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Art as a medium of #Breakingthebias

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka's current exhibition "Encounters" aims to structure a sequence of changing displays that bring together six encounters between artworks and ephemera from the 1950s to the present. The exhibition questions if a chance encounter between one thing and another alters how something familiar or commonplace is otherwise seen? Can two artworks placed side by side reveal something new about each of them? Putting on another set of lenses, one can argue that through the artwork and ephemera on display that the presence of women and their representation in society is boldly and sometimes subtly expressed. In conjunction with International Women's Day and the theme #Breakthebias, "Encounters" highlights the presence of women and brings to focus the breaking of bias subconsciously and consciously in Sri Lanka.

A stark reflection of this can be observed in the first body of artworks, artefacts and literary publications that highlight the events from the 5th Non-Aligned Summit Conference held in Colombo in 1976. In 1961, against the brewing Cold War tensions between pro-Soviet or pro-American countries, a coalition of nations formed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to recognize their shared independence struggles. Sirimavo Bandaranaike at the time was Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and was Chairman of the summit. Specially produced stamps with the portrait of Sirimavo Bandaranaike were issued at that period and one could question in today's context if this was done with a view of breaking a bias in terms of the fact that was the world's first female prime minister, when she became Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in 1960, going on to server three terms in national politics: 1960–1965, 1970–1977 and 1994–2000. The BMICH was gifted to Sri Lanka in 1970 by the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) in response to a request from then Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Sirimavo Bandaranaike for a fully equipped conference hall as part of her preparations to host the conference. The

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stamp serves as a reminder of the strong diplomatic ties between nations amidst the tensions and the strength of a leader hosting the summit in this instance Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Here again, the symbolism of these acts showcases the constant presence of female leadership within a perceived patriarchal society.

Another set of poignant artworks representing the family unit from the 1950s to the present day with a painting by George Keyt (1901–1993) from 1952 of an agricultural family pounding paddy, its vivid colours and stylised figures contrasts with the realistically observed working-class family by Asai Rasiah (1946–2020) from 1970. Both paintings describe the family in relation to acts of labour, with the female figure additionally involved with the labour of motherhood. In contrast and by extension, the works by

Richard Gabriel (1924–2016) and Susiman Nirmalavasan (b. 1982) convey what happens and what is yearned for when a family unit is torn apart, by internal or external disputes. All these bodies of work when viewed together and separately bring the audience's attention to the women in the family and one may sense the enormous role of the woman being in the labour of love for her family or being the missing link that connects and builds society at large.

Art has always been a medium of expression that has captured the essence of any community or society. #Breakingthebias will only be further enhanced and realized if we continue to allow for varying mediums of art to be showcased especially those that capture and frame how women have been represented in society. The Museum of Contemporary Modern Art Sri Lanka aims to continue the dialogue and discussion around all things gender, keeping an open mind through the varying artists and artforms that come through its doors.

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka is a cultural initiative focused on building a museum of modern and contemporary art for the country and fostering learning and engagement for as wide a public as possible. Alongside its curated exhibitions and education programmes, the museum is the first publicly accessible trilingual venue of its kind in Sri Lanka. For more information, visit www.mmca-srilanka.org or follow them on Facebook facebook.com/mmcasrilanka and Instagram instagram.com/mmcasrilanka/ for updates.