

museum of modern
and contemporary art
sri lanka

The MMCA Sri Lanka Opens '88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva'

The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) opened its new exhibition titled '88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva' on 30 November at its premises on the ground floor of Crescat Boulevard, Colombo 3. Curated by Sharmini Pereira and Ritchell Marcelline, assisted by Thinal Sajeewa and Nimaya Harris, '88 Acres' is the MMCA Sri Lanka's first solo exhibition, and looks at the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme and the pioneering work of Sri Lankan architect Minnette De Silva (1918–1998).

The exhibition focuses on the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme in Kandy, designed by De Silva and opened in 1958. The Scheme heralded a new form of social housing in Sri Lanka, and was notably created with the participation of its users. '88 Acres' explores how this sprawling hillside development was ahead of its time in providing affordable accommodation for a diverse ethno-religious community of government public servants in Sri Lanka. Alongside a specially commissioned artists' film by Irushi Tennekoon (b. 1989), Sumedha Kelegama (b. 1988), and Sumudu Athukorala (b. 1980), '88 Acres' looks back at the Scheme 65 years later to consider De Silva's influences and the challenges of her design approach.

Sharmini Pereira, Chief Curator at the MMCA Sri Lanka said, "Rather than curate a full retrospective on Minnette De Silva's architectural practice, we are focussing on a single project in order to study her work in detail, which is something that has not been done to date." She added that, "The challenge with curating this exhibition was that there are no original drawings or models from De Silva's architectural practice, The Studio of Modern Architecture. We had to therefore take a different approach which involved commissioning three artists to research the scheme which has subsequently been crafted into a film animation. Their research involved interviewing residents of the Scheme and archival research,

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which has now produced the most up to date archive about the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme which we hope others will build on.”

‘is this an architectural documentary?’ (2023) by Tennekoon, Kelegama, and Athukorala interweaves animation, archival photos, film recordings, and witness testimonies to consider what the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme bears witness to in terms of the environmental, social, and political transformations of Sri Lanka since the early ’50s. Reflecting on their research and creative endeavour, the artists noted that, “When we began this project, we were confronted with the question of how we could narrate a story about architecture through film. The rhetorical title of the documentary questions our own role as artists/filmmakers and how compelling we have been in our pursuit of narrating this story.” They further added that, “The genre of animated documentary has opposite properties, with documentary essentially being known for recording facts or truth, and animation as a medium historically associated with fiction. The use of illustrations and animation in our artists’ documentary has helped us to imagine what Minnette De Silva would have been like in her lifetime, and has helped us in conveying some of the technical and architectural ideas in the film to wider audiences.”

The film is supported by the British Council Digital Collaboration Fund, which supports UK and overseas cultural partnerships to develop digitally innovative ways of collaborating. Commissioned by the MMCA Sri Lanka, the Research and Development support for the film was provided by Forensic Architecture, UK. Speaking on their support towards ‘88 Acres’, Orlando Edwards, British Council Sri Lanka Country Director said, “The British Council seeks to address today’s global challenges through design, exploring the social and cultural value of a wide range of design disciplines. Minnette De Silva was a pioneering architect, challenging perceptions and using architecture to respond to social, political and environmental contexts.” He further stated that, “We are delighted to support and see the fruition of the first solo exhibition on De Silva’s practice in Sri Lanka, which forms part of the 75th anniversary celebrations of UK-Sri Lanka diplomatic ties in 2023/24”.

‘88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva’ is also the first exhibition of a modern architect in Sri Lanka to receive the endorsement of the World Monuments Fund. Ajit Gunewardene, the Chair of the Committee of the MMCA Sri Lanka spoke of this milestone partnership between the museum and WMF and noted that, “The MMCA Sri Lanka curates unique exhibition

experiences that have already attracted large numbers of visitors. This is the museum's first solo exhibition, and it could not be more fitting to focus on a female architect like De Silva at a time when international organisations like WMF are starting to recognise the importance of architects from the global south. The museum's research promises to spearhead more focus on this much admired architect with her first ever solo exhibition, here in Colombo."

The research-oriented curatorial process has led the curators of '88 Acres' on a journey of re-discovering the architect, her writings and teachings, and most importantly her innovative orientations. "The exhibition brings about an inquiry, curatorially highlighting the work of Minnette De Silva," said the Co-curator of the exhibition Ritchell Marcelline, adding that, "It explores the origin of the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme in detail within the context of a newly independent state, and looks at it within its culturally rich geographical area in the suburbs of Kandy." He further added that, "We wanted to find as much as we could of the original material produced by De Silva in her practice as an architect, educator, and thinker. In our research, both the team of filmmakers and the curatorial team found an expansive and diverse body of material from various parts of the world, which has introduced a new way of looking at, enjoying, and researching architectural projects."

'88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva' has been specially designed by Jonathan Edward, and the exhibition identity has been created by Nia Thandapani. The exhibition features photographs, publications, historical documents, installations, architectural drawings and models alongside an artists' film. 'is this an architectural documentary? (2023) will be screened eight times daily, and '88 Acres' opens to the public from 30 November 2023 to 7 July 2024. Thinal Sajeewa, Assistant Curator at the MMCA Sri Lanka noted that, "The works on display include sound material, commissioned drawings, architectural models, and video to help the audience better understand the Scheme and De Silva's practice", adding that, "The visitors are also able to engage with and appreciate De Silva's thinking and writing. The exhibition is a must see for all those who are interested in or simply curious about architecture and Minnette De Silva."

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication titled 'Second Volume', edited by Kaumadi Jayaweera and designed by Nia Thandapani, with contributions by the curator of the exhibition, Sharmini Pereira, and the artists, Irushi Tennekoon, Sumedha Kelegama, and Sumudu Athukorala. 'Second Volume' is generously

supported by Art South Asia Project and the British Council, and will be launched in February 2024 to coincide with De Silva's 106th birth anniversary.

Alongside the exhibition, the MMCA Sri Lanka will also offer a host of free public programmes and outreach activities aimed at students of schools and higher education institutions. These programmes will include specially curated Gallery Talks, Workshops, Reading Groups, and Tours by the curatorial team, artists, and Visitor Educators. The museum plans on placing specific focus on students of architecture, art history, fine arts, literature, and social sciences. All public programmes are made possible with the generous support of the Foundation for Arts Initiatives, the MMCA Sri Lanka's Founding Patrons, and the British Council.

The exhibition is generously supported by the British Council, with additional support from Art South Asia Project, Foundation for Arts Initiatives, Foto Design, Advent Projects (PVT) Ltd, SriLankan Airlines, Lite87, Rhythm FM, and Rock FM. Generous support is also provided by the museum's major benefactors and funders: John Keells Foundation, Nations Trust Bank, Fairfirst Insurance, and the Founding Patrons of the MMCA Sri Lanka.

The 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. 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/.