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ART

Singing lines

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

Sri Lankan artist Tilak Samarawickrema's wall hangings are serious and compelling works of art.

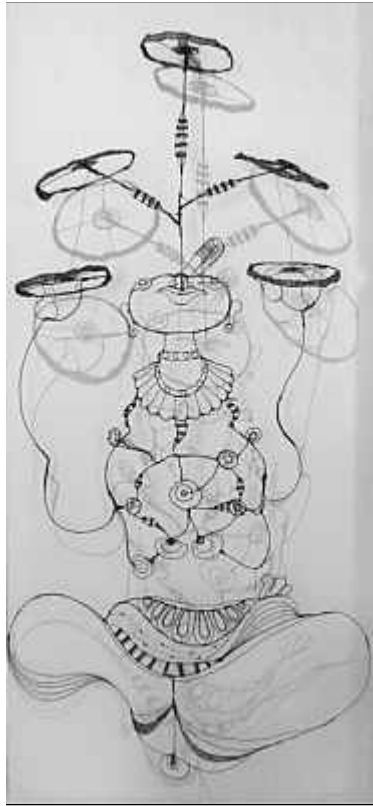
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Tilak Samarawickrema. His integrated approach to all his activities gives his work a rare roundedness.

TILAK SAMARAWICKREMA, the versatile and receptive artist from Sri Lanka, was in Delhi in April exhibiting his intriguing wall hangings at Gallery Art Motif. A fortuitous meeting, courtesy an American art historian friend, Elizabeth Rogers, resulted in the discovery of a truly sensitive, concerned artist with a gentle sense of humour. One discovered that there was more to the man; he had made witty animation films, done his Masters in Architecture from Rome in the early 1970s, and had since become a designer of buildings and factories that were eco-friendly and a pleasure to the eye, and of course a draughtsman with a sensual, singing line, a fact borne out by his lavishly illustrated biography. He came across as a modest man despite his many accomplishments.

The mention of George Keyt, the master of line from Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was known then, who stayed in Rabindranath Tagore's haven for artists, Shantiniketan, during the poet's lifetime in the 1930s was a good conversation opener. Keyt, who always dressed in dhoti-kurta, drew with a sinuous, caressing line that was close to Picasso's when he drew his muse number three, Dora Marr. Tilak quickly pointed out that Keyt 'owed' Picasso for finding solutions to his plastic problems. He laughed heartily when told that Keyt had defended himself by saying that Picasso too owed a debt to the Old Masters, not the least Velasquez!



Samarawickrema uses the shadows cast by the thin wire sculptures imaginatively. Shadow and substance play off each other, corroborating each other's presence.

Tilak's playful, expressive line owes something to the curves in the Sinhala script. What had started as doodling in his student days became a passion by the time he went to Rome. His exhibition of line drawings became a rage and then culminated in the warm, sensitive, humorous animation film on village life in Sri Lanka, *Andare*. It was a mature piece of work using motion sparingly and with wit and subtlety. This film was done in the old Cell Animation technique: 24 drawings were necessary to get a single second of motion. It was indeed a labour of love. *Andare* continues to impress and touch the heart even in this age of highly sophisticated electronics that drives all work in animation.

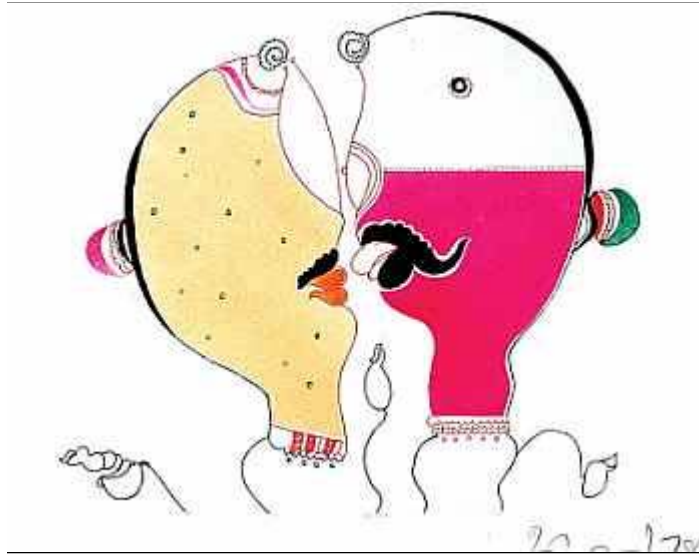
Both in terms of technique and aesthetics, it is a classical animation film and has an affinity with the glorious poetic works of Lotte Rhineger. *Andare* was shot with a bare minimum of means but has an elegance that stands out 33 years after its making.



LINE DRAWINGS (ABOVE and below) have earned Samarawickrema great popularity.

