Ranjith Perera

Posted on

An Archivist of Sri Lankan Life

Artist Ranjith Perera at work in his studio.

Ranjith Perera describes himself as a narrative realist, painting people and places as he sees and remembers them, with memory serving as a powerful source of inspiration for his art.

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Ranjith Perera’s paintings often portray ordinary people with great dignity and intimacy. His depiction of places in Sri Lanka, often historical, is a visual tapestry of stories, stories of ordinary lives, and stories that he imagined into his canvases. Thus, Ranjith draws many of his subjects from everyday encounters, often depicting people he meets by chance – the man hired to pick coconuts in his garden, the gypsy offering to predict the future for a quick buck, the person begging at a traffic light, the snake charmer, or the Tamil laborer.

Horton Place in the 1950s recalls Ranjith’s daily journey to school, with his friend Tony Harridge’s father’s car evoking memories of the commute.

There is authenticity in their appearance that draws Ranjith to them as subjects. Betel-stained teeth, unkempt hair, an unassuming demeanor, and little concern for attire reflect the realities of their daily lives and hard-earned existence. Yet, in these

faces, Ranjith sees stories waiting to be told. Through his paintings, he captures the dignity of ordinary life. Many of those who live on the fringes of society fascinate him because, as he sees it, they have stories to tell. Ranjith's amiable nature and ease in conversation allow him to connect with them, and they often become willing muses for his paintings. "I get a lot of satisfaction meeting these people because they are not the people that you would associate with under ordinary circumstances," explains Ranjith. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Ranjith's work is his larger canvas of Sri Lanka's disappearing way of life. When he paints a historical building, he does more than capture its physical form; he tells the story of the place and the people who once surrounded it. It is this quality that has led to his being described as a "visual chronicler."

The old Eye Hospital showcases beautiful architecture while weaving intriguing stories of life beyond its walls, including a Bhaiya, an Afghan-origin moneylender, waiting outside for his debtors.

Ranjith first captures the structure and its immediate surroundings before weaving in the stories of the people who inhabited those places. Each frame brings together

multiple narratives, some drawn from his own memories. His painting of 1950s Horton Place, for instance, features a vintage car that recalls how his friend Tony Harridge would give him a lift to school in his father's car. His memories of Colombo are also filled with rickshaws and buggies that once crowded its streets. Ranjith often paints these places from memory, drawing on what he saw as a schoolboy traveling along the streets of Ranjith has created many such works against the backdrop of historic places, taking delight in turning each canvas into a collection of stories.

The entrance to Galle Fort in the early 1900s, brought to life through artist Ranjith Perera's inimitable imagination.

His painting of the early 1900s, Galle Fort, is another favorite. He researched the people, objects, and details of the era, bringing together elements that reflect life in the Fort at the time – people on the streets, rickshaws, a British bureaucrat, and a sign indicating the then speed limit of 25 miles per hour. Most notably, the Dutch-built Fort retains its heritage through the emblem at its entrance, bearing both Dutch and English insignia.

A painting of Kandy’s Temple of the Tooth Relic captures the religious rituals and social hierarchies of a bygone era.

For Ranjith, the stories are often found in the smallest details. Ranjith’s painting of the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, set in the early 1900s, brings together architecture, people, attire, and ceremony to create a rich visual chronicle of a bygone way of life. His storytelling is informed by the many history books he collects, complemented by extensive online research.

The Battle of Balana, which captures the island’s history, is still a work in progress.

The scene features people in the foreground of the Temple: an aristocrat being carried in a palanquin, alongside a Nilame, an Adhikaram being worshipped by commoners, two local drummers, men blowing a wind instrument, and a monk. Particular attention has been paid to the attire of everyone, from aristocrats and officials to local drummers and palanquin bearers from South India.

Each detail reflects the social hierarchy of the period, underscoring Ranjith’s meticulous effort to bring historical authenticity to his work. The Dutch-period Wolvendaal Church is more than a 17th-century monument in Pettah, as Ranjith reveals through his painting. As with his other historical works, extensive research informed the scene.

He discovered that the name Wolvendaal was derived from the area’s association with wolves, while the Kaiman’s Gate, or Kaiman Dorakada, still stands nearby. His painting imagines the life surrounding the church: the bell calling people to worship, British women in lace gowns hurrying to service, and lingering afterward for conversation. Ranjith’s delight lies in uncovering such details and adding his own narrative to the building’s history, rather than simply reproducing it.

A spark of color to a peacock that visited Ranjith’s garden.

Ranjith’s latest project, the 1603 Battle of Balana, is a work in progress. It depicts a brutal episode in Sri Lanka’s colonial history, when the Portuguese attempted to capture the Hill Country. Although the Portuguese had sophisticated weaponry, the local forces knew the terrain and relied on their own tactics to repel the advancing troops. Ranjith has recreated three villages from memory, with the famed Bible Rock rising prominently in the distance.

The scene captures the chaos of battle – Portuguese troops accompanied by African Kaffirs and Lascarins, local mercenaries, advancing through dust and blood as villagers hurl rocks at them. Adding a personal dimension, Ranjith has positioned himself beneath a distant tree, observing the battle unfold. He has quite literally inserted himself into history, contemplating an event from centuries ago.

Ranjith’s next project takes him to a 1920s Sri Lankan wedding during the British period. He has delved into historical records to recreate how British guests and Sinhala women dressed and how weddings were celebrated at the time. Gathering the details has been no easy task, but once completed, the painting will offer another glimpse into the past through art – from the attire and conversations to the music and merriment of a bygone wedding.

Ranjith’s repertoire is extensive. He continues to paint daily, in the morning and evening, drawing inspiration from his love of wildlife, with the leopard as his favorite. From his studio overlooking the garden, he observes peacocks, parrots, migratory birds, and even snakes, which find their way onto his canvases, often with a touch of imagination and a rich color palette. His work also encompasses flowers, temple door handles, murals, vendors, lace makers, and village scenes. These subjects reflect both his childhood memories and the scenes he continues to encounter while traveling across the country.

Ranjith remains grateful to his mentor, Nadine David. After a career in the rubber industry and an early retirement, he studied under Nadine to further develop his skills. Her guidance helped shape him into an accomplished painter, while her encouragement led him to hold his first solo exhibition in 2001. And so, Ranjith’s journey continues. Drawing from his memories of people, places, and attire, he transforms the details of a bygone era into paintings that preserve Sri Lanka’s history and heritage. In doing so, his work becomes a visual archive of a rich past, ensuring that its stories endure on canvas.

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A hive of activity outside the Kelaniya Rajamaha Viharaya, its historic entrance and stupa rising
grandly in the background.