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Research Thesis for Master of Philosophy

Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of the Visual & Performing Arts
Colombo.

Research Topic:

An investigation of the appearance of Surrealism in 20th Century

Sri Lankan Paintings

(With reference to an analysis of the paintings of L.T.P Manjusri)

Medium: English

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Abstract

According to the first manifesto of Surrealism published in 1924, Surrealism was defined as, pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express either verbally or in writing or otherwise the true function of thought (Breton 1924). Post and prior to this statement, many artists and theorists have brought forward various definitions on this intriguing and mysterious genre of art. Although these definitions have been under much criticism, a study of the history of art will reveal that there have always been artists whose works were inspired by dreams, the supernatural, the irrational and the absurd. The 20th century was a period that saw a dramatic change in the field of visual art around the world. Concepts and ideas that were born in Europe and other parts of the world were brought to Sri Lanka by artists who travelled the world. During this century, visual art in Sri Lanka too evolved from a more traditional and academic style to that of a more liberal and expressive nature. Out of these transformations, the later works of eminent local artist L.T.P. Manjusri stands out for a number of reasons. On the one hand, he changed his style of painting from a rigid traditional, religious style to that of a more surreal, symbolic and sensual one. Also his later work are among the first in Sri Lanka to show elements of European Surrealism in them. The present study aimed at discovering the appearance of Surrealism in the 20th century Sri Lankan paintings, taking the said works of Manjusri into focus. An identification of the pictorial vocabulary that he created to depict visual equivalents to the workings of the unconscious mind was utilised with this regard. This particular study was conducted due to the lack of documentation on the later works of the artist and the lack of much needed art based psychological literature in Sri Lanka. A visual analysis and comparison of the works of the said artist was done in order to uncover elements of Surrealism in them such as scale, repetition, levitation and juxtaposition. Furthermore, an archival research was also done in order to uncover facts on his life and events and also of the socio-political backdrop of the country at the time that had a profound influence on his transformation as an artist. The study shows that the works of Manjusri can be placed alongside of his European Surrealist contemporaries. Furthermore, the study reveals that most or almost all of the works under consideration bears overt or subtle themes that are sexual in nature. It is believed that this study will provide an insight into the appearance of Surrealism in 20th century Sri Lankan art while paving the way for a greater understanding and appreciation for the said works of L.T.P. Manjusri and others who succeeded him.

Key Words: Surrealism, Sri Lanka, 20th Century, L.T.P. Manjusri