

# Living on the Margins

## Original concept artworks

*Living on the Margins* is the artistic outcome of two different research projects that aim to understand war-to-peace transitions in Sri Lanka and Nepal. The project culminated in the homonymous touring exhibition which was seen in April-June 2018 in Kathmandu (Nepal), Colombo and Batticaloa (Sri Lanka) and London (UK). The exhibition included original conceptual artworks commissioned by PositiveNegatives to Sri Lankan artists Pakkiyarajah Pushpakanthan and Abdul Halik Azeez, with an underlying assumption that art can facilitate discussion on topics such as transitional justice, state reform, post-war development and inclusion.

This resource makes these original artworks available, together with their notable concept notes, as educational tools to engage the viewer in a meaningful conversation between artistic practice and contemporary social issues. Discussion points are provided at the end of this document to stimulate classroom debate or individual reflection.

For more info about the wider research project you can visit the official website [borderlandsasia.org](http://borderlandsasia.org).

### Summary

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Abdul Halik Azeez, *Lotus Power*



Work on the Lotus Tower began in 2012, at completion it will likely be one of the tallest, if not the tallest, constructions in South Asia.

No one knows what exactly the Lotus Tower is supposed to be for. There are stories that it is going to house a restaurant at the top, but it seems rather meaningless to build such a huge construction just for a restaurant.

Most people seem to think that this tower will be used for communications, and of course surveillance. Wikipedia seems to corroborate this, its entry for the tower says that it will be used for "communication, observation and other leisure facilities".

The Lotus Tower has become the de-facto symbol of Colombo. You cannot escape its gaze. It is so tall that you can see it from almost anywhere, forever changing the skyline of the city. In Buddhism the lotus symbolizes fortune, rising as it does out of unclean, muddy waters, or in this case Colombo. The Tower seems to signify Colombo's transformation from unclean to clean, from old to new, from bad to good, from poor to rich.

These pictures were taken when neighborhoods in Vauxhall Street were evicted to make way for a park surrounding the Beira Lake and the Tower, in December 2017. 'Low income neighborhoods' were removed so that the landscape would look 'beautiful'.

The event mirrors the history of recent evictions in Colombo. Always the 'poor', 'unclean' and 'ugly' have been removed to make way for the 'beautiful', 'clean' and 'wealthy'. In this process, people have been effectively ghettoized in ways that are highly insensitive to their livelihoods, culture and lifestyles. Taking their former places, Big Capital projects have flourished.

At the core of Colombo's post-war development drive, concepts such as 'wealth', 'growth' and 'success' are taking on meanings directly borrowed from the languages of neoliberalism and materialism.

This is Colombo trying to achieve its dream of becoming a 'world class city'. A narrative embraced by those that hold power and the population at large alike.

'Lotus Power' an 8 fold zine by Abdul Halik Azeez, April 2018. [cargocollective.com/abduhalikazeez](http://cargocollective.com/abduhalikazeez)





## Concept Note for *Lotus Power*

Written by Abdul Halik Azeez

Work on the Lotus Tower began in 2012. At completion, it will likely be one of the tallest, if not the tallest of all constructions in South Asia. No one knows exactly what **purpose** the Lotus Tower will serve. There are stories that it is going to house a restaurant at the top, but it seems rather meaningless to build such a huge construction just for a restaurant. Most people think that this tower will be used for communications, and of course surveillance. Wikipedia appears to validate these rumors, as its entry for the tower says that it will be used for “communication, observation and other leisure facilities”.

