

Casa Serena: Where Art Meets a Cause



A painting by Nisansala of the Ganges River at night.

Escaping the mayhem makes sense when one gets into the secure confines of Casa Serena - the gallery studio of artist Nisansala Karunaratne Rajapaksa. Honking drivers and changing traffic lights tell nothing about the peaceful, quiet refuge tucked away nonchalantly in the urban jungle.

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Casa Serena stands for the tranquil home, only in this instance, Nisansala wants it to be a gallery for a cause. She wants her exclusive space to impact people's lives positively. Opening her own gallery studio and making it a hub for those who love to dabble in art is an ambition Nisansala has finally realized after more than two years of planning. When people would look for the perfect setting for such a

purpose, Nisansala has chosen the rear spaces of a large building overlooking a busy Colombo street to make her project a reality.

Her creativity runs through the rooms, simple and austere, yet composed, unruffled by the raucous outside, to create a pleasant setting for everyone to achieve their purposes. She wants people to feel harmony and peace and experience positive vibrations, just like she likes to paint – compositions of beautiful things from nature and life. A key takeaway she envisages through painting is to make people happy and see beauty even in the mundane. This same ethos is imbibed in her gallery, a place to rest and recharge sagging energies. It is the ideal urban hideaway for conversations on art, painting, or to show one's work. In designing her gallery studio, Nisansala has had many things in mind. She has had many people in mind.

A wall of paintings of hers and others to raise funds to help those needing medicines. It is a cause that she wants to engage in collectively by inviting fellow artists who would care to join her endeavor by displaying their paintings on this “wall for a cause”.

Space for Exhibitions

The ground floor gallery is what Nisansala hopes to use for exhibitions. It is open to anyone intending to exhibit their work. It is a minimally designed space, intentionally so that it attracts small gatherings for greater impact and intimacy. Keeping her spaces small and uncluttered is her way of allowing individuals to explore and pour out their creativity. Nisansala displayed three paintings from her latest collection, “Where do I Belong”, in this ground-floor gallery. An ardent explorer of the physical world and its microcosms and the mysteriousness and complexity of the human mind, Nisansala's latest project dabbles with Buddhist philosophy, exploring the connection between color and human personality. She explores the supposed six human characters and their relationship to colors chronicled in an ancient text, the Visuddhimagga. In this instance, the color of light an individual sees during mindful meditation. She provokes a conversation, contemplation, for individuals to challenge themselves to realize who they are, to create an exchange within individuals and among individuals so that there is an honest attempt at self-reflection and self-exploration, leading to positive changes.

A Fillip to Amateurs

A graduate of California State University trained in fine art photography and design, Nisansala wants to open her gallery studio to help amateur artists become professionals. She looks to use her foreign training and two decades working as a professional artist to help up-and-coming artists who meander in the wilderness with the least guidance, possessing the talent but needing to harness the potential effectively for their future. She points out that the best artists often fade into obscurity when they face too many hurdles to take their work into the mainstream and find themselves without a career in their pursuit of art. She wants to be a stepping stone for the next generation of artists, especially in honing their skills in fine art, the space to achieve the depths of artistic expression. She wishes to push for authenticity, which could be achieved only by perfecting one's creative substance rather than merely buffing one's skills to be a better artist.

Nisansala, who has also taught at Sri Lankan universities, has experienced students' penchant to simply emulate others' works, which she describes as dull and devoid of innovation. She wants to work with budding artists intrepid to break boundaries to find their niche and their unique spark. For this purpose, Nisansala has been in conversation with veterans to get them on board to create an impact, to harness the best out of local talent, and their responses have been encouraging. Her intentions are altruistic. She believes one's existence makes sense only by impacting others' lives positively. Hence her professional life makes more sense by making it more than a commercial pursuit to make it a means to many outcomes. Word of mouth is her method of reaching out to those needing help.

Opening her own gallery studio and making it a hub for those who love to dabble in art is an ambition Nisansala has finally realized after more than two years of planning.

In using one's creativity productively, Nisansala believes that individuals need to be bold and intrepid but also move away from hoping to have a lifelong career in painting only, which is unsustainable and unproductive. That's where she wants to use her gallery space to help young people explore their potential and think realistically about their future so that they use their artistic skills to carve out a stable career. Nisansala, for instance, has expanded her repertoire to create customized products showcasing her paintings, such as in notebooks, which could

be extended to include corporate merchandise and other mementoes.



The ground floor gallery open to artists to showcase their paintings where Nisansala is displaying her “Where do I belong” collection of paintings.



An artistic touch to the simple nut - The artist's take on the King Coconut.



The wall for a cause in a gallery for a cause – The wall that the artist is offering to anyone interested to display and sell their work for charity.



Artist Nisansala Karunaratne Rajapaksa, founder of Casa Serena Gallery Studio.

Art Therapy

Nisansala is an artist with a positive mindset. She uses the canvass and every surface she draws upon as a positive expression, be it in the flowers, scenes of nature, human behavior, or landscapes. Art has been a source of great consolation to her. She knows more than anyone else the power of self-expression through art can do for self-healing. Therefore, she is excited about venturing into art therapy at her studio, a warm space surrounded by ample light and paintings.

It is here that she has dedicated an entire wall for a cause. A wall of paintings of hers and others to raise funds to help those needing medicines. It is a cause that she wants to engage in collectively by inviting fellow artists who would care to join her endeavor by displaying their paintings on this “wall for a cause”. It is in this room that Nisansala dedicates her time to art therapy classes. She aims to reach out to a broad spectrum of individuals, irrespective of age, to help them cope with life’s vicissitudes. Often life’s workload disallows individuals from engaging in hands-on creativity, which allows them to fuse thoughts with physical strokes, creating an energy that helps overcome one’s limitations. She conducts art therapy sittings in her studio space according to demand and her schedule. It is not confined by time but makes it a time spent in boundless engagement with a small group of individuals. It is a non-invasive mode of ensuring mental wellbeing, a little escape into solace. It is also a way of helping individuals grapple with life’s challenges to express their thoughts, guided to express their ideas through art that they would not openly communicate. She wants to make it a time to unwind one’s thoughts on paper and feel the surroundings, help them put their weight down, and open their minds to healing. Art therapy sessions could be organized by prior appointment, as a group or individually.

A keen collector of artworks, Nisansala has dedicated part of her gallery, an entire room, to showcase the works of the doyens of Sri Lanka’s art world. Named the “Collectors Art Gallery”, it contains some invaluable works by the likes of George Keyt, Manjushri, Justin Deraniyagala, Ivan Peiris, Donald Ramanayake, Somabandu Vidyapathi, Richard Gabriel and S Doraisamy, works that will remain in the public domain and preserved for posterity.

As Nisansala looks forward to pursuing her triple agenda through Casa Serena, she hopes it will shed light on artists’ immense role in helping people heal. She and her husband are managing two hospices in Anuradhapura and Matara for adults and children with cancer, and they bear testament to the power of art in expressing thoughts and feelings, bringing joy and healing in despair. Her gallery studio in Colombo offers the same solace to anyone looking to showcase their work, improve their skills as artists, and take refuge in the healing power of painting.

Casa Serena

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Nisansala interpreting her ideas and emotions with aesthetic flair.



Patches of color on canvas stand on an easel in the studio - a painting by Nisansala.



A watercolor painting of buildings.



The Collectors Art Gallery holding some invaluable paintings by Sri Lanka's masters of art.



A painting of Nisansala's husband, a physician and an accomplished Ves dancer done by a Russian artist is displayed in her studio.