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Archiving the Margins: Art, Memory, and Resistance at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT This chapter examines the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka as a site of memory based on its inaugural exhibition, *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales*. It explores the intricate relationship between art and memory, how artworks invoke memory, and analyses how the exhibited artworks perform memory and work as a form of resistance. This investigation delves into the ways artworks embody and communicate historical and personal narratives, positioning the MMCA as a significant cultural institution in the preservation and articulation of collective memory.

KEYWORDS agency, commemorative practices, MMCA, site of memory, solidarities

Introduction

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) is the first museum in Sri Lanka dedicated to modern and contemporary art. Established in 2019, the museum was first located on the seventeenth floor of the Colombo Innovation Tower and later found a place in the heart of Colombo—on Crescat Boulevard. The MMCA, though an art museum, writes history and preserves memory. As the website of this museum indicates, it has been conceptualised as a public museum in Sri Lanka to commemorate and conserve Sri Lankan art forms (MMCA 2022). The emergence of this museum at a time when public memorials and commemoration are banned is a significant milestone. Curated by Sharmini Pereira, the first exhibition and show was named *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* (19 December 2019–16 August 2020) and comprised four galleries holding 115 artworks by

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45 artists of diverse backgrounds and cultural influences. This chapter is based on this exhibition. The title of the exhibition signifies the role of artworks and how they tell us different stories. The stories that we associate with artworks depend on our socio-political backgrounds and the baggage that we carry with us. This exhibition raises the following questions: "How do artworks tell stories? What stories do they not tell? Can the same story be told in different ways?" (MMCA 2022). The artworks on display portray stories of memory, remembrance, war, violence, suffering, celebration, and various other human emotions.

The entrance of the museum displays a poem by the writer Cheran Rudramoorthy. The poem portrays how a "bridge, strengthened by its burden of a hundred thousand tales, collapses within a single tear" (MMCA 2022). This poem has been translated and displayed in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. The bridge that the poem portrays symbolises the power of collective stories, the need to reiterate the telling and retelling of stories, and how this process leads to the retelling of memories. It is noteworthy how each gallery has been named. Gallery 1 is named "Survey, Country, Home / Land." The artworks on display in this gallery are based on landscape and the idea of home and country. The linguistic choice to write home/land as two distinct words is commendable. For many in Sri Lanka, a homeland does not exist; it was shattered by the war. Gallery 2 is named "Gaze, Self, Portraits," and the artworks in this section are mainly photographs and recorded performances. Gallery 3, titled "Landscape / Landscapes, Territory," reflects artworks based on the idea of landscape and marked territories. Gallery 4 is named "Mourning, Loss and Belief," and this gallery houses Sri Lankan artworks on the civil war.

The emergence of the MMCA is crucial because it has given a voice to the silenced history and memory of the Sri Lankan civil war. It has provided a space for victimised communities to share and connect with their repressed memories. Andermann and Arnold-de Simine illustrate the role museums play in this regard:

> By giving a voice to what has been left out of the dominant discourses of history, diversified and sometimes even compatible narratives have supposedly been granted a place in the museum that seems no longer to aspire to any totalizing synthesis (2012, 4).

The MMCA's positionality in Sri Lanka comes into play at this point, and it is of particular interest to this chapter. Though the MMCA is an art museum, the exhibits of various types it holds give voice to a history that has been left out of the dominant narrative produced by the Sri Lankan state. The MMCA, as an independent museum, contributes to a new identity for the silenced, repressed memories of the dead and the victims of the civil war.

Art and Memory

Art and memory are interconnected, because art is a powerful medium that captures the materiality of memory. The evocative nature of artwork not only portrays the multimodality of memory but creates a lasting impression in the minds of the audience. Because of its visual appeal, the viewers or visitors also identify their own memories and emotions through the artwork. Artworks mediate memory materially, and the materiality of memory in the artworks brings out the narratives of the victims. According to Muntean et al., "memory is performed, mediated and stored through the material world that surrounds us" (2019, 22). It is this mnemonic practice that will be discussed in detail in the next section through the selected artworks. Monuments were considered one of the earliest sources of the material forms of memory. As the field of memory studies came to encompass multimodalities, memory scholars were also interested in artworks as memory objects. This chapter attempts to answer the relationship between artworks and memory, and how artworks and art practices depict and perform memories. Eakin notes that "memory bridges the gap between the lived past and the imagined future" (in Plate and Smelik 2015, 2). This chapter argues that it is the artworks and the memory artefacts displayed at the MMCA that bridge the gap between the present and the violent past of Sri Lanka. The multidirectionality and the multimodality of memory enable the emergence of artistic practices which capture the nuances of memory. A visual artwork can speak volumes compared to a written form. It is this appealing nature of visuality that powerfully depicts violent and traumatic memories. It is noteworthy how the memory practices have transformed over the years. As Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik have pointed out, Michael Rothberg has summarised this transformation

