

# Adrift: Journey of Memory, Migration, and Belonging

Posted on

**“Adrift” by Anushiya Sundaralingam delves into themes of memory, migration, and estrangement through diverse artistic mediums. Presented at the Saskia Fernando Gallery on Galle Road, the exhibition offers a deeply personal chronicle of the artist’s experiences during the Sri Lankan civil war and the profound influence these memories continue to exert on her creative work.**

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

**Photography** Sujith Heenatigala.



The vessel becomes a metaphor – of memory, survival, and uncertainty.

“Adrift” is an odyssey back to a land left in 1989, when marriage offered her a way out of the perils of Sri Lanka’s civil war. Her departure marked the beginning of a painful disconnection from her family, who remained caught in the throes of conflict. For years, there was only silence—no letters, no telephone calls, and no words from home.

In 1995, six years later, Anushiya returned with her young son to make the perilous journey to her home, compelled to see her ailing grandmother and aging parents. By then, the war had ravaged the land so profoundly that there was no direct road to Jaffna. It had become a forbidden place, and its people were crushed by both sides of the conflict. Undertaking the journey was a mission fraught with uncertainty – she knew nothing about who was taking her or how, whether she would see her family or return safely.



Brushstrokes of color capture a fragile passage across water.



In 'Adrift' artist Anushiya Sundaralingam weaves profound and untold stories of conflict, becoming the voice of countless victims.

The journey to Jaffna stretched across two days, passing through countless checkpoints and even a night spent in the jungle. It unfolded in fragments – by train, tractor, motorbike, bicycle, a minivan, and finally, a boat across waters patrolled by the navy. At every stage, Anushiya and her young son were at the mercy of strangers – deliverers who guided them from one uncertain point to the next. She did not know the route; every road seemed forsaken, and trust in outsiders became her only compass. The final passage was the most perilous – a secretive boat ride in the dead of night. Operated by men who warned the passengers to keep low and silent, the journey was cloaked in fear. Anushiya remembers the small fishing vessel, the bucket she was handed to bail out the water seeping into the boat, and the lantern placed on the floor, dim enough to avoid detection. The travelers had no voice in the night's stillness; words could betray them. No one knew how long the boat would drift before reaching land; only faith alone could carry them forward.

This haunting voyage lies at the heart of Anushiya's current work, where the recurring motif of the boat becomes a vessel of memory, survival, and uncertainty. The exhibition's title, "Adrift", is drawn directly from that experience, a journey with a destination, yet no clear end in sight, drifting between fear and deliverance, between human will and the forces of nature.



Each work echoes the weight of memory.

Anushiya, based in Belfast, initially created artwork about other aspects of the journey but only recently began addressing the boat crossing, connecting it to current global migration crises. Her artistic process involves working with various materials, including medical boxes she collected while caring for her parents in Northern Ireland, wax, photography, and painting. During the Civil War, there was a shortage of medicine, and people suffered because of it. Her work is characterized by fragmentation, reflecting the fragmented nature of her life experiences.

The exhibition “Adrift” features sculptural installations of boat-like forms, paintings, and manipulated photographs. She emphasizes the experimental nature of her process, embracing accidents and unexpected results. “There is playfulness about my work. I may make something in 3D, play with it, twist it, and then manipulate it with lights to create shadows. I enjoy working with different materials, colors, textures, shapes, and patterns to express a profoundly deep subject representing the past, the present, and the future.”

Anushiya explains that her pieces represent more than just boats—they also represent bodies, homes, and vessels, carrying themes of entanglement, fragmentation, and displacement. Her predominantly dark color palette reflects the depth of sadness associated with the civil war and the lives lost.

Inspired by her journey, her paintings are composed of entangled and enmeshed shapes resembling boats. These shapes allude to the perilous voyage she undertook thirty years ago and to a sense of entrapment endured by so many others.



The predominantly dark color palette reflects the depth of sadness associated with war and death.

Her photographs further expand this theme: three-dimensional sculptures created from various materials, often recycled, manipulated through her instinctive process before being photographed. Each creation is a window into the lingering trauma the artist carries of that night: the fear, the discomfort, the uncertainty. Yet, Anushiya’s story extends beyond the personal. It’s a collective narrative, echoing the

experiences of thousands who were caught in the crosshairs of conflict and undertook similar perilous journeys—whether to reunite with their loved ones or to flee the brutality of war-ravaged circumstances.

For Anushiya, life in Jaffna in the 1980s is marked by memories of displacement. Her work has become a way of processing trauma and a bridge to connect with others who share similar experiences. Many people from the Sri Lankan Tamil community have begun sharing their migration stories after seeing the exhibition. In this way, her works carry profound meaning, stories woven from her memories and intertwined with the narratives of countless others. These stories extend into the present and echo across the world.

Thirty years after her perilous boat journey to reconnect with her home and family, Anushiya returned to Sri Lanka in 2025. Perhaps her urgency to return had diminished once her parents were safely under her care in Northern Ireland. Her three-decade hiatus ended when she received funding from the British Council, enabling her to collaborate with the University of Jaffna and present an exhibition there. Significantly, Jaffna is where Anushiya's artistic journey began – her first solo exhibition was held there before she left Sri Lanka, making her the first female artist to do so in Jaffna. She graduated with a Fine and Applied Arts degree from the University of Ulster in 1998, establishing a career that has since spanned local and international platforms.

Her work has been exhibited widely, including at the Ulster Museum, Belfast, Northern Ireland (2024); the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland (2017); One Church Street Gallery, Buckinghamshire, UK (2013); Belfast Print Workshop, Belfast, Northern Ireland (2014); and most recently the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka (2025). Anushiya's works are also featured in several prestigious collections, including Queen's University, Belfast, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and the National College of Art, Dublin.

Anushiya is exploring glass as a new medium for her future works, continuing her passion for creating art that intertwines her personal narrative with universal themes of migration and displacement. Through her evolving practice, she remains committed to giving form to memory and experience, while opening spaces for dialogue and reflection.

*Till October 13, 2025*

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*Venue: Saskia Fernando Gallery 138, Galle Road, Colombo 3*



Her work includes sculptural installations of boat-like forms.