KALĀ: Celebrating Art Meaningfully

Posted on

It is a much-needed art renaissance for our times. And the month-long line-up of programs isn’t disappointing. KALĀ embarks on its inaugural journey as an ambitious collaborative project with the Lionel Wendt Art Center. A project with a long-term vision, KALĀ is the newest educational and artistic platform for showcasing modern and contemporary art of South Asia and is looking to grow into an annual festival of art-centered events and exhibitions where collaborations with practitioners, representatives, and institutions in the region will establish it as a relevant and enduring initiative that builds bridges across generations and geographies.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



A creative work by H A Karunaratne, 2019.

In a coming together of Sri Lanka’s famous old masters’ artworks and their younger peers, KALĀ is creating a coalition of ideas and imaginations spanning two centuries and generations, creating one of the most diverse art exhibitions and platforms for conversations in Sri Lanka. In a commingling of legends and their genius and artistic descendants of post-independence, KALĀ reawakens the human psyche to the surreal world of breathtaking, arousing, sublime, and wacky visual expressions, the provocateur extraordinaire, from then and now, both influenced by the visual bounty of the mind and the environment.

KALĀ, a word derived from Sanskrit, aptly describes the platform’s range and enormity because the term encompassed 64 traditional arts, more than only painting in ancient India. Hence, KALĀ is a meticulously crafted program that runs till February 25, 2024. It began with an exhibition of 19 artists and their works under the title Pivot Glide Echo, curated by KALĀ Assistant Curator Mariyam Begum under the guidance of KALĀ Curatorial Advisor Sandhini Poddar, Adjunct Curator at Large of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

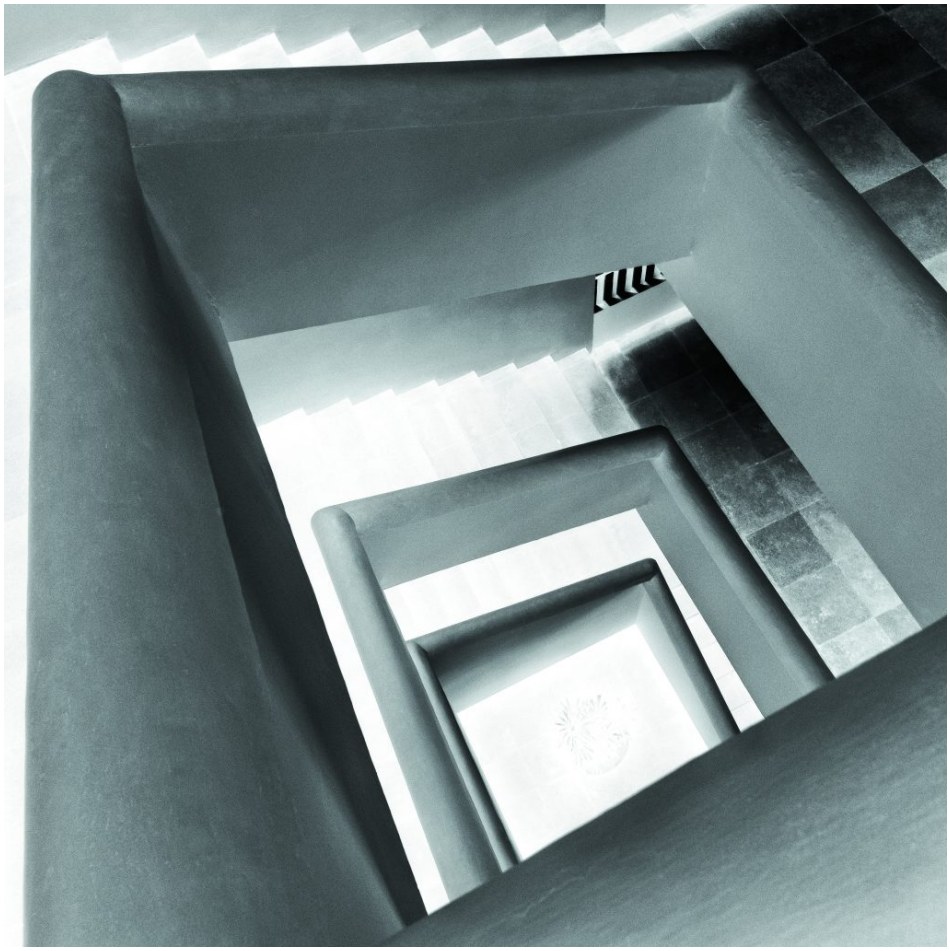
The diverse line-up of creative projects includes talks headlined by artists on artists, on artistic movements, women artists, spaces as preserves of art, on architecture, photography, and contemporary Sri Lankan art, on pioneering performance work by progressive Sri Lankan dramatists who broke the mold, and art funding and development. There will be twelve workshops with a cap on the number of attendees, billed as interactive with artist portfolio reviews, storytelling, and painting, digital drawing, found material and nature drawing workshops, and a children’s painting and clay molding workshop. There will be a screening of the 1934 documentary The Song of Ceylon, narrated by Lionel Wendt, and the more recent documentary on Sri Lanka’s Aragalaya movement, an anatomy of its many stages, evolving intensity, and culmination.