> by speaking of a shift "from lieux de memoire to noeuds de memoire," coining a new term to designate the "knots" of memory at the intersection of memories and legacies of genocide, colonialism, and slavery today and to "capture the dynamism inherent in remembering—what we call memory's "multidirectionality." (2013, 13)

The MMCA, in this context, is a *lieu de memoire* as well as a *noeud de memoire* that bridges the knots between the repressed and violent memories of the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. Each artwork on display presents multifaceted narratives of the victims, while some of them are testimonies of their first-hand experiences. Through the different narrative strategies, the artworks mediate, store, and transmit memories. The MMCA, an art

museum, serves as a storehouse of artworks that depict the collective memories and the collective trauma of the marginalised.

The MMCA: Resistance through Art

The following section presents a critical analysis of selected artworks from the exhibition *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales*. By engaging in a close reading of each artefact, this section demonstrates how resistance is portrayed through the artworks and reflects on the transmission of memory and the role of memory artefacts in a post-war nation.

"Cabinet of Resistance No 2" (2016)

This artwork was designed by the artist Shanaathanan. It "utilizes and transforms the card index bureau. An administrative archival system, originally designed to collate scientific data in the 18th century. This bureau was later adopted by libraries and museums, along with state bureaucracy for filing purposes" (MMCA 2022). Crane refers to curiosity cabinets in her theorisation of museum and memory as follows:

> The phenomenon of the curiosity cabinet in Europe dates at least from the Renaissance. While elaborately decorated, portable, or cabinets, might house a special collection of valuables, the curiosity cabinet was a larger, immobile entity characterized by an interest in displaying a wide variety of natural and man-made objects in one place—the plenitude of the world represented in the microcosm of a single room or space. (2000, 67)

Utilising an archival system originally designed for a special collection, the artist employs a unique approach in capturing the real-life testimonies of thirty individuals within thirty cabins of a wooden structure, aptly named the "Cabinet of Resistance." This title encapsulates the spirit of resistance and resilience that defines the narratives of those who endured the ravages of war. Each cabin within this installation unveils the poignant testimonies of possessions carried by individuals during their migrations and exoduses within the country. The "Artist" cabin, for instance, recounts the migration journey of the artist Vijitharan's family who, being farmers, carried their cherished hoe. This testimony draws a compelling parallel between the utilitarian use of a hoe for cultivation and nourishment and its poignant transformation into a tool for burying the dead. The farmers' most treasured possession thus became a vessel for both life and death, embodying the complexities of their wartime experiences. The cabin dedicated to "Sandbags"

unfolds the crucial role played by these protective barriers in war-torn areas. While sandbags were indispensable for shielding against shelling and bombing, the testimonies reveal a poignant choice: individuals opted to carry their most cherished possessions instead of the practical but cumbersome sandbags. This deliberate decision underscores the deep emotional connection people maintained with their personal belongings, even in the face of wartime adversity. Throughout the artwork, the artist captures the profound impact of war on individuals' lives, narrating stories of resilience, sacrifice, and an enduring human spirit. The "Cabinet of Resistance" becomes a living testament to the multifaceted experiences of those who navigated the tumultuous landscapes of conflict, preserving the narratives of survival and the intrinsic value of cherished possessions amid the chaos of war.

