Capturing The Persona Of Sri Lanka

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A silhouette of Medirigiriya captured at dawn

One of the country's foremost photographers, Nihal Fernando, has combined a true artistic gift with a passion for conservation of Sri Lanka's heritage and natural resources. The resulting photographs have both inspired and challenged his audience to action.

Words Manori Wijesekera

Nihal Fernando's love of photography started early, when he was still in school and took group photos of his friends with a borrowed camera. He ventured into professional photography as a news photographer in the 1940s for the Times of Ceylon. The Observer Pictorial and the Times Annual, collector's items for its stunning photography and creative writing, soon began carrying his work. When his employer, the Times Group, decided to close down Studio Times in 1963, he decided to purchase it and move out on his own. The journey he embarked on from that time onwards, is one which has captured the remarkable beauty and vulnerability of this island nation.

Fernando is perhaps best known for his photography of the natural world. The

painstaking hours of watching and waiting, the research and the resulting search for some species which required you to go deeper and deeper into the jungle – these were all the norm for Fernando. The photographs of elephants, leopards and other mammals captured the imagination of those of us who couldn't venture into the jungles with him. He paid equally close attention to the flora – the giant trees, the shrub and the rainforest plants, the wildflowers and the ferns, all of these received the same meticulous attention as his loving portrayals of wildlife.

The remarkable ability which Fernando has, to create an evocative moment through a photograph, is one which he used unashamedly to promote his island home.

The panoramic beauty of the Sri Lankan landscape, whether it be fishermen at work along a pristine coastline or the canopy of rainforest, covered in a shroud of mist, Fernando captured each breathtaking vista with beautiful framing and composition. Some photographs look like paintings, others almost ethereal.

Sifting through a part of his collection, it appears that he wanted to capture every facet and nuance of Sri Lanka. Portraits of the Sri Lankan people, their everyday lives, the shy smiles of children – all these are captured with empathy through his lens. The Northern Province was one he could not cover as extensively as other parts of the country, due to the military conflict at the time. But his pre-conflict photographs of the grandeur of the buildings and warmth of the people in the North makes you stop and gaze in sadness – the knowledge that their lives would be drastically changed a few years after these carefree photographs were taken, a hard reality to swallow.

The remarkable ability which Fernando has, to create an evocative moment through a photograph, is one which he used unashamedly to promote his island home. Born in the west coast town of Marawila, in a house by the sea, Fernando's family moved to Colombo when he was six years old. But the deep love of the natural environment and a sense of the historical heritage we call our own, never left him.

A large part of his collection consists of black and white photographs, and Studio Times was soon recognised as the pre-eminent place for commercial processing of black and white photographs. Although he moved into colour photography and then to digital cameras, some of his best work remains in the black and white sphere. Studio Times has presented 18 exhibitions, featuring Fernando's work as well as others at the Studio, such as Pat Decker, Luxshmanan Nadaraja and Christopher Silva.

Nihal Fernando’s photographs not only speaks to us of Sri Lanka’s intrinsic beauty,but also challenges us to consider the values and lifestyles we pursue and how it could forever erase this fragile beauty.

The publications of Nihal Fernando are varied and provide a glimpse into this man of many parts; from a much acclaimed “Handbook for the Ceylon Farmer” published in 1965 extolling the merits of sustainable and organic farming methods, to “The Handbook for the Ceylon Traveller” which was a precursor to today’s travel book, with facts, information and beautiful photographs to help you discover this island better. Among his other publications, now considered collectors’ prized items, are The Wild The Free The Beautiful, Serendip to Sri Lanka: Immemorial Isle, Sri Lanka: A Personal Odyssey, With The Dawn and his last publication, Eloquence in Stone: the Lithic Saga of Sri Lanka.

The one quality that separated him from his peers, that raised him above the milieu of artistes, was his ability to transform his passion into action. He was a founder member of the Environmental Foundation and Ruk Rekaganno, as well as a former member of the Fauna & Flora Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Environment. He has worked passionately and actively to protect the natural resources of this country, against exploitation and advocating conservation. He instigated the movement that resulted in the opposition to the open-cast mining at Eppawela by a multi-national company, was involved in the campaign against the state-sanctioned logging in Sinharaja forest, worked to stop the water reforms bill and was ardently involved in many other campaigns. Each of these campaigns was successful, as they were based on meticulous research and had garnered support from all affected people.

Although now in retirement, Fernando’s legacy lives on through his daughter Anu Weerasuriya who now manages Studio Times. Through his photographs, Nihal Fernando revealed to bothSri Lanka and the world, the hidden facets of this country. From never before seen historical artefacts, to the vulnerability of our wildlife, the splendour of our natural landscape, and the generosity and warmth of our people, Nihal Fernando’s photographs not only speak to us of Sri Lanka’s intrinsic beauty, but also challenge us to consider the values and lifestyles we pursue and how it could forever erase this fragile beauty.

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