

Characteristically Sri Lanka

Posted on



Words Saskia Fernando

Just past Mirrissa town, through an inconspicuous gate, a windy road leads up a hill towards the concrete mansion that is the abode of artist Saskia Pintelon, formally known as Saskia Pringiers. We are shuffled straight into her studio, with a ceiling about 30 feet high and a mezzanine level running around above her work table, a fantastic place to look down onto works from, given their inherent new massive size. This is undoubtedly every artist's dream. Saskia Pintelon has lived in Sri Lanka with her husband and family since 1982. Her largest collection of work remains in the country and there are Pintelon pieces scattered throughout many of the local leading contemporary art collections. She has exhibited in Europe, and most recently Singapore. Here is a Belgian born and bred artist, who is a movement even by herself, in our Sri Lankan contemporary art scene.

My first encounter with my namesake was in 1987, a confusion over our names led to an introduction, a friendship and the collection of what is now the largest of her work. Pintelon's was the first exhibition to be shown at The Gallery Cafe. At the Saskia Fernando Gallery – the acting gallery of the artist – the old and new works of Pintelon are available throughout the year; but this double exhibition, running from January 26 to February 26, the first after many years, compromises with both galleries and it signifies two stages of an artist's life.

What is particularly intriguing about this double show of Pintelon's work, is the two series, which consist of work from 2004 to work completed in 2011. The evolution of the artist in this period is evident. Her series of faces, which were published in her Book of Faces in 2006, brought the artist 'face-to-face' with a culture that had become her own, and perhaps marked a complete embarkation on an emotional terrain. The portraiture so bold and central in the Faces series are constructed using extracts from the newspapers, and faces from old photographs collected from village photographers. They are painted on brown paper bags, and some on split tea packing bags, the print still remains on these bags – a raw simplicity that is characteristic in all of Pintelon's work. This artist sees a beauty in the simplest day-to-day objects of Sri Lankan life, earlier it was handwritten bills collaged on a painting, later the form of a pot made a regular appearance. The phrases written in cursive are extracts from the local newspaper and are recalled with a certain admiring humour not to be misinterpreted as condescending. This series also marks the last series of work on paper, it was after this that the artist made a transition to canvas. It is also around this time that Pintelon's surroundings changed from a home that was the beautiful old house of Ena de Silva in Alfred Place Colombo, to her Tadao Ando mansion in Mirissa, which has undoubtedly brought this artist to

this new extreme of abstract expressionism.

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Pintelon exhibited the first of this series in a solo show in Singapore in early 2006: levels of dark colours blended into one another, “these are the colours I see from my window, as the lagoon merges with the sea”, states the artist. This new series resembles her Monsoon series from the early 2000s, one piece of which belongs to the Lighthouse Hotel Collection and hangs behind it’s reception desk. The small figure running through the rain has disappeared but the composition with just a few hand-stitched words inflicts a turmoil of emotion. The process of shedding, for the artist – whether it be through her move or through the loss of figurativeness in her work – is ceremoniously shared in this series. As a follower of Saskia Pintelon you have then grown with her work, from questioning the oddly positioned figures as a seven year old to admiring the beauty of a Sri Lankan face to connecting emotionally as an adult with a series of work that erases everything you knew, leaving behind the naked emotion of a true contemporary artist. As the artist often states herself, in that nonchalant way, “I cannot exist without painting”, it is indeed a drug she passes around generously to us all.

Pintelon’s exhibitions will be on display at Paradise Road Galleries, and Saskia Fernando Gallery.

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