The bridal saree stands as a cherished and symbolic possession among married Tamil women, carrying immense sentimental value. When a married Tamil woman passes away, the significance of this cultural tradition is evident as her bridal saree is respectfully adorned on her body, accompanying her to her final resting place through burial or cremation. This ritual not only reflects the deep emotional connection to the saree but also underscores its role as an enduring symbol of a woman's life journey. The sentimental value attached to the bridal saree extends through generations, as daughters often choose to don their mothers' bridal sarees at their own weddings. This tradition not only pays homage to familial bonds but also signifies the continuation of cherished memories and the passage of tradition from one generation to the next. However, the artwork delves into the poignant choice faced by women who, despite the sentimental value and memories associated with their bridal sarees, find themselves compelled to sell these precious garments. The act of selling the bridal saree becomes an expression of sacrifice for the well-being and protection of their families, emphasising the resilience and selflessness embedded in the narratives of these women. Within the "Jewelry Safe" cabin, the artwork narrates the practice of carrying photographs instead of jewellery. In a departure from conventional valuables, these families chose to safeguard the remnants of their cherished memories in the form of photographs. This deliberate decision reflects an understanding of the enduring power of visual memories to transcend material possessions. The cabin becomes a repository of stories, where the intrinsic value of photographs is elevated above traditional notions of wealth, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of families in the face of challenges.

> When the Sri Lankan Army started their operation to re-take land from under LTTE control we had to abandon our ancestral house due to the

> shelling. We carried the necessary amount of clothes; documents and photo albums with us but we did not know what to do with the jewelry. Carrying the jewelry with us presented a risk. So, we dug the earth closest to the well under the coconut palm and buried the jewelry before we left the house (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

This is the testimony of a woman who chose not to carry her jewellery and, instead, carried photographs and documents. This reiterates the memorial value of photographs and written records such as documents. The role of photographs in carrying familial memories is theorised by many scholars. Connerton points out that "photography is an 'inscriptive' (archival) memorial practice that retains an 'incorporative' (embodied) dimension: photographs give rise to certain bodily acts of looking" (in Hirsch 2013, 116). Connerton's argument validates the idea that family photographs facilitate the affiliative acts of the 'post' generation in understanding the inherited postmemory. Thus, family photographs can be considered a medium of postmemory. By carrying their photographs with them, this family preserves their memories for the next generation to be transmitted in the form of photographs.

The cabin named "Bunker" narrates the story of a schoolboy who was hiding in a bunker to escape from forceful conscription by the LTTE. Bunkers, or underground hideouts, were an indispensable feature for the people who lived in the north of Sri Lanka, which experienced war for three decades. People built bunkers in their houses to escape from shelling and bombing. Each house at least had one bunker. During the last phase of the war, the LTTE forcefully conscripted men and women from each household. To save their children from being conscripted, parents had built bunkers in the backyard and hidden their children:

> We had a bunker in our house to protect us from the air raids. My father created an inner cell within the bunker to hide me. It was a tiny dark place, with little air and full of insects. I spent the daytime in the bunker, and if I noticed strangers in the vicinity, I immediately moved to the inner cell. I had to hide inside my room. The later recruiters were more aggressive and desperate. They would forcefully enter the house by breaking doors and roofs. My parents, like other parents in their position, were helpless. My father buried a tar barrel in the ground and put me inside it. He covered the opening of the barrel with firewood. For the entire day, I stayed inside the barrel with fear. (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2")

The above testimony portrays the intensity of the war, and how it threatened the livelihoods of the people who lived in the war zones. It also demonstrates the physical as well as psychological trauma this boy has been through. Living in a bunker, not knowing what would happen to him,

must have been a traumatising experience. By reading this testimony, the visitors can visualise the traumatic experience of the narrator. This is a first-hand experience of a war victim, and this kind of narrative is not present in the larger war narratives authored by the state. By giving voice to this schoolboy through this artwork, the artist gives voice to the silenced victims of the war.

Another cabin, named "Jam Bottle," narrates the story of an individual who used jam bottles as kerosene lamps. During the 1990s, when the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka were severely affected by the war, there was no electricity. People resorted to alternative means; one of them was jam bottle lamps. These lamps were mostly used by students to study and to do other education-related work. This is one of the ways in which people who lived in the war-affected areas expressed their resilience against the state. The cabin named "Jam Bottle" narrates the story of a medical student who lived through the war in Jaffna, and how he made use of the jam bottle lamps:

> When Jaffna was under the control of Tamil rebels from 1990 to 1995, the Sri Lankan government imposed an embargo on all goods and services to the LTTE held areas. There was a shortage of fuel and no power supply. We passed the night using oil lamps; children had to manage to study with these lamps. To minimize the fuel consumption special lamps were made of jam bottles. Every household had these handmade lamps. When I was a medical student at the University of Jaffna, I had to manage to do my studies with these lamps. But the light produced by the lamp was not enough to see the full page of the big anatomy books. I kept the jam bottle lamp on the page of the book and moved it line by line to read the page (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