Elizabeth Rogers has called Tilak Samarawickrema “A Sri Lankan Aubrey Beardsley”, most probably because of his flowing line that verges on the decorative. But unlike in the case of the Edwardian Englishman, Tilak's line has a latent power that allows it to change character. In other words, it is not just his signature but a versatile means of expressing seemingly disparate ideas. Being a product of his age, Tilak has allowed his graphic sensibilities to be influenced by the many humorous elements present in Dadaism and Surrealism. His drawings merit serious study by any connoisseur or student of art.

It is difficult to understand on meeting him how good he is at his work or the unusually high degree of refinement of his creative mind. “Have you seen my work at all?” he asked this writer at the first meeting on an evening at India International Centre, New Delhi. On getting an answer in the negative, he said briskly, “Come tomorrow, I'll show you what I have in my computer.” The images in his computer took one by surprise. Here was a sensibility that had refined and absorbed all the eclectic artistic influences acquired during his travels and at the same time retained the imprint of the artist's personality.



The first surprise was *Andare*, which he began in 1974 in Rome. He finished it there four years later. The technique is subtle, spare and sophisticated. The prevailing trend then was to use constant, even frenetic, motion almost all the time. The better animation films often suffered from this malady. First-time film-maker Tilak chose the less popular and more difficult option, that of perfectly timed economical movement highlighted by an evocative sound track. The effect on the eye and the ear is uncanny. The use of black-and-white line drawings that moved in counterpoint to the music and other sound effects took many a connoisseur of animation films by surprise. Seeing the film 33 years after its completion on Tilak's laptop computer was still a treat. His latest offering is done electronically on digital video. Capturing difficult visual effects is a lot easier in this medium, but it still requires a genuine artist to create something witty and playful as Tilak has done. He uses the geometrical patterns on a certain wall hanging of his, sets them in motion and plays them off against a jolly, interesting musical score. When one suggested that the shapes figuring in his animation work here were reminiscent of the abstract works of the Dutch master Piet Mondrian, whose works were the rage in the West particularly in the first half of the 20th century, and that he had stood Mondrian on his head, Tilak laughed out aloud in acknowledgement.

His integrated approach to all his activities – drawing, wire sculpting, animation film-making, toy designing, making wall hangings and practising architecture – gives his work a roundedness that is rarely seen these days. The one name that readily comes to mind is that of the great American designer and experimental film-maker Roy Eames, who visited India, and briefly the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, almost 40 years ago. The seeds of Tilak Samarawickrema's artistic flowering were sown during his 'Italian period', which began in 1971 when the Government of Italy awarded him a postgraduate scholarship in architecture. A year earlier Samudra Gallery in Colombo had hosted an exhibition of his line drawings, which were widely appreciated.



Quenby Prints Facility, the factory complex of Brandix Group at Seethawaka, 55 km from Colombo.

His exhibitions of line drawings in Rome, in other cities of Europe and in New York during this period, which lasted until his return to Sri Lanka in 1983, were popular enough for him to earn a steady living. Tilak had also worked in fabric design on his return to Italy in 1981. He spent the year before entirely in New York. It was a heady period in his life.

On his return home he worked as a consultant to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and helped set up the Design Unit at the Sri Lanka National Design Centre. He worked closely with 200 craftspersons, not only making use of their talent and knowledge, but also helping them to produce work that would meet contemporary needs and tastes. It was through this association that he probably got the idea to create wall hangings that integrated Sri Lankan tradition with certain trends in 20th century Western art. The result of this collaboration has been visually stunning pieces of contemporary art that takes off from a traditional foundation and merges seamlessly with hitherto unimaginable elements like the geometrical works of Mondrian and Joseph Albers and Optical Art that was so popular in Europe and the United States in the 1960s.



Wijemanne House, also designed by Samarawickrema.

Tilak's wall hangings are inspired by a variety of stimuli. They may be the decorative facade for an exorcist ceremony known as “torana-maligawa”, the facade of a Hindu temple in Captain's Garden in Kovil, Colombo, or the patterns on the dresses of traditional Sinhalese dancers. The asymmetrical element in his work also comes from his deep knowledge of contemporary Western art and architecture. He makes elaborate preparatory drawings and illustrations before discussing the technique to best realise his vision with his weavers. The result of this collaboration, on each occasion, is a serious, compelling work of art.

His wire sculptures, springing from the cultural traditions of his land, are entirely his own. They have the flavour of puppet plays that carry within their narrative the myths, legends and folktales that constitute the psyche of a people. He uses the shadows cast by the thin wire sculptures imaginatively, creating an optical illusion that plays on the concept of Maya. Shadow and substance play off each other, corroborating each other's presence. They are very different from, say, the Mobiles of Alexander Calder which he no doubt would have seen in New York or elsewhere in Europe. Calder's Mobiles, beautiful as they are in concept and execution, can but obliquely be related to a post-First World War European culture with tenuous ties with Christianity. To many they appear to be a quietly playful visual representation of existentialist ideas. Tilak's visual moorings come from a Buddhist tradition common to Sri Lanka, and there are also possible influences of the minority Tamil (Hindu) culture of the country. It is this cross-fertilisation that gives these works such buoyancy.



