

June 2022

**An Audience Engaged Approach to Education:  
The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka**

The exhibition 'Encounters' at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) completed the first of its three exhibition rotations on 22 May 2022. A total of 37 free public programmes were offered to engage audiences of all ages, taking inspiration from the artworks on display. Public programmes are specially curated by staff of the MMCA Sri Lanka and form a hugely important interface between the content in the galleries and the audience's engagement with it.

The exhibition launched with contemporary artist Pradeep Thalawatta (b. 1979) speaking about his artwork 'Athi Vishesha (Extra Special)' (2008) and how it relates to ideas of friendship and love. Thalawatta's work was on display as part 'Encounters' Rotation 1, placed in conversation with a painting by George Keyt (1901–1993), titled 'The Friends' (1982). Visitors were also given the opportunity to hear art historian T. Sanathanan pay homage to artist Asai Rasiah (1946–2020), whose work 'வாழ்க்கை கைவினைஞன்' ((Life) Craftsman) (1970) was on display in the same rotation. This was the first public talk about his work since his passing in 2020. Conversations were also held between art patron Malaka Talwatte and Chief Curator Sharmini Pereira about George Keyt and the various personal and professional influences that may have played significant roles in Keyt's practice. All places for these free events were sold out, indicating a keen interest from local audiences to engage in discussions with and about artists that deserve greater critical attention.

The changing displays will foster further public events around the practice of Keyt, whose work will be featured again in Rotation 3 of 'Encounters' which will open on 19 October 2022. The MMCA Sri Lanka also organised four themed

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poetry readings about ideas of love and intimacy. Poets Malinda Seneviratne, Vivimarie Vanderpoorten, Phusathi Liyanaarachchi, Surekha Samarasena, Saumya Sandaruwan Liyanage, and Anar responded to artworks in Display 2 with poems in English, Sinhala, and Tamil. At an Open Mic event, young and emerging poets aged 16 to 21 read their poetry on the theme 'intimacy'. The poetry events brought together a total of 40 participants and generated how interest in modern and contemporary art connects with poetry and the spoken word.

Pramodha Weerasekera, Assistant Curator Education and Public Programmes, said, "it is important to curate unique experiences that allow audiences to meaningfully engage with art. In Sri Lanka, we want to encourage a museum-going public. Our aim is to make this a reality in the long-term through regular events and experiences that are accessible and free-of-charge." All these events are funded with the support of the European Union, the Foundation for Arts Initiatives and, the John Keells Foundation who view the investment in public programmes as essential to the impact that modern and contemporary art can have on society at large.

The public programmes at the MMCA Sri Lanka also place specific emphasis on activity-based learning experiences for younger audiences in the form of workshops. A workshop by Kiyawana Muddara for instance, trained young adults to learn history through stamps that have been released on various important moments in Sri Lanka. Stamps are some of the ephemera exhibited in Display 1, focusing on the Non-Aligned Movement, on view until 8 January 2023. Similarly, Artists Sabeen Omar and Shahdia Jamaldeen conducted a workshop about experimenting with storytelling using fabric, sewing and embroidery, taking inspiration from the much talked about artwork 'White Curtain and Women' (2016) by contemporary artist Susiman Nirmalavasan (b. 1982) which was on display as part of Rotation 1. Sharmi Thavayogarah, Coordinator Education and Public Programmes, spoke of the workshops: "Visitors participate hoping to learn about various things, from history to mediums of art. They also want to relax after a long workday, for example, by learning to sew and embroider. Through such workshops, the exhibition space becomes more dynamic and participants end up engaging with the artworks on display without even realizing it."

Alongside the public programmes, the MMCA Sri Lanka also works directly with schools and universities by organising visits for students that cater to their

curriculum needs. In the first three months of 'Encounters', the museum hosted up to 78 school students and 116 university students. Curator Sandev Handy spoke is interested in the way the MMCA Sri Lanka "can think of the galleries of the museum as classrooms, where learning can go hand in hand with reflection, loitering and playfulness; hopefully encouraging students to return with friends outside of school hours." The MMCA Sri Lanka team is not only made up of exhibition curators but also curators of education, learning and training. Three dedicated staff members are involved in ongoing discussions with school teachers and university lecturers about the numerous ways in which the MMCA Sri Lanka can work with the formal education sector and how in turn students start to think about the museum industry as a career path.

Entry to the museum alongside all of its events is free. Visitors are encouraged to stay updated about all our events via the museum's website [www.mmca-srilanka.org](http://www.mmca-srilanka.org) and social medias: Facebook [www.facebook.com/mmcasrilanka](http://www.facebook.com/mmcasrilanka) and Instagram [www.instagram.com/mmcasrilanka/](http://www.instagram.com/mmcasrilanka/). For any queries about its education and public programmes visitors may also write to [education@mmca-srilanka.org](mailto:education@mmca-srilanka.org).