The above anecdote reveals how, even amidst difficulties students prioritised education and found ways to study. Reading with the help of light from a jam bottle lamp is an excruciating experience for the reader. However, the students had no other option but to continue using the jam bottle lamps. A visitor to the MMCA who reads this cabin can empathise with the experiences of the students. The present students who read this anecdote will understand how the students of the past generation survived in a war-ridden country. According to Plate and Smelik, "art and popular culture are dynamic processes that mediate memory through narrative strategies, visual and aural styles, intertextual references and intermedial relations and re-enactments and performances" (2015, 7). What we see here is a visual representation in the form of index cards that narrate the lived experiences of the victims of the war. These narratives also

transmit the memories of these victims. The individual testimony of this medical student not only transmits his individual memory but also serves as a collective witness to the generation that used the jam bottle lamps throughout most of their lives. Similar to this alternative mechanism, people used dynamos to connect to radio stations, as electricity or batteries were needed to operate the radio. Since essential items were banned and there were no telephone services, the people who lived in the affected areas were cut off from the rest of the country or the entire world. The narrator of this cabin says:

> There was no direct connection with the rest of the country and the world. We had no telephone services. We were dependent on the BBC, VERITAS and the All India Radio to listen to local and international news. But to operate the radio we needed batteries or electricity. In the middle of the town, a tea shop fixed a loudspeaker to listen to the BBC Tamil service at 9.45 pm. A large crowd assembled in front of the shop at 9.45 pm every day (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

This tea shop functioned as a communal space in which a community, long afflicted by decades of war and disconnected from international news, encountered a medium that gave them access to the rest of the world. This communal space is also a place where this community's collective identity is built.

The cabin named "Doctor" carries the testimony of Dr Punithan, who was one of the resident doctors during the last phase of the war. His testimonial is a witness to the human massacre. He states that there were severe shortages of medicines, and the patients were treated in makeshift hospitals. As people moved from a war-torn area to a slightly better area, the hospitals also moved—makeshift hospitals were built under the trees. An excerpt from his testimony is as follows:

> During the peak hours of the war, I worked 20 hours a day and looked after nearly 300 to 400 patients. Under normal conditions, a doctor would typically attend to a maximum of 17 patients per day. After performing an operation, our next medical challenge was to keep the patient safe from shelling and sniper attacks. So, we made bunkers under the trees and laid the patients on the sand. The number of injured patients drastically increased after 2008, with the advancement of the army but the number of doctors and number of supporting staff remained the same (Shanaathanan, "Cabinet of Resistance No 2").

Punithan's testimony is an eyewitness account of the resilience of the healthcare professionals who saved thousands of injured civilians.

Punithan could have left the war zones, too, but he chose to stay despite the imminent threat to his life. He is also one of the few doctors who shared their horrendous experiences after the end of the war. Many doctors who served in the war zones left the country after the war and refused to publicly share their experiences because of the possible threats it posed. It can be stated that within Shanaathanan's cabinet of resistance, an archive unfolds, chronicling narratives that embody unwavering resilience.

"This Is Not a White Flag VII" (2012)

This artwork was created by Chandraguptha Thenuwara using mixed media on board. It appears to be a white rectangle on which "this is not a white flag" is written in English, Sinhala, and Tamil. It is noteworthy that Thenuwara designed this immediately after the end of the civil war. Though this artwork appears to be a symbol of peace, it ironically questions the idea of peacebuilding and the failure of the Sri Lankan government in declaring peace when, in fact, people succumbed to the wounds of their traumatic memories of violence. "Thenuwara's work appears to ask if the image of a white flag is a deception—and, by extension, if peace is a falsehood" (MMCA 2022). This artwork questions the peace-building process in Sri Lanka. The state announced its victory over the LTTE, organised parades and victory monuments, and celebrated the victory rather than addressing the human rights violations that took place during the civil war. 'Peace' and 'reconciliation' are deceptive words in the post-war Sri Lankan landscape because the remnants of the war are still haunting the survivors, and victim narratives do not have any place in the state-sponsored war narratives. Thus, peace in Sri Lanka is a lost cause. According to Rothberg, "multidirectional memory reveals how the public articulation of collective memory by marginalized and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and justice" (2013, 40). In the same manner, this artwork speaks for the marginalised, and in so doing, posits questions pertaining to peace-building in Sri Lanka. Visitors who witness this artwork will navigate their way through the questions this artwork raises.