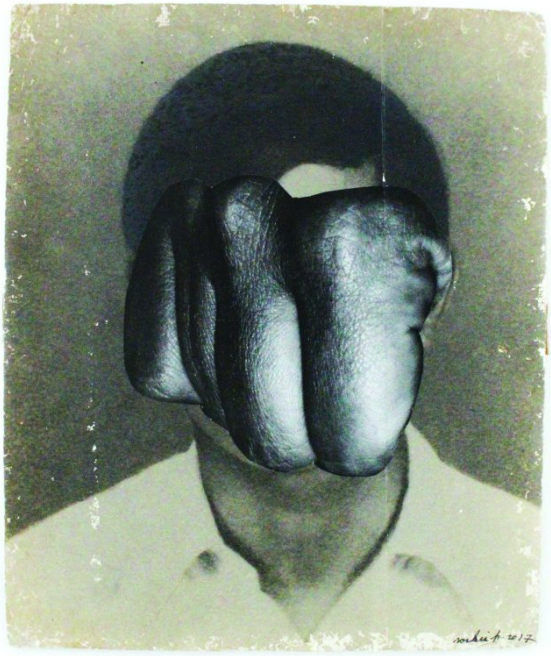
Lionel Wendt Art Centre.



A painting by Ivan Pieris.



Blue Water by Sebastian Posingis (© Sebastian Posingis).



Nobody is Perfect II by Saskia Pintelon.



CUDDLE V by Mahen Perera.



Longing for Love by Vasantha Yogananthan (© Vasantha Yogananthan and Jhaveri Contemporary).



Mixed media art by Rupaneethan Pakkiyarajah (© Saskia Fernando Gallery).

KALĀ Artist Tables offers intimately curated dinner meetings with three contemporary Sri Lankan artists, Chandragupta Thenuwara in conversation with his gallerist Saskia Fernando, Jagath Weerasinghe with curator Mariyam Begum at Koluu's Private Residencies, and Jagath Ravindra at Paradise Road Tintagel in conversation with curator Mariyam Begum. This packed calendar of events will be an exhilarating tour that embraces many genres of the art world and delves into the works of Sri Lanka's most famous artists, then and now, in the most interactive sessions. Whether purposeful or accidental, KALĀ begins its journey at the Lionel Wendt Art Centre, the venue on which once stood Wendt's residence Alborada, which became a creative citadel for the '43 Group, the founding place for the Group who were made up of radical painters of the day. At the center of this Group was Wendt and his friends George Claessen, George Keyt, Geoffrey Beling, Justin Deraniyagala, Ivan Peries, and L T P Manjusri, and other renowned artists of the day, men with panache – a tad quirky that awed the public but it was they who brought a cultural shift in Sri Lanka's art history. Wendt was an ardent supporter who organized controversial exhibitions of paintings of some of these old masters, sometimes provocative and edgy, much to the chagrin of conservatives. However, Wendt is celebrated for his photography, excellent visual record of everyday life in the villages and urban areas, landscapes, ancient ruins and temples, traditional crafts, and colonial architecture. By using various techniques to capture his wide-ranging subject matter, Wendt revealed his technical competence and flawless production. His studio nudes of men and women are legendary. Collectively, these men had embraced an audacious ethos to their work, a passion led by a rebelliousness that spurred some of the most visually exciting and stimulating works of art. They dictated new artistic styles and new artistic values. One could say their impact was immeasurable. And it is the same sense of fearless expression that the younger generation of artists after them have pursued, eccentric and imaginative works inspired by a wide range of sources. KALĀ, therefore, is an ode to these artists of many generations and their transcending influence on creative daring and trends.

The exhibition segment at the Lionel Wendt Gallery was a tremendous sensorial treat into an enormous universe of creative statements influenced by nature, religion, mythology, idealism, activism, visual expressions of individual perspectives and experiences, from defiant departures and disruptive journeys that challenge the

norm. But it had a greater purpose – evoking “a conversation on the limitations and possibilities across generations of artistic practice”. Indeed, it was, starting with the catalyst himself, Lionel Wendt, the champion of change in the halcyon creative landscape of conservative colonial Ceylon.

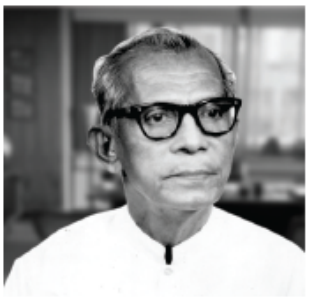
He was in the company of his beloved ‘43 Group friends. From George Keyt’s cubism-inspired paintings and the unmissable nudes to George Claessen’s expressive content through abstraction, Manjusri’s fusion of Kandyan and modern art, his dedication to preserving the country’s artistic heritage, to Ivan Peries’s idealized forms, the works of these men are the preserve of an era that broke the shackles and stirred the conventional Ceylonese art establishment. Later artists, such as H A Karunaratne, offered their fair share of trailblazing work in Sri Lanka’s abstract tradition, his hallmark being the fusion of Eastern spiritualism with Western innovation. Other modern abstractionists like Muhanned Cader offer disorienting and de-familiarizing landscapes outside conventional shapes. Saskia Pintelon makes melodramatic and expressive constructs, while the cryptic annunciations of Kingsley Gunatilake are thought-provoking. Anoli Perera’s activism in painting, sculpture, and installation is challenging. Rupaneethan Pakkiyarajah creates symbolic forms from natural and discovered items. Then there are the young disruptors, the artists of today, multidisciplinary artists like Raki Nikahetiya, Kavan Balasuriya, and Mahen Perera, whose works are explorative, dramatic, radical, and riotous, to digital artist Muvindu Binoy exploring gender, agency, tradition, and societal expectations amid ever-evolving digital landscapes to diasporic works of photographers Liz Fernando, Vasantha Yoganathan, and Cassie Machado exploring complex ideas that they grapple with as artists with Sri Lankan roots. German architectural photographer, Sebastian Posingis’s allure with experiencing buildings, extends broadly to Geoffrey Bawa’s designs, where he focuses on capturing their beauty in all their naturalness. Because of its immensity, the Pivot Glide Echo segment was a visual treat to endure and relish. It was a deep engagement into the world of individual artists and their thoughts and emotions. A cascade of art evolving in over eighty years. With its well-curated, stimulating, and engaging program line-up and diverse participation from and outside Sri Lanka, KALĀ is poised to grow and incite broader input by creating a community to celebrate art meaningfully.

Till February 25, 2024

Lionel Wendt Art Centre, Colombo 7



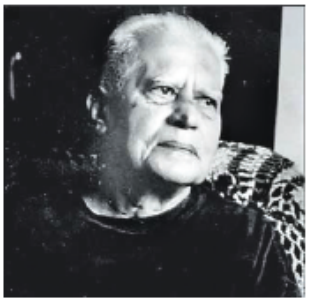
George Keyt.



L T P Manjusri.



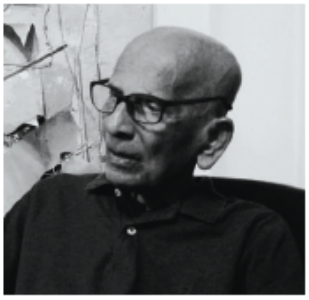
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