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RHYTHM IN LINE: DRAWINGS, SCULPTURE AND ANIMATION

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Tilak Samarawickrema

The first thing that strikes one's attention in Tilak's drawing is the fact that the curved line predominates over the straight line. And one could certainly say that his drawing is made exclusively of curved lines: the few straight lines to be found are there precisely because he cannot do without them, but if one, looks carefully, these lines which seem straight are in reality a segment of a curve whose radius is very large. If Lobacevskij, the famous inventor of spherical geometry, who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, could have seen these drawings, he would have liked

them because of the predominance of curved lines. But these drawings of Tilak are constructed with this type of line, not so much for reasons which non-Euclidean geometry suggests to the mind; on the contrary, I believe, because in his own country he grew up and was formed in the midst of these signs. The Sinhala script is all made up of curved lines, but not curves made with a compass, curves made by hand, small, large, of any variable radius, with flourishes or not. Also in the art forms of Sri Lanka the images are constructed like this, sinuous, soft, full of life. This curved line of Tilak's runs over the paper, is a dynamic line, perhaps follows the observer's eye which discovers a world in its wholeness and in its detail. This mode of drawing of Tilak's is therefore a very essential mode, not boring and pedantic, but stimulating so that also those who look at the drawing are compelled to participate with pleasure in the reading of the visual message

by SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

"The reality I depict is essentially that of my country, my culture and the traditions which have survived to this day and which I consider extremely precious. More recently I have added another temporal dimension to my work by extending it to animation and cinematography."

- Tilak Samarawickrema

(Rome, 1977)

Tilak Samarawickrema is an iconic and an iconoclastic figure. Passionate and provocative, sometimes explosive, there is nothing conformist or indeed correct about him. He cannot be predicted; he will always confound and confuse, do the opposite and be the very opposite of what you expect. He remains uniquely himself and uniquely Sri Lankan.

Many people have written about Tilak Samarawickrema; not many of them have been fortunate enough to have been asked twice. This is not an appraisal by an art historian; it is a gift and a tribute to a friend.

Drawing: "The Line and its Capacity to Create Space"

Tilak's line drawings began as a form of doodling, a restless scribbling which evolved into an art. 'His curving line has its origins in the contours of the Sinhala alphabet, echoing the vaka deka, the classic double curve, which has characterized Sinhala art for almost 2,000 years.

Tilak had always been fascinated by the line and what he felt was "its capacity to create space." In his drawings, curving, laughing lines sweep across the paper. Creating space and form, they open new horizons on the page. His line is a sensual, voluptuous thing, like him, restless and always seeking. His wire sculptures capture this spirit, freezing it in time and space.

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His erotic drawings are perfectly suited to his technique. At first they seem like a mass of lush and rounded curves. As you look closely, details begin to appear. Long overgrowing toenails and fingernails take on a life of their own. Men and women of different ages, shapes and sizes come to life before our eyes; couples meet and match, their bodies touching in a mass of writhing forms and flickering tongues. There is great detail here and even greater depth. By not drawing the full picture, Tilak allows the viewer to complete the picture for himself. Using the line, he creates space for the eye to breathe and the mind to wander. Although it appears to flow so freely, Samarawickrema's art reveals a very precise mastery of line and form. His technique lies at the very foundation of his work. His lines and curves are stencil thin-delicate yet very assured. Working with an architect's drawing pen, he holds it vertically over the paper. He grips it very gently, not too tight, not too loose. Changing the size of the nib, he varies the thickness of the line. He dares not press too hard and has to work with his mistakes.

Tilak's love of animation begins with his short film *Andare of Sri Lanka* (1977), a visual retelling of an ancient Sinhala folktale. Watching his drawings come to life, Tilak learned how to move his lines and synchronize them with sound. He was thrilled by the sense of movement. It introduced him to the possibilities of animation, something which still fascinates him today. He continues to work in this medium, using digital animation to make his lines talk.

Although the process of animation is now easier, the effect remains no less startling. In the Munchie TV Commercial for the T20 Cricket World Cup (2012), trumpets blare as Samarawickrema's lines jump out at you. Beating drums, waving flags and strutting figures evoke the unique flavor of a day at the cricket in Sri Lanka. It is full of fun and noise, both celebration and biting satire.

Having made his lines come alive, Tilak was determined to do the same for his tapestries. *Threads in Voyage* (2010) is an animated film based on his last tapestry exhibition. Deconstructing the forms of his woven tapestries, Tilak plays with the threads to the sound of acid jazz: weaving the geometric forms into an acrobatic display.

Wire Sculpture: "Wire is like line. Instead of a line which I can draw, I substitute it with wire. Drawing on paper has a limitation on size; with wire, I can work on any scale."

Wire provided Tilak with another medium for making his lines come alive, giving them living form in sculpture. He now had the freedom to create a shape of any size. Stretching from floor to ceiling, all his sculptures are larger than life. There is also the play of shadow, which gave a totally different dimension to his lines.

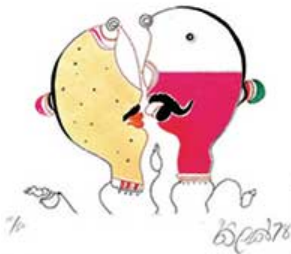
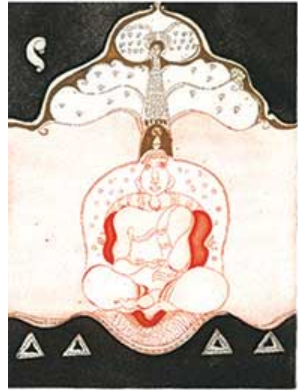
Made out of brass wire, Tilak's *Mythical Garuda Bird* (2016) is inspired by the peacock. A line drawing as a three-dimensional sculpture, the Garuda Bird is a solid form made of lines. A mass of curving shapes picked out in brass, the wire accentuates form of the lines.

Only the head is solid. At night, when the shadows fall, the bird comes alive, the wire gleaming as it glows with inner life. As the sun begins to sink, Tilak nods towards the Garuda with a smile, "See, she's resting now."

Towering over people's heads, the stilt walker was once a common feature in peraheras (processions) across the country. It is a memory which has remained with Tilak through the years. Always unsteady on their feet, the stilt walkers were so far above the ground that they were always tottering here and there. As in the peraheras, Tilak's *Stilt Walkers* (2010) are larger than life. Ten feet tall, they loom above our heads. Quivering patterns of wire, they seem to sway from side to side. *Stilt Walker III* (2015) is a striking mass of curves, moving and dancing in the breeze. The wires are bound tightly together, emphasizing the rounded form.

Still driven by a restless desire for innovation, for Tilak, these works are part of a still evolving process of discovery and experiment.

Copper Plate Etchings: Tilak's interest in etching dates back to 1979 when he attended a summer course in Urbino, Italy. Here he learned the technique by etching on stone and copper plates. As Tilak remembers, it was a tedious and a painstaking process. Drawing with a pointed needle on a copper plate, he scored sharp lines onto the metal. The plate was then dipped in acid which "bit" into the metal, leaving behind the lines. He would then cover the plate with ink. Later on, he would wipe the ink off the surface, leaving only the ink in the etched lines. The plate was then put through a hand press together with a sheet of paper. The paper picked up the ink from the etched lines. It was in this way that his prints, were created.



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