"Journey I" (2015) and "Journey II" (2015)

This artwork was made by Samvarthini based on her various journeys between Jaffna and Puttalam. It portrays a tin suitcase with a rotating mechanism and a map-like structure. Though it looks like a map, it does not contain any resemblance to real places or names. She uses outlines,

hatching marks, and blacked-out areas. Samvarthini's artwork evokes noticeable changes that occurred in the post-war landscape of Sri Lanka, especially in the cities of Jaffna, Mannar, Vauniya, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Puttalam, and Anuradhapura.

> Here districts are ominously reduced to outlines, hatching marks, and blacked-out areas. The presentation of these drawings in small tin suitcases with an improvised rotating mechanism plays with the idea of a place in transition. As these adapted suitcases make clear, these drawings also register a past in the process of being made obsolete. (MMCA 2022)

This chapter is interested in the word 'obsolete,' and it reads this artwork based on the idea of the systematic erasure of memories. The areas that this suitcase depicts are war-torn districts. By using an obsolete structure, this artwork questions how remnant memories in the form of physical structures are demolished through an emerging building boom. This is done systematically by the state to erase accountability, transitional justice, and the human rights violations that took place during the war. It is noteworthy that the areas that the artist marks are predominantly Tamil-speaking areas where the minority Tamils reside. These places underwent rapid changes soon after the end of the civil war. The name boards of the shops that bear any resemblance to the LTTE were replaced by new name boards. The LTTE, during their reign, followed a Tamil-only rule in the *de facto* Tamil state where the names of the roads, lanes and shops were given 'pure' Tamil names. However, the aftermath of the war saw a systematic erasure of these names as well as the demolishing of the buildings that were built by the LTTE. In doing so, the state erased the linguistic identity of the Tamils that the name boards and the places carried. Samvarthini's artwork can be interpreted as a response to the institutionally organised act of erasing the linguistic identity of the minorities in Sri Lanka. The artist chose not to name the places and created map-like structures. Placelessness in the artwork symbolises the plight of the victims whose narratives are placeless in the dominant narratives of Sri Lanka's civil war. Begona points out that "in its different dimensions of landscape, space or territory, place is overwhelmingly present in the minds and social interactions of people" (in Gray 1999, 193). Here, this artwork underlines the placelessness of the areas which lost their linguistic identity markers to an act of state-sanctioned erasure. The title of this artwork, "Journey," is significant because it portrays the repeated displacement of the people who lived in these areas. During the intense civil war, they would migrate to temporary shelters and return to their villages when the situation returned to normalcy. The lives of these people were constantly on the move—travelling

to find temporary refuges and returning when the situation improved. This artwork tells us the stories of the arduous journeys of the people who lived in the war zones, and highlights placelessness.

"War Text" (2002)

This artwork was created by Kingsley Gunatilaka. It depicts an open book, and within the open pages toy soldiers are perched facing another group of soldiers. Using an old book and toy soldiers as props, Gunatilaka evokes the idea of how civilians were used as shields by both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE. "War Text" is a reference to the language of war and how language was manipulated to present war as a humanitarian operation. Lakoff says language is "the art of effective argument" (2000, 4). Examining the language of war elucidates the idea that manipulation of language is the centrality of the discourse of war. The language is manipulated based on the propaganda of the dominant group. Consequently, war is justified through a distortion of truth, and language is used and misused to camouflage reality by the fighting forces. It is noteworthy that the military discourse of war re-iterates the depersonalisation of civilians, and the language of war lends itself to this form of representation. Shields are metal covers that are usually used in wars to protect combatants. Civilians were forcibly trapped inside war zones by the LTTE so that the government forces would not attack the zones where the civilians were trapped. However, the innocent civilians were the victims of both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The civilians who are victimised in the war are the vulnerable group trapped between the two armed forces. By placing armed soldiers inside an open book and naming it "War Text," the artist critiques the presence of war in the everyday reality of the people.

