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Behind the scenes of ‘The Foreigners’ at the MMCA Sri Lanka

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) opened its new exhibition titled ‘The Foreigners’ on 4 May 2023, at its premises on the ground floor of Crescat Boulevard, Colombo 3. Curated by Sandev Handy, Curator and Sharmini Pereira, Chief Curator at the MMCA Sri Lanka, this exhibition is the first by the museum to focus solely on contemporary artists. ‘The Foreigners’ is the culmination of a year’s worth of planning, design, and production, which brought together 19 artworks that include photographs, performances, video artworks, installations, drawings, and paintings.

Handy, the lead curator of the exhibition, shared that, “The impetus of this exhibition emerged from a research interest of how Sri Lankan contemporary living artists were reflecting on their relationship to home through their work, regardless of them living or being a citizen in this country. What emerged through this research was a selection of artists who see themselves as foreigners and testify to this experience, whilst defying and going beyond the rigid frameworks of national borders.” He went on to invite the public to visit the exhibition and “to reflect on how the experience of being a foreigner, an outsider, or a stranger is in fact a familiar feeling shared by many and a defining characteristic of being connected to this island.”

The MMCA Sri Lanka takes research very seriously, especially when it comes to mounting a museum-quality exhibition. Handy noted that, “Research, planning, and exhibition design has always been crucial to our work, as we move towards building a world class museum. Many of the works in the show emerged from concerted research online and in person, through studio visits, travel, and relationships nurtured with institutions, collectors, and artists.” He further added that, “Some of the works, however, came from mine and Sharmini’s previous research, references from previous exhibitions we had seen, and artist practices we have been observing over time.”

‘The Foreigners’ exhibition has been specially designed by architect and designer Jonathan Edward, who has worked closely with the MMCA Sri Lanka

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curatorial team over the course of six months, while the exhibition identity for 'The Foreigners' has been designed by Emile Molin. Speaking on his design process, Edward said that, "The exhibition design of 'The Foreigners' was a response to the curatorial prospectus and narrative put forward by Sandev Handy and Sharmini Pereira. The design itself was conceptualised around the introduction of a single 'Foreign object' and how it would affect the space and the visitor experience." He further stated that, "Colour plays a key role in this design, with 'Signal Orange' being used to guide visitors through the exhibition."

This exhibition design has also taken into consideration the Public Programmes and group visits that take place at the museum alongside the exhibition, for which large crowds of students and other visitors gather in the galleries. Commenting on these concerns, Edward added that, "What sets the MMCA Sri Lanka apart is its people-focused approach to exhibitions and art education. Thus the design of the space is flexible and free flowing, providing space for the diverse public programmes that the MMCA Sri Lanka has to offer."

'The Foreigners' features 15 artists who live and work in Sri Lanka, Sweden, the UK, and the USA. All artworks on display are on loan to the MMCA Sri Lanka from lenders, including artists, who are based in India, Sri Lanka, Sweden, the UK, and the USA. Speaking of the manner in which the MMCA Sri Lanka acquired the artwork for 'The Foreigners', Handy noted that, "In the absence of a permanent collection, we rely primarily on securing loans of artworks from artists, collectors, and institutions for our exhibitions. 'The Foreigners' is the first exhibition by the MMCA Sri Lanka to have almost half its artworks coming in as loans from outside of Sri Lanka, often directly from the artists themselves."

Following the trilingual language practice of the MMCA Sri Lanka, all texts on display in 'The Foreigners' including the labels for artworks have been produced in English, Tamil, and Sinhala languages. A group of translators, copyeditors, and proofreaders who are part of the MMCA Sri Lanka's Museum Associates had come together to support the museum's Editorial desk in creating these texts. Speaking of the language practice at the MMCA Sri Lanka, Handy reflected that, "Most writing about contemporary art is filled with jargon and terminology that is impenetrable to audiences. At the MMCA Sri Lanka we've taken it upon ourselves to make sure that the labels, or what we call the Extended Captions, of artworks are accessible, digestible, and invites engagement with the artwork."

He further said that, "Prioritising accessibility in our writing, however, has to sit alongside doing justice to the artworks and the artists. We thus endeavoured to write captions in a way that was incisive to each work, whilst in conversations with the artists of the works themselves. Through our trilingual captions my hope is that everyone might feel invited to reflect on the work and to explore their familiarity with contemporary art."

‘The Foreigners’ will be on display until 22 October 2023 at the MMCA Sri Lanka premises. The museum is open daily from 10am to 6pm (except on Poya days and public holidays) at the ground floor of Crescat Boulevard, Colombo 3, and entrance to the museum and all its public programmes is free. Information about the museum, and its exhibitions and public programmes can be found via their website www.mmca-srilanka.org, or on Facebook at facebook.com/mmcasrilanka and Instagram at instagram.com/mmcasrilanka/.