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in situ_Sri Lanka

theertha
residency + exhibition
Theertha International Artists’ Collective
Colombo
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Gallery view
This exhibition follows-on from two previous In Situ exhibitions in Bangalore and Istanbul during 2015. The work also relates to earlier shows in New York and Bangalore; too perfect to be natural (2010) and the nature of (in) perfection (2012).

This exhibition seeks to connect the generative theme of the In Situ series and the concern with perfection in the earlier works in the context of the tradition of Buddhist art, particularly cave paintings in Sri Lanka. Although the cave paintings are generally seen in the context of statues of the Buddha I would like to suggest that the painted geometric elements are more than just a decorative or background support for the narrative or devotional aspect of the sculptures.

Although Buddhism was officially introduced into Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC there is evidence of its earlier presence and the chronicles record three visits by the Buddha. In the 3rd century BC there were two sects of monks, one devoted to meditation and the other to literacy. The meditative tradition (Varanasi) was associated with forest dwelling monks and the literary tradition (Gamavasi) with communities in the urban areas (1).

The Varanasi developed image worship, transforming caves that had previously been used by pre-historic man into image shrines (Len-vihra) and this form of devotion appears to have connected with a story-telling folk tradition that appealed to Buddhist laity. Although many of the murals have been reworked over the centuries those at Dambulla UNESCO World Heritage site are an excellent example of both form and style (2). The cave paintings at Dambulla were first painted in the 1st century BC and have been repainted several times since, mostly in the 18th century and for a UNESCO restoration in the 20th Century.

The figurative paintings at Dambulla continue a so-called primitive style of two dimensional or flat representation that contrasts with the three dimensional figurative sculptures and therefore sit aesthetically between the abstract (patterns) and the literal (sculptures). This flatness is also a feature of Orthodox Christian or Byzantine religious art where the tension between

1. Described as part of a display at the International Museum of World Buddhism, Kandy, Sri Lanka.
2. ibid
the second (flat painting) and third dimension (realism) creates a tension or dynamic that evokes transcendence. Another feature of Dambulla, represented by multiple statures and images, is the idea of an omnipresent Buddha, part of the thousand Buddha concept that developed in the Mahayana tradition (3).

Religious art in general needs to conform to or reflect the ontology of the religion, such as the generation of forms from a single point in Islamic art or the concern with light in aspects of Christian art and architecture. The cave and temple artworks in Sri Lanka generally have three types of image; statues, mostly of the Buddha or Bodhisattva; other iconography such as people, plants or animals; abstract elements, which generally act as a ground or unifying element for the overall design. These abstract elements can further be divided into three styles, body rays (around the Buddha), floral/circular motifs and regular geometric pattern, which is generally based on regular squares.

The floral/circular motifs have a generative quality that is similar to their use in other religions and they generally sit aesthetically with the figurative paintings between the abstraction of the pattern and the realist sculptures. However, the abstract quality of the pattern is not mimetic in a reductive sense and can be read as both an aesthetic and ontological ground for the visitor experience.

While sacred spaces are sometimes considered to contain God this may not be the case at Dambulla or in other Buddhist temples, which may rather be a reflection of some ultimate truth.

“….the ever-presence of images should not be allowed to dissuade us from taking seriously Buddhist claims that those anthropomorphic elements facilitate neither the worship of the person nor the divinity of the Buddha, but rather his teachings or his example, the Dharma – an eventuality that suggests that (some) Buddhist temples are not houses of god per se, but, in a more subtle variation of the commemoration of divinity priority, ritual-architectural expressions (or commemorations) of ultimate truth(4).”

3. Described as part of a display at the National Museum of Sri Lanka, Colombo.  
One of the fundamental teaching of the Buddha was that of conditionality, where everything is dependent on a particular set of conditions or circumstance and therefore subject to change. The nature of reality is therefore fluid, composed of a dynamic rather than the physical permanence of objects and the fundamental ingredients of this dynamic are an indivisible conglomerate of primordial space, energy and consciousness called the Great Perfection (5).

The pattern at Dambulla can thus be read in the context of the ultimate truth and the Great Perfection, providing a ground from which the two dimensional figurative elements and three dimensional sculptures emerge in the evolution of space and consciousness and as an expression of a primordial or background energy or dynamic. Interestingly, the regular patterns are painted on the irregular wall surface of the caves creating a sense of space that alludes to the space/time dynamic of relativity as expressed in physics. This feature contributes to a sense of fluidity for the visitor experience, even though the regularity of the pattern also acts as a cohesive unifying element.

The works in In_Situ Sri Lanka have been influenced by a consideration of the relationship between space, energy and consciousness and suggest a dynamic that’s often alluded to in religious art involving geometry or pattern. The three dimensional spatial sense evoked by the two dimensional forms suggests transcendence, while the materiality of the object creates a sense of immanence, the tension between each creating a sense of energy or presence in the artworks.

The sensuality and spatial dynamic of the colour, along with the scale in relation to the human body also work with the structure to create an experience for the visitor. The smaller paintings are extracted from the larger works and the overall work explores how to find creativity and be receptive to intuition in the context of a formal structure; a pertinent problem in our techno-cultural society. The artworks are not mimetic or reductive in an abstract sense and suggest that pattern can have a function that is more than decorative. Kevin Todd

Enfoldment #1, acrylic on CNC-cut MDF panels, 150 x 150cm OA
Enfoldment #1e

Enfoldment #1b

Enfoldment #1j

Enfoldment #1a

All, acrylic on CNC-cut MDF panels, 72 x 72cm
Gallery views, Red Dot Gallery, Theertha International Artists’ Collective, Colombo.
Enfoldment #2, acrylic on CNC-cut MDF panels, 150 x 150cm OA
Enfoldment #2g
Enfoldment #2a
Enfoldment #2d
Enfoldment #2b

All, acrylic on CNC-cut MDF panels, 72 x 72cm