The used book also symbolises the disruption caused by the war in the educational activities of the students. The title of this artwork, "War Text," is noteworthy: as a text, this artwork documents the effects of the war, civilian casualties, massacres, violence, and human migration. The title also symbolises the emergence of state-sponsored war texts, both fictional and non-fictional, after the war. The state promoted texts that celebrated and valorised the war. Nationalist literature projected the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa as a king who defeated the enemy of the state—the LTTE. He was compared to the former kings of the Anuradhapura dynasty who defeated the Cholas—Indian kings from the Dravidian Tamil dynasty. This artefact is a thought-provoking work of art which urges visitors to question the idea of war. When I first glanced at this artwork as a visitor, it evoked a striking image that stayed with me for several days. This

artwork can also be interpreted as a memory artefact that resonates with the violent memories associated with war—hiding in bunkers, sounds of shells, and bombing.

"Sinhala–English Dictionary in a Steel Jail" (2007)

Designed by Kingsley Gunatilaka, this artwork represents a Sinhala–English dictionary in a steel jail. This is a reminder of the Sinhala Only Act, imposed by the government in 1956, and its aftermath. In 1956, the then Sri Lankan government declared a new 'Sinhala Only' language act and thereby asserted Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka, to the exclusion of the other languages spoken in the country. Tamil and English were not accorded the same status. This resulted in the minorities in Sri Lanka who were speakers of English and Tamil being marginalised in all aspects of their lives. Precipitated by the violent events that followed the introduction of this act, the first communal riots happened in 1958.

> The act automatically disenfranchised a quarter of the country's then population, namely the Tamil speaking communities in the island, who perceived the act as a threat to their language, culture, and identity. The unrest it caused led to the first island-wide anti Tamil riots in 1958, shattering the trust the communities once had for one another, laying the groundwork for one of the longest wars in modern history (MMCA 2022).

Gunatilaka's artwork recalls this violent history of Sri Lanka and questions the politics of using language to divide the people of the country. It reflects the failure of the language policy and how the state disenfranchised the minorities in Sri Lanka. By designing a dictionary in a steel jail, the artist invokes a poignant image of the imprisonment of the minorities under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and various other modes. It also suggests that the dictionary is not accessible to the people, as it was sealed. In the same manner, the non-Sinhala-speaking minorities did not have access to state services because of the language they spoke. In addition to this, the dictionary contains only English and Sinhala, signalling the arbitrary omission of Tamil from state discourses. Furthermore, this artwork serves as a memory artefact that evokes institutionalised violence and the traumatic memories associated with that violence.

"No Glory" (1998)

"No Glory" is a poignant creation by Sarath Kumarasiri, where he skilfully moulds two distinct pieces of footwear from clay. This artwork serves as a symbolic representation of the missing civilians in the aftermath of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka. During these tumultuous events, Tamils in Colombo faced violent attacks, with homes being looted and set ablaze by marauders. The repercussions were devastating—some Tamils lost their lives, while others sought refuge abroad, and the rest relocated to their ancestral homelands. The 1983 riots marked a pivotal moment in Sri Lanka's history, amplifying racial violence. This artistic tribute not only commemorates those who perished but also stands as a testament to the diversity of the affected citizens. The deliberate dissimilarity between the two items of footwear underscores the varied ethnicities, religions, and cultures of the individuals impacted by the tragic events, adding layers of depth to the narrative embedded in the artwork.

> In the years following the anti-Tamil riots that took place in Colombo on 23 July 1983, Sarath Kumarasiri created a series of works in memory of those that lost their lives. Using clay, he sculpted items of clothing such as trousers and shirts—the uniform of the unarmed civilian to condemn the senseless killing of innocent people. A selection of footwear rendered with this same intent formed part of his 'No Glory' series. The artist's decision to present single, rather than multiple pairs of shoes gives expressive form to the numbers of missing civilians who were caught up in the violence of the civil conflict. (MMCA 2022)

