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The MMCA Sri Lanka partners with the George Keyt Foundation

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka showcases work of George Keyt, documenting and creating awareness on select paintings by the Sri Lankan artist

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) works with many lenders and private collectors to curate its exhibitions, with the objective of helping the public to learn more about modern and contemporary Sri Lankan art. In 2021, the museum was given access to the George Keyt Foundation Collection (GKF) which is installed in various offices of the John Keells Holdings Group. It was during this research visit that Chief Curator Sharmini Pereira and Curator Sandev Handy found inspiration for the MMCA Sri Lanka's second exhibition 'Encounters', which places four paintings by Keyt at the centre of four displays of art.

Speaking about the partnership Pereira said, "It was a great opportunity to have a guided tour of George Keyt's works by Chair of the GKF, Mike Antoniasz, and to see physical works by Keyt because there are no paintings by him on public display that are easily accessible seven days a week." This observation was a key factor that led Pereira and Handy to consider the inclusion of works by Keyt in 'Encounters' which opened to the public in February 2022 and is free of charge.

"The GKF was established in 1988 in the lifetime of the artist and was founded on the principles of promoting the works of emerging artists and Sri Lankan art. We are thrilled to work with an organisation such as the MMCA Sri Lanka, that creates knowledge and documents the works of Sri Lankan artists. Over the years, the foundation has led many initiatives such as the annual 'Kala Pola', an open air art fair, the 'Young Contemporaries', 'Nawa Kala Karuwo', and the 'Sri Lankan Art Exhibitions'. We aim to preserve the work done by Keyt and have produced several publications on his work, most notably a publication that

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commemorated Keyt's Centennial anniversary in 2001," said the Chairperson of the George Keyt Foundation Mike Antoniasz.

Speaking about the works displayed Handy commented, "George Keyt is such a well known name in Sri Lanka – yet the public have limited knowledge of his actual works, due to a lack of access to them other than through publications. While the published material is vast compared to many other modern Sri Lankan artists, there are only a few texts that look in detail at specific paintings. With the 'Encounters' exhibition we want to familiarise audiences with specific paintings by Keyt, choosing to look closely at four of his paintings namely 'The Friends' (1982) and 'Pounding Paddy' (1952) which were exhibited from 11 February to 22 May as part of 'Encounters' Rotation 1, and 'The Offering (1949) and 'Kandyan Bride' (1951), which will be displayed as part of 'Encounters' Rotation 3 from 13 November 2022 until 19 March 2023."

"Each of the four paintings provided Sharmini and I with the starting points for 'Encounters'. We have created a conversation or 'encounters' with other artist's works," Sandev further noted, "which sees the inclusion of works by Pradeep Thalawatta (b.1979), Abdul Halik Azeez (b.1985), Aubrey Collette (1920–1992), Martin Wickramasinghe (1890–1976), Asai Rasaiyah (1946–2021), Richard Gabriel (1924–2016), Susiman Nirmalavasan (b.1982), A. Mark (1933–2000), Nelun Harasgama (b.1959), and Janani Cooray (b.1974)." The juxtapositioning of artworks that explore similar subject matter from artists of different generations has been championed by the MMCA Sri Lanka. The curatorial approach contributes to seeing and thinking about art historical narratives in new and unexpected ways.

One of the ongoing problems faced by the GKF is the costs for looking after their collection, which includes the conservation of the paintings and drawings by Keyt. As part of 'Encounters', four paintings by Keyt were successfully conserved. Speaking about the conservation work Udaya Hewawasam from ConsArt, commented "The biggest damage was to the wooden stretchers which were almost totally infected by insects (wood worms) thus providing no mechanical stability. In such cases there is no option other than to replace all the stretchers. Only one painting had large paint lost due to a flood. Fortunately, GKF provided a photograph of the painting before the damage occurred, which helped to reconstruct the exact area that had been lost." Udaya Hewawasam is one of the most informed and experienced conservators of modern art in the country. Sharing Keyt's work with the public could not have been done without the months of intensive conservation work performed by his conservation studio ConsArt.

One of the highlights of the conservation process was the discovery of information at the back of the paintings, including details from past exhibitions,

and information on the paintings' titles. Following standard conservation practises, Udaya confirmed how "After these labels were safely detached, they were de-acidified and then relocated to the back side of the painting in safe acid free sealed transparent cases."

The MMCA Sri Lanka's ambition to create a museum of modern and contemporary art is dependent on the work of such experts and professionals in the museum field, who help to reveal information about artworks that shape and inform how curators present the work of an artist.

'Encounters' is generously supported by the European Union, Foundation for Arts Initiatives, John Keells Foundation, and the Nations Trust Bank. The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) is an education-led initiative that aims to establish a public museum dedicated to the display, research, collection, and conservation of modern and contemporary art for the benefit and enjoyment of the general public, schools, and tourists. Presenting curated exhibitions and education programmes, the MMCA Sri Lanka is the first publicly accessible trilingual venue of its kind in Sri Lanka.

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