothes off, selling body parts, the oldest profession, the sex industry, is definitely a growth area worthy of social analysis in a globalized world of cyber sex, global mail order brides and the international sex trade that inevitably turns women who sell their bodies (never mind their minds), and not the men who consume them into the bad guys. But what then of the play of market forces? The old logic that supply (of female bodies) is driven by (male) demand?

Women artists, filmmakers, sculptors, advertising professionals have been for a while challenging the construction of what it means to be a good woman - at the fringe of established canons of truth, beauty, and goodness, and one might add sex. Two women artists whose work was recently on show as part of the No Order Group's exhibition at the Vibhavi Academy for the Fine Arts in Etul Kotte, clearly belong to the global community of women working to develop a female gaze on sexuality its purpose/ or lack thereof and its relationship to social values and norms.

'Fabricated woman' is the title of a series of mixed media art work produced by Nilanthi Weerasekera, a graduate of the Institute for Aesthetic Studies. Along with Anoli Perera whose work has consistently challenged the social taboos that keep women in ignorance about their bodies, sexuality and desires, Nilanthi seems intent on deconstructing conventional notions of the beautiful woman. She plays with bangles, lipstick traces, net stocking, falling beads which might be allegories for belly buttons, the stereotypical fetish objects

of male desire vis-a-vis the female of the species. She also plays with the images of women and the designers who make them up-Dior-diorissimo, magazine cut outs from *Femina*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*. In Sri Lanka where the *lajja-biya* syndrome that prescribes that women be demure and respectable, fear-filled and unwilling to talk about desire or in sex outside the heterosexual marriage bed (because if they do so they are deemed prostitutes), it is refreshing to see the emergence of women artists who challenge conventional constructions of femininity and what it means to be a good woman.

The four frames /installations by Anoli in the No Order exhibition constitute a de-naturalizing peep-show for women and men. She works with the pornographic image, most scut outs from porn magazines, but interrupts the male gaze that might be titillated at naked women masturbating "enjoying their sex". There also women in leather and then there is the gay male duo in the peep show. Unlike Nilanthi's brush strokes that have flow and motion, Anoli's work is concentrated and conceptual, still and stripped, split-screen in highly varnished acrylic, dull and bright. Desire and Control.

Anoli argues that notions of respectability keep women in ignorance about their bodies and desires and circumscribe women's knowledge, freedom, mobility and expressiveness. Of course, she is not speaking of the little girls who pour themselves into little tank tops and hang out at the Colombo shopping arcades and cascades dressed like the Spice Girls. She is speaking of "respectable" Sri Lankan women trapped in their respectability: women who have learned to look the other way, cultivate ignorance about their bodies and desires, plead and pretend ignorance in order to get a promotion or save their marriage. Peep shows can, it seems, also educate women on desire, its objectification and subjection.

The work of Anoli and Nilanthi attempts to reinvent women's relationship to their bodies and desires against and through the male gaze, a gaze that positions women as objects rather than subjects of desire and sex. Their work positions women as agents of sex. They challenge the idea that women who enjoy their bodies and sexuality outside the prescribed norms of heterosexual marriage with its reproductive purpose are either loose or immoral. They also challenge the social construction of the "good women". The sealing on information about sex and sexuality inhibits women's expressiveness and potential, Anoli believes. These artists are developing a language of representation, to displace a male gaze that has for so long constructed the "ideal" woman and told her how to dress, look, be and do - and what she should desire. ■

Women's Coalition Calls for End to Hate Speech & for Constructive Conflict Resolution

As the violence escalated in December during the presidential elections, and reached its high point in the simultaneous attacks at the election rallies of the main political parties, there has been an escalation of hate speech in the national press. A number of people including President Kumaratunge were injured and Lucky Algama killed by human bombs and rumor proliferated in the media. In the new millennium the violence and insecurity continues unabated in the form of other murders and attempted attacks in Colombo, including the killing of Kumar Ponnambalam.