The absence of footwear in this artwork serves as a symbol, encapsulating the tragic reality of enforced disappearances that befell countless youth, men, and women. These individuals, abducted during the civil war, experienced a harrowing fate, with armed men using white vans to carry out these abductions—an infamous phenomenon known as 'white van abductions.' The mere sight of a white van became synonymous with peril, etching a haunting image in the cultural memory of the civilians. Similarly, the missing footwear becomes a haunting symbol, embodying the trauma experienced by the person it belonged to during their abduction. The artist's act of preserving and protecting this artwork becomes an act of resistance against enforced disappearances. Despite attempts to erase the traces of the victims, the artwork defiantly stands as tangible evidence, resisting systematic erasure by the state. It serves as a testament to the dark reality of state-enforced disappearances. In this poignant artwork, the absent footwear transforms into a memory landscape, evoking the void left by the missing pair. Visitors to the MMCA are invited to confront

the trauma of the victims, prompting them to visualise the untold stories behind the missing footwear. The deliberate dissimilarity between the two pieces of footwear not only signifies the plight of civilians fleeing war zones amid shelling and bombing but also represents the heart-wrenching instances of families torn apart during these chaotic escapes. By naming the artwork "No Glory," the artist emphatically reiterates the stark truth that there is no honour or triumph in war. The artwork challenges viewers to reflect on the human cost of conflict, urging them to question the whereabouts of the missing pair and imagine the untold stories of those who vanished amidst the tumult of war.

"Study for Kannagi" (c. 1963—1972)

"Study for Kannagi" is a bronze statue made by Tissa Ranasinghe to commemorate the 1958 communal riots in Sri Lanka. This artefact portrays a female figure grieving near a corpse. The female figure is a symbolical representation of Kannagi, the heroine of the Tamil epic *Silapathikaaram*. She is worshipped by the Tamils and the Sinhalese as a goddess. Showing a grieving Kannagi near a corpse highlights the grieving mothers and wives who lost their sons and husbands during the war. The grieving Kannagi figure can be juxtaposed with the grieving Kannagi from the Tamil epic, who destroys an entire city when her husband is falsely accused and killed. This artefact as a repository of traumatic memories of violence embodies the sorrow that engulfed the lives of women who lost their loved ones. At the same time, it stands as a symbolic representation of the mothers and wives who continue to protest, question, and demand that the state reveal what happened to their sons and husbands who were forcefully disappeared. A grieving woman at the side of a corpse is a recurrent image in many cultures and also figures prominently in Tamil classical literature. The artist uses this image to depict the plight of the traumatised women whose only resort is grieving. Somasundaram reflects on the trauma of the victims of the civil war, especially women. He states:

> a broader and long-term psychosocial intervention for collective catharsis and a healing of memories for traumatized families and community would be an acknowledgement of what had happened. Communication / representation of collective trauma is crucial for the psychosocial rehabilitation of communities and public education, and consequent interpretation, acceptance and inclusion in individual, collective and social memory (2010, 26).

The grieving mothers and the wives need answers from the state. Their long-dormant trauma needs a closure. However, this acknowledgement

has not been given by the state to date. This artwork can be interpreted as a stark reminder of the human rights violations during the civil war in Sri Lanka and the horrors of the war. By subverting the epic heroine Kannagi to represent ordinary women, the artist records the othered history of the Sri Lankan civil war. The feminine narrative that this artefact carries is a juxtaposition to the masculine narrative of the civil war, which glorifies and valorises the war. "Study for Kannagi" is a powerful depiction of the unsung heroines, the mothers and the wives who are singlehandedly fighting for truth and justice for their loved ones.

"Displacement" (2015)

Having personally faced displacement, Vijitharan reflects on his own family's forced departure from the northern part of Sri Lanka during the final phase of the civil war. In this evocative piece, the artist crafts a bicycle seat, intentionally omitting other components. The bicycle, a ubiquitous mode of transport in the lives of the people in the north of Sri Lanka, emerges as a powerful symbol of the recurring human displacement experienced by the community. The bicycle holds particular significance for Vijitharan's family, who come from a farming background where the bicycle is an integral part of their daily lives. In the north of Sri Lanka, the bicycle transcends its utilitarian function, becoming a cherished companion for residents. In Sri Lanka, the bicycle stands out as the common man's trusted mode of transport. Through the symbolic representation of the bicycle seat, the artist captures the essence of displacement experienced by countless individuals, using a familiar and integral object to convey the impact of migration and upheaval. The artwork not only serves as a personal reflection on Vijitharan's own journey but also resonates with the broader narrative of the Northern Sri Lankan community, where the bicycle becomes a silent witness to the shared experiences of displacement and the resilience of its people.

> Vijitharan's presentation of a seat without its frame and wheels parodies the displacement of people from their homes and communities. Using an economy of means, the work starkly evokes the devastating sense of loss during the final stages of the conflict (MMCA 2022).

