

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Encroached paddy fields. Parched earth. Abandoned ponds. Silenced beauty. Reminiscing a lost landscape, pondering the remnants of an abundant past in motionless ceramic sculptures tells the story of Asela Abeywardene's childhood, the transition and transformation from one milieu to another. Her exhibition 'Remnants' shows the artist's nostalgic reminiscence and apprehensiveness.



There is so much we hold dear in the recesses of our memories. Childhood encounters are the most vivid that stay rooted in our minds and help mold our worldview. In *Remnants*, ceramicist Asela Abeywardene carves out the beauty of a lost world, a lost past of her childhood, her ancestral land of four generations, which was her first canvass to the vastness of nature and the beauty of her surroundings. Through the years, she watched her land wither away; the unpretentious beauty of paddy fields, abundant home gardens, water bodies, and wildlife of her home was replaced by ostentatious urbanization's trappings. She expresses her lament in thirty ceramic sculptures; she displays sixteen at the Galle Fort Art

Gallery from November 2024 to April 2025.

Perfectly Imperfect

Asela is an extraordinary artist who hews beauty into imperfect carvings. There is potency in the depth of her work, and only a probing mind will stop to ponder and understand the artist's worldview. Influenced by Buddhist philosophy and Zen Buddhism, Asela is guided by the ethos of wabi-sabi. This Japanese aesthetic pronounces the triple concept of imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness, a philosophy that trains the mind to see the beauty in impermanent things. It calls for a lifestyle that embraces authenticity, through which one discovers the most authentic inner self. Thus, Asela's work in 'Remnants' captures emotions carved into organic forms, objects shaped as bowls, cylinders, and vases wrought in imperfect visages that only the individual with a deep seeking for meaning will relate with the artist's focus. What is unmistakably evident in her work is the outstanding beauty in the imperfection, resonating with the perpetual message that nothing is perfect; in fact, perfection is an impossible reality. Then what can one do but train oneself to witness the beauty manifesting itself in the imperfect, the humble, and the modest things in life, of seeing its internal essence from the outside?

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Her collection reflects village wells, ponds, and water puddles.



Artist Asela Abeywardene.

Seeking Solace in Art

In marking a loss of the past, Asela is in part mourning the loss of familiar sights that were central to sociocultural cohesiveness and harmony, now reduced to remnants which she

remembers through her current exhibition, showing remnants of fast depleting natural resources, remnants of the connection to ancestral wisdom and values, and remnants of memories. Asela belongs to the fourth generation of dwellers in Malabe, a suburban locality nearly seventeen kilometers from the heart of Colombo. Malabe is a symbol of the island's rapid urbanization. "My memories of Malabe as a child is of a village," said Asela, who remembers the wild cats and foxes and rare fauna and flora, the paddy fields, and small plantations of coconut and rubber which have diminished and disappeared with time, as more people moved to the area. Her ancestral land and its transformation symbolize the overall social change that the island was experiencing in the aftermath of a new economic system - open borders and markets. The suburbs were suddenly bursting with an energy that was once confined to the capital. The country's august house, the Parliament, shifted to the suburbs and so began extensive road constructions, making inroads into once quaint Malabe, whose agrarian identity was slowly being erased as the land began to be cleared and sold as separate plots, and so sprung vibrant neighborhoods, palatial houses and luxury cars and educational institutions. For Asela, the transformation was harsh. A transformation that affected her identity. A transformation that not only altered social relationships but also changed the way of life practiced by generations of people.

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Using ceramic, the artist creates organic forms such as cylinders and vases.

Asela, the ceramicist, works primarily with ceramic clay, which she describes as versatile, its affiliation to the natural elements of earth, air, fire, and water, allowing her to dabble in her preferred artistic expression of humble simplicity in perfectly imperfect tactile expressions. Thus, Asela stands out as an artist who transcends the everyday use of ceramic clay to produce functional and decorative ware to its use as a medium for artistic expression. However, the abstract nature of her concept challenged its expression in ceramics. She ingeniously finds expression in using organic forms such as bowls, cylinders, and vases over figurative sculpture to express her idea, making a powerful statement of change, loss, and depletion, loss of affinity to the familiar landscape and social relationships. The village wells, ponds, and water puddles are shown through these basic structures, experimenting with glass as a representation of water on ceramic. This profuse natural resource decorated the locality in myriad forms. Interestingly, as a ceramicist, Asela had been dabbling with the idea of experimenting with glass, mixing the two mediums in sculpture since her last exhibition in 2017, and through Remnants, she achieved her purpose. However, she refuses to be confined to a specific style.

Finding her Calling

Asela loved nature, and her village helped her appreciate its wonders. She was passionate about art as well. However, school life was the least supportive of her ambitions. It was much later in life, after working in the corporate sector and becoming a parent, that she pursued her passion. From a degree in liberal arts to studying art under Professor Sarath Chandrajeewa to enrolling in a painting class, Asela finally had the chance to pursue what she loved. But she found painting too rigid and boring; it was not her space to dwell in. Asela pursued the ideal fit, immersing herself in something that would quench her desire for learning and perfect expression. But if it was meaningless, she would leave it behind

and seek anew, and eventually, she found her calling in ceramics. Thus, she began her journey in ceramic sculpting, studying under two ceramic teachers, Michael Rice from Northern Ireland, who taught her pottery on the wheel, and Katerina Smoldyreva from Russia, who taught sculpture. Asela creates contemporary art pieces by hand and the pottery wheel, manipulating the basic shapes to obtain abstract forms that convey her thoughts. However, she confesses that she doesn't control the form too much, instead guiding the clay to take its own shape and infusing it with surface décor to create artistic

In Pursuit of her Artistic Ideals

depictions as pure abstract interpretations, a combination of distortions, exclusions, and exaggerations, a play between abstract and the real, producing impressionistic and unique sculptures. By allowing her perception to guide her hands, Asela reveals her conception of the world and an absorbing vitality of their own. Ultimately, her work harks back to her emphasis on imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness through her visionary eyes, creating abstractions as underlying reality, delivering their greater meaning from the evidence. One can only deduce that Asela speaks to the world through her work, expressing her pain and letting anyone with eyes learn.

Till April 2025

Galle Fort Art Gallery.