The Women's Coalition for Peace, comprising women of all class, political, ethnic and religious communities, calls for moderate speech and action in this context of heightened fear and insecurity. Incitement to violence through hate speech in any society breeds trauma, mistrust, insecurity and often an intolerance of people of a different religion, ethnicity or political ideology. It is hence that conspiracy theories naming prominent persons and enemies are to be avoided and a due process of investigation followed where relevant. The rhetoric of conspiracy theory merely masks the absence of due process of investigation and justice. It is also injurious to the peace. In a context of heightened anxiety and insecurity amongst all communities in the country, the need for measured speech and thoughtful action by all segments of the media cannot be over emphasized. In this context we congratulate the president for calling for the public to refrain from vengeance attacks on minorities and the opposition soon after she was injured.

Most disturbingly, amidst the various conspiracy theories propounded to explain escalating violence in the country, there has been a return of anti-minority rhetoric in the media, both private and state owned. The pogrom/riots of July 1983 when anti-minority rhetoric proliferated in the media should be a warning and a reminder to us all. The Coalition notes that the government controlled press, which has the institution of State and its legitimacy behind it, has an obligation to set a tone of moderation for the rest of the media. Likewise the private media has an obligation to desist from hate speech against minority communities. Innuendo, rumors and character assassination of persons suspected of disturbing the peace is not conducive to an atmosphere of order and security. Free media should not be a guise for hate speech and ethnic labeling and stereotyping are to be avoided at all times.

The climate of uncertainty and insecurity generated by violence, death, curfews, house to house search operations and the general sense of insecurity in Colombo in the past month, is mirrored more dramatically in other parts of this war torn country. In the north, fierce fighting continues in and around Elephant Pass, with large numbers of civilians being displaced yet again in the Jaffna Peninsula. In the east, the deteriorating security situation has meant that at least one pregnant mother and child who sought permission to cross a security checkpoint to get to hospital at the time of delivery died because they were asked to wait till morning. We in heavily fortified Colombo only become aware of the enormous toll this conflict takes from the poor and marginalised of all communities, Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim when the censorship is lifted or when the LTTE suicide bomber strikes in Colombo.

The Coalition notes the fact that women have suffered disproportionately due to the generalized violence and the militarization of Sri Lankan society. Moreover the disturbing trend of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka to induct women into violence and take the lives of women, who traditionally have not participated in political violence needs to be arrested. We call upon the LTTE to eschew the practice of using women or men as suicide bombers and terrorizing society. Similarly, the military and paramilitaries must desist from targeting violence at women.

Throughout the armed conflict and escalating political violence women have been subject to rape and other forms of gender specific sexual abuse and harassment, particularly at checkpoints. We especially note the gang rape and murder of Sarathambal in Jaffna and call for immediate and stern action against the perpetrators. 20 year old Sarathambal, daughter of a Hindu priest and a mother of an infant, during the curfew hours of the night was dragged out of her house by four armed men alleged to be from the security forces, gang raped and killed by them. Her brother who was in the house at the time was intimidated, assaulted and tied up while she was being dragged out of the house. Her body was recovered just few meters from her residence covered by palmyrah leaves and had several injuries on her body caused by biting. There was a mass demonstration by the public with placards saying, 'Sarathambal is another Krishanthi Kumaraswamy'. We also note the attack in Monaragala on the house of actress, Anoja Weerasinghe, and the destruction of her 22-year career archive and call for a speedy investigation of the perpetrators in this politically motivated attack. Ms. Weerasinghe remains in India. Finally, currently a large number of women are being detained in police stations. We call for speedy investigation and release when relevant.

In the context of escalating violence and insecurity, the Women's Coalition once again reiterates its call for:

1. The People's Alliance Government, the Opposition and the LTTE to rise above using the conflict and the war for political gain, and to build an atmosphere of cooperation towards collective problem solving, and to restore civility to national politics.
2. The government, the Opposition and LTTE to arrive at the consensus on constitutional reforms aimed at satisfying the democratic and peaceful aspiration of all Sri Lankans.
3. The Government and the LTTE to take steps to de-escalate the military conflict and take steps to resume peace talks.
4. The Government, the Opposition and the LTTE to work together to seek third party facilitation to promote negotiations between the parties and all other political groups and interests concerned with the conflict.
5. All parties in the conflict to take into consideration the immense loss of life, livelihood, displacement and insecurity of the Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim communities in the country and the aspiration for peace expressed by all people living in the conflict areas, and to being a process towards the re-commencement of peace talks.

Women's Coalition for Peace.