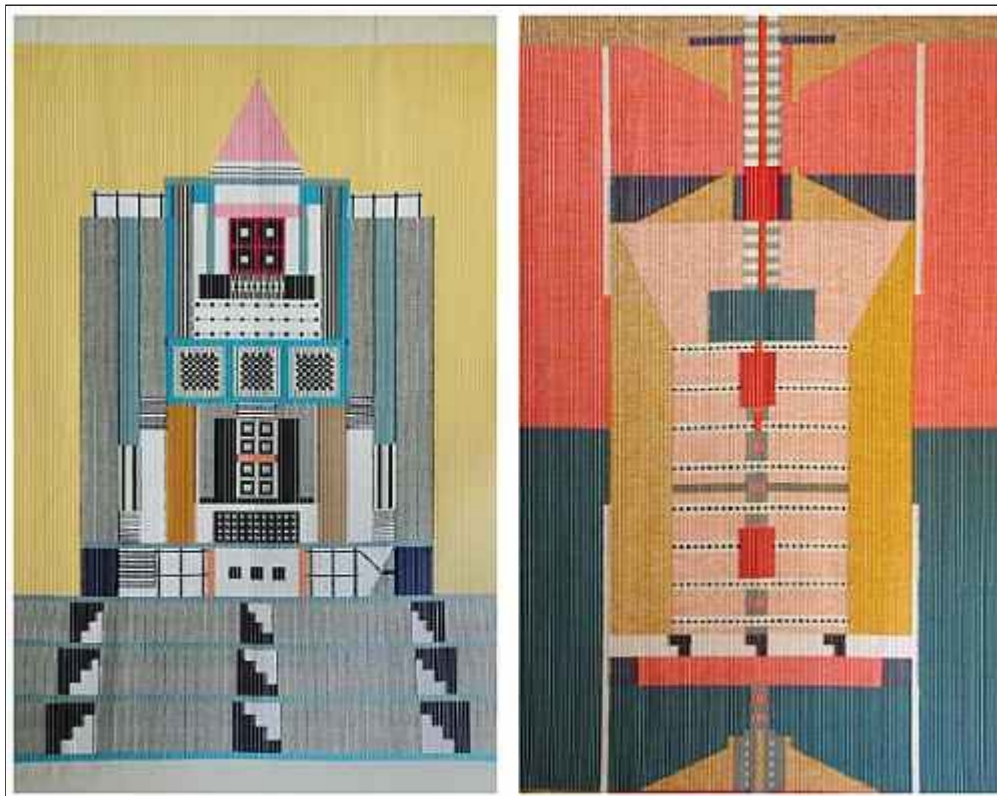
Twin Houses, Colombo. His architectural designs are always eco-friendly. The homes he builds are full of light and air.

Tilak Samarawickrema has all along practised as an architect, and his design group, Tilak Samarawickrema Associates, is widely known and respected for its discerning work. His architectural designs are always eco-friendly and they promote mental and physical health because the homes he builds are full of light and air. His architectural sensibility, to be sure, is modern, but he has also learnt from classical architecture, especially that of Italy, which he studied in depth as a student there. His houses, for all their symmetry, also often contain a most pleasing asymmetrical element within. They are highly liveable spaces. The factories that he has designed show a respect for the lives of the people who work there. There is an awareness of the need for enough greenery around not only to soothe the senses but also to bring down the levels of atmospheric pollution. His ideas seem to have been positively influenced by the idealistic concerns related to Scandanivian industrial architecture. Tilak's designs for factories are a model of social awareness combined with the need for sensible productivity. Indian factory designers could most profitably take a leaf out of Tilak's book.

The creche he has designed is a place where children will feel comfortable and their nascent creativity will find a pleasurable outlet. You can hear the laughter of children and their pleasurable shouts even by looking at a photograph of the place. Tilak's work as an architect combines social awareness in the best sense with a protean artist's sensibility.



In the pages of his (mainly visual) biography titled Ink of Lanka with brief but perceptive texts by many scholarly friends, mainly from Europe, Tilak's generosity of spirit comes through quite easily. From the black-and-white photographs emerge a psychological history of a man who is completely at ease in a cultural ambience vastly different from his own. He is able to be a citizen of the world because he is so secure about the cultural moorings that are his by inheritance.



Samarawickrema uses geometrical patterns in his wall hangings.

He must have been widely liked, even loved, by his friends in Italy as well as those he made elsewhere in Europe and in New York because of an amiability that comes naturally to him and which is an

expression of both his self-confidence and his good nature. His sparkling intelligence comes across in his drawings in the book, as does his slightly naughty sense of humour. His youthful eyes have in the photos the far-off look of a traveller, as they do even now, well over 40 years later. He has the demeanour of a playful seeker. Like a restless child he must constantly be doing something and have his sense of curiosity challenged. Tilak Samarawickrema's work is a source of delight for all those who know it.



THE ASYMMETRICAL ELEMENT in his work comes from his deep knowledge of contemporary Western art and architecture.

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