The bicycle seat, stripped of its essential parts in Vijitharan's artwork, serves as a unique symbol, starkly reminding viewers of the losses endured by individuals during the bombing and shelling in Sri Lanka. This stripped-down artefact becomes a visceral reminder of the human toll exacted

by the conflict, encompassing the loss of loved ones, treasured possessions, and even the physical trauma of severed body parts. According to Somasundaram,

> from January to May 2009, a population of 300,000 in the Vanni, the northern part of Sri Lanka, underwent multiple displacements, deaths, injuries, deprivation of water, food, medical care, and other basic needs caught between the shelling and bombings of the state forces, and the LTTE which forcefully recruited men, women, and children to fight on the frontline and held the rest hostage (2010, 1).

The figure shown here is the number of deaths during the last five months of the war. The bicycle seat with the missing parts portrays missing civilians and civilian deaths due to LTTE and state violence. It also testifies to the lack of accountability on the part of the Sri Lankan government in reporting civilian casualties. The state "continued to assert that 'not a single drop of civilian blood had been shed' and the 'biggest humanitarian rescue mission in history had been executed'" (in Somasundaram 2010, 26). This artwork is a testimony to human migration, displacement, enforced disappearances, and civilian casualties.

"Tyre"

The installation "Tyre," conceived by Pradeep Chandrasiri, strategically places a solitary tire at the centre of Gallery 4, compelling the audience to confront its unsettling symbolism without explicit captions. This tire serves as a powerful and silent witness to the harrowing events of the 1983 ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, where Tamils were ruthlessly targeted and burned by angry mobs who callously thrust burning tires over their victims' necks. Unlike other exhibits at the MMCA, the absence of captions enhances the impact of this artefact, urging viewers to engage in contemplation and drawing attention to the disruptive nature of the displayed tire. This intentional lack of context underscores the artist's approach, allowing the artefact itself to narrate the violent history it embodies. The tire, placed prominently, becomes a focal point that demands the audience's attention, inviting them to grapple with the traumatic memories etched into the cultural consciousness of the Tamils. As a memory artefact, the tire becomes a vessel of remembrance, carrying the collective trauma of the victims. By evoking the July 1983 riots, deeply ingrained in the cultural memory of the Tamils, the tire prompts visitors to imagine the brutality unleashed on Tamil civilians solely due to their ethnicity and language. This powerful

representation aligns with Hirsch's (2013) theories on carrying forward the stories of victims, acting as a conduit to channel the suppressed narratives of the past. The tire, standing as a visceral reminder of the violence camouflaged and submerged by the state, provides an outlet for viewers to see, touch, and discuss the traumatic memories associated with it. In its simplicity, the tire becomes a catalyst for dialogue and reflection, unravelling a violent history that demands acknowledgment and remembrance in order to confront the ongoing impact of such atrocities.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, there is no memory museum in Sri Lanka that commemorates the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. Memorial events organised by civil society and the families of the victims came under surveillance, while on the other hand, state-sponsored museums in Sri Lanka celebrate war as a humanitarian operation. The primary argument of this chapter is that the exhibition *One Hundred Thousand Small Tales* entails a positionality to interpret the MMCA as a site of memory. As a memory site, the MMCA also serves as a space where museum activism takes place. The artefacts displayed in this particular exhibition each narrate the stories of the victims of the civil war and transmit their memories to the next generation. As the task of the museum is to collect, exhibit, preserve, and remember, this chapter reads the MMCA as a site of memory that facilitates a collective remembering of the memories of the war. In this way, the MMCA can be seen as the yin and yang of the history and the memory of the Sri Lankan civil war, as the museum represents a repository of contemporary art. Similar to the complimentary nature of yin and yang, the museum's role extends beyond mere documentation. It becomes a platform for reconciliation, education, and dialogue. The museum becomes a space where the darkness of history and the light of artistic expression converge, fostering a nuanced understanding and contributing to the process of reconciliation and healing. The role of the MMCA as a site of memory is deployed through the transmission of contested memories, traumatic memories, collective memory, and postmemory. The artworks analysed in this chapter depict various memory narratives such as survival stories, stories of migration, trauma, and exoduses. In this way, the MMCA also engages in memory activism, as it brings out the subaltern voices that are silenced in the dominant narratives. The museum collects, exhibits, and transmits memories and counter-hegemonic voices. In doing so, it creates an activist space that allows subaltern narratives to emerge.

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