



Pushpakanthan



Sugunasabesan

# When Memory Lives

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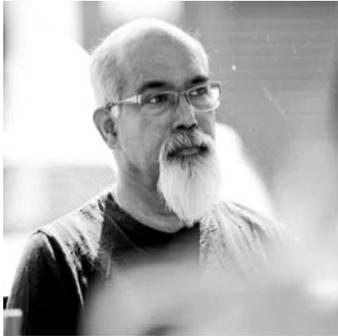
**S. P. Pushpakanthan** is an artist from Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, whose subject matter has been heavily influenced by the prolonged civil conflict that permeated his youth. His powerful, emotionally raw and meticulously executed drawings, paintings, video art, installations and performance engage with issues about which there has been mostly silence. The work speaks of physical and mental suffering, conditions he equates with both the deep pain his country experiences as it continues to emerge from decades of civil strife, and global suffering connected to questions of identity, agency and gender. As an artist, Pushpakanthan expresses his generational outlook, a subtle feeling of being trapped by the burden of a tragic history, of being in search of reconciliation, and experiences of cultural in-betweenness. His work seeks to create a space for marginalized voices, for remembering and healing a silenced past, and for initiating honest discussions about the meaning of reconciliation. Pushpakanthan studied at the Ramanathan Academy of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna, and is Lecturer in the Department of Visual and Technological Arts at the Swami Vipulananda Institute for Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. He has exhibited widely in Sri Lanka, India and the UK, and is represented by Saskia Fernando Gallery in Colombo. His work is in private collections in Sri Lanka, Europe and North America. He is a recipient of a South Asia Studies Fellowship at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where he is currently a Fellow and Visiting Artist.

My work deals with the disappearances that occurred during the course of Sri Lanka's civil war, the loneliness of survivors, and what it means to be forced to start one's life all over again. My art is fundamentally about the emotional torture endured by the families of the disappeared, because of their persistent questions that continue to go unanswered. Haunting memories, imagination and fear fill my work—here suffocating mental constrictions and suppressed emotions strangle those who imagine the suffering of their family members and are frustrated by their own inability to help them. They are trapped between the real and the surreal through these memories. Though viscerally ever-present to those left behind, and deeply ingrained in the everyday lives of mothers, spouses, children searching for their loved ones, the disappearances themselves disappear. They vanish from political discourse—as they are appropriated for political agendas, from collective memory—as the public moves on to other topics, from communities—as those unaffected move on with their own lives. They disappear behind ethnicized politics and hatred; yet lurk as spectres of the injustices of the war, testifying to the ongoing misery and agony of families and friends.

My creations express themselves as the psychological analyses of the reactions that such suffering evokes in me. My work recognizes the human need to situate and share this suffering within the context of the suffering of others. My drawings seek to articulate the disappearance of disappearances by filling a white space that signifies the void left by the whitewashing of history, of landscapes, of everyday lives from disappearances. Abandoned furniture, along with discarded traces of ordinary life, and roots that speak of missing bodies sown in the soil, integrate the mediators between the body and the emotions of day to day existence with what has been shattered and burned by war. Furniture is drawn modelled on the human body to represent not only the dead but also the wounded, disappeared, displaced and traumatized. This gives the viewer the opportunity to experience the work from multiple perspectives and to render the suffering of others visceral – others who may be divided by nationality, ethnicity and religion. In my work, I attempt to observe the ever-

present trauma from a certain distance and embed my artistic approach in a globalized context by exploring ideas relating to agency, identity and gender.

My hope is that this work will create a space for marginalized voices, for remembering and healing a silenced past, and for initiating honest discussions.



*Sabes Sugunasabesan is a London-based photographer. He migrated to England from Sri Lanka over four decades ago. Both his diasporic experience and life in a metropolis are significantly represented in his photographic and artistic work. Sabes makes photographs of cities, urban landscapes, people and his home. Through these he explores memories, connections and responses to places and events. Some of his work is accompanied by reflective text. Sabes' exhibition, 'The Last Walk to the Beach' was shown in London in June this year. It explores his response to the last phase of the thirty-year civil conflict between the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Witnessing the war from the distance of space and time, and his connection with his people's tragedy, pervades this body of work. Sabes has exhibited in London and Toronto.*

This body of work is dictated in method and substance by the final phase of a thirty-year civil war between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and at the same time by my position of distance in time and geography. This series narrates my psychic response to the civil war, which was a source of pain, anger, trauma and loss for many. As someone who migrated to the UK 40 years ago, I am speaking for myself, but with the acknowledgment that there are common and shared emotions amongst Tamils of the diaspora. This includes a recognition that those outside the war zones come to know about wars from the comfort of their living rooms, while also confronting the sense of guilt that comes with having survived these atrocities.

In my lifetime, there has never been a stretch of time that Sri Lanka was at peace with itself: ethnically divisive legislation and pogroms targeted at the Tamil minority peppered the island's history. The ideals that I saw in my youth, under the slogans of socialism, equality and racial harmony, disintegrated even under the left wing leaders I had looked up to. My recollections of my youth, the rich diversity of the people, the varied landscape and collective hopes are always tinged with reminders of the hateful, unpredictable underbelly of the country. The State created the necessity for an armed conflict. My generation began the armed struggle and my children's generation continued it. Many generations suffered as a result. The last days of the war saw Tamil people driven to the shores of Mullivaikkal and being massacred in the thousands. During and after the end of the war, scores of war crimes against Tamils took place, ranging from rapes, summary killings, enforced disappearances, air raids on hospitals, and the shooting of unarmed civilians. Nothing that is spoken written or shown can adequately convey what the Tamil people of Vanni went through. I found myself inquiring why the war affected me as it did, in spite of my years in diaspora, and why I felt the need to visit the land.

In this series, I weave photographs from my recent visit to the affected areas with Internet images to connect with my people's collective experiences of the atrocities of war, and to share my own reflexive journey. I am also sharing the shifts in my responses as they emerged as attachment to the different places in the country. My distance dictated how I sourced my materials and worked with them, whether they came from social media, survivors' narratives, or accounts by journalists who

spoke to the victims of the war. With these materials in hand, I followed the route of the war from West to East of Vanni, all the way to Mullivaikkal Beach, where the war came to an end. These photographs were taken during a physical journey, carrying thoughts of the extended families that moved from one 'no-fire zone to the next' as each zone became a death trap.

I have long been interested in the interface between photography and emotions. I needed to visit Mullivaikkal with the intention of not being a 'war tourist' and intruder, but with an awareness of my position of distance to the people and place. It was a moment to contemplate my responses as well as to reconnect with the people and place. I find myself looking hard for signs of hope, for people and for the land to go on, because hope should not be surrendered.