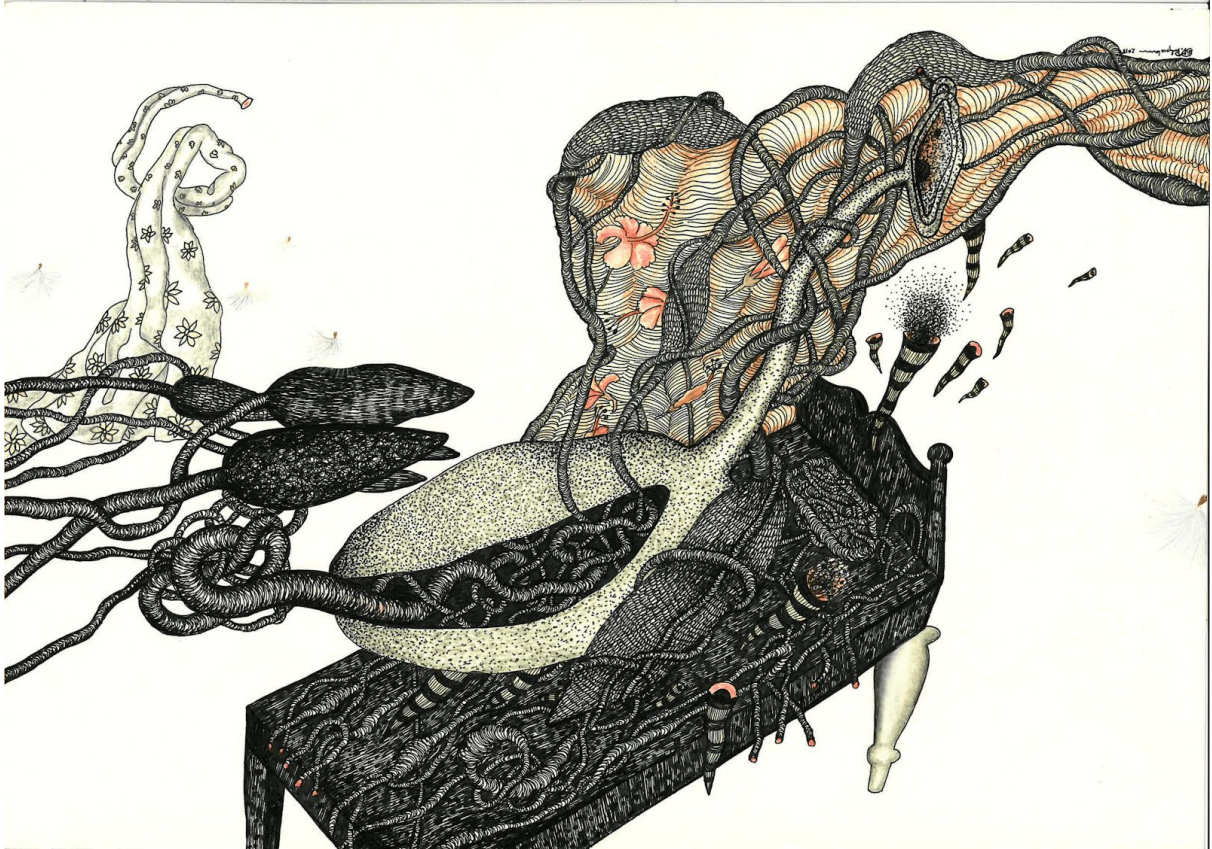
The Lotus Tower has forever changed the **skyline** of the city; it is so tall that a person can see it from almost anywhere. One cannot escape its gaze. The building has become the de facto **symbol of Colombo**. In Buddhism, the **lotus flower** symbolizes fortune, as it rises out of unclean, muddy waters, or in this case, it rises out of Colombo. The Tower seems to signify Colombo’s process of **purification and transformation** from ‘unclean’ to ‘clean’, from ‘old’ to ‘new’, from ‘bad’ to ‘good’, from ‘poor’ to ‘rich’... I took the pictures that compose my creation at a time when **eviction** of residents in Vauxhall was taking place, to make way for a park surrounding the Beira Lake and the Tower. Low-income neighbourhoods were removed so that the landscape would look ‘beautiful’. The event mirrors the history of recent evictions in Colombo. In this scheme, the ‘poor’, ‘unclean’ and ‘ugly’ are being pushed out to make space for the ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’ and ‘wealthy’.

The **ghettoization of underserved communities** is taking place in ways that are highly insensitive to their livelihoods, culture and lifestyles. Taking their former places, Big Capital projects are flourishing. At the core of Colombo’s **post-war development** drive, concepts such as wealth, growth and success are taking on meanings directly borrowed from the languages of neoliberalism and materialism. Colombo is trying to achieve its dream of becoming a world-class city. Interestingly, this **narrative** is embraced both by those that hold power and the population at large.

*Lotus Power*, digital media, 2018. Courtesy of PositiveNegatives and the artist.



Pakkiyarajah Pushpakanthan, *Living with The Disappeared*



## Concept Note for *Living with The Disappeared*

Written by Pakkiyarajah Pushpakanthan

Incidents that mark the collective **physical and mental suffering** of my country compel me because of the deep and prolonged pain Sri Lanka is finally emerging from. My creations are a psychological analysis of my reactions to such suffering. In my work, beyond the process of coming to terms with the past, I take part in the post-war space addressing the question: *What comes next?*. I am a distant **witness** to ever-present trauma, while I reflect on the effects that globalization has on agency, identity and gender. This reflection enables me to represent a generation trapped between a tragic history and the demands for **justice and reconciliation**. While I recognise the difficulty of finding universal answers, through my art I try to help the observer empathise with feelings of loneliness and what it means to be forced to start life all over again.

My piece for *Living on the Margins* explores **disappearance**: specifically, disappearances in my hometown of Batticaloa, located in the Eastern Province, as a result of Sri Lanka's civil war. My uncle disappeared in 1997, and our family is still trying to understand what may have happened to him, also considering the possibility that he may be still alive. The families of the disappeared often perform **religious ceremonies** where they offer flowers to deities, hoping that their prayers will reach their loved ones. The **hibiscus** in my painting symbolizes their hopes that blossom but then fade away. My work is fundamentally about the **emotional torture** that these families continue to face because of the lack of answers to their questions. The impossibility to help who is suffering results in an exploration of memory, imagination and fear. In this new dimension, people are living in between their hope to meet the disappeared people again and the reality of their memories.

My work recognises the human need to situate individual suffering within the context of the suffering of others. Embracing and sharing our suffering is, in my opinion, the way to move forward. **Abandoned furniture**, along with discarded traces of daily life, become the medium that connects impressions of ordinary life with what has been shattered and burned by the war. The bed is drawn in the shape of a human body to represent not only the dead but also the wounded, disappeared, displaced and traumatised.

In this piece, I have also incorporated visual imagery of the local **creeper plant**. In my childhood, I blew the seeds of the creeper, and watched them disperse into the wind. As an innocent child, I performed this act carelessly, without thinking about where those seeds would ultimately end up. Similarly, I believe international and local actors are toying with the trauma, pain and deep-rooted emotions of these families for their own gains, without thinking about the long-term effects of **partisan politics and inaction**.

It is my hope that this work will create a space for **marginalised voices**, for remembering and healing a silenced past, and for initiating honest discussions about what reconciliation truly means, both within the context of my country, and in war-torn societies elsewhere.

*Living with The Disappeared.* Original size: 29.7x42cm, mixed media (archival ink and pencil colour) on paper, 2018. Courtesy of PositiveNegatives and the artist.

## Discