

Layers of Life

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The library is one of her favourite places. Literature is also a passion

An artist who believes that “the only value art has is what it does to your heart and soul”, Anoma Wijewardene transcends the norm.

Words Daleena Samara | **Photographs** Rasika Surasena



Anoma Wijewardene, Sri Lanka's global artist

Anoma Wijewardene's home gallery in Colombo is pure delight; a tropical oasis curtained by high walls. After a quick chat, you realise that like her art, this place too is enigmatic; behind the restrained colours, large open rooms and quiet enclosed spaces is a multi-layered fusion of past and present. Fragments of family history linger in door and window frames, and the gateposts embedded in a garden wall. To dive into this place would be to find a story.

Anoma is a Sri Lankan contemporary artist with a global name. Her powerful and distinct lyrical expressionism, a form of subtle visual activism employing the interplay of colours, textures, imagery and media, has created waves worldwide. Her works are deep and profound explorations of issues that concern her: the interface between man and society, man and nature, and the inner and outer world. Anoma's home gallery exhibits not a retrospective of a rich body of work spanning decades, but more current pieces, from 2009 onwards. The rest are in public and private collections across continents. While most of the exhibits here are mixed media paintings on paper or canvas, she's also known for cutting-edge digital art, video works and installations. Her exhibit "Quest" at the National Art Gallery in 2006 was Sri Lanka's pioneering digital art exhibition.

Although of Sri Lankan birth, she spent most of her life overseas. "I left Sri Lanka when I was 16 to go to school in India, returned and went to art college in England, then lived in England. But coming back on holiday and, eventually, to live here (in 1993) was a sort of rediscovery — having the time to explore the country again and to engage in it," she says.

London was home for decades after she graduated a designer with First Class Honours and MA from Central St Martin's College, the University of the Arts, London. Her first ever work was created while she was still following her MA, which made the cover of British Vogue, and she designed for luxury brands such as Pierre Cardin, Yves Saint Lauren, Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. Then, yielding to inner yearning, she gave it up for art.

That Anoma's art is cerebral is unsurprising. Her father, respected scientist and polymath Ray Wijewardene, a name linked to agriculture, aviation, engineering design and renewable energy technologies among other things, was a key inspiration. He too was an artist. Her literati upbringing gave her direction. Poetry, prose and music fuel her art: a speech by Arundati Roy inspired "Quest", German poet Raina Maria Rilke titles her works, and Sri Lankan poet Ramya Chamalie Jirasinghe pens poetry for her. The lovely library upstairs is a retreat.

Leaving design was an impractical eventuality. "With design it is a market place you know you have to produce, and you know you will get paid, but with art it's different," she says. "The only value art has is what it does to your heart and soul. It has no other purpose whatsoever. You can't eat it, you can't wear it, but man has always needed it because otherwise, you wouldn't have the cave paintings."

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In the past 20 years, she has shown in over 40 exhibitions worldwide. In June, she showed three works themed on love at the Affordable Art Fair in London. They demonstrated poetically the regenerative qualities of maternal love. We first met at the art auction powerhouse Sotheby's Gallery in Hong Kong, where only the most exclusive of artists are shown. In April this year Anoma was one of 15 artists handpicked as the sole representative of South Asia for the "One Belt, One Road Visual Arts Exhibition 2016" presented by the Hong Kong Federation of Women at the venue. "One Belt, One Road" showcased 15 women artists representing different countries including Portugal, Taiwan, Macau, France, Italy, Iran, Kazakhstan to Malaysia and Russia. It included Japan's iconic avante garde artist Kusama Yayoi, ranked the most popular artist in the world in 2014 by museum attendance.



Creating art using various hues in her spacious studio

Exhibition curator Pansy Ho wrote: 'The selected artists were chosen for their artistic talent, their passion for their own cultural identity, as well as their belief that through their art, generations of younger women will find the courage to express themselves. That is an expression of culture that unites and strengthens all people'. Sri Lanka was the only country selected from South Asia.

Anoma's exhibit "Earth Rise Within Us", a visually sublime yet provocative installation of suspended panels of digital art transparencies of landscapes and geological formations, invited viewers to engage and interact with it. In the separate panels was the idea of different aspects of nature coming together to make a whole. Visitors became part of the work by walking into the spaces between them.

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By viewing the display from different perspectives, they saw its varied aspects and witnessed how their own presence and actions altered the colours, patterns and mood. A strong work, it showed how man changes nature and vice versa, and how they belong together.

"The abstract mix of layering and fusion of colours and images are especially evocative and effective as rendered on plastered surfaces, reflective of man's interaction with nature and strongly inviting the viewer to respond," remarked Hong Kong celebrity designer Kai-yin Lo, of Earth Rising within Us. Kai-yin Lo who is on the board of numerous prestigious art bodies including M+, Hong Kong's swank new museum of contemporary art, and Tate Modern in London, purchased the exhibit at the end of the exhibition.

D H Lawrence said: "The essential function of art is moral. But a passionate, implicit morality, not didactic. A morality that changes the blood, rather than the mind." That is an apt description of Anoma's rich contribution not just to art but humanity. "I just want to get under your skin, but ever so subtly and gently," Anoma says. "I am not giving answers; just asking questions. These are questions that concern me ... that's really all there is to it. The concern is emotional more than intellectual and maybe that's why it resonates with you. If we don't feel it deeply and if it's not from the heart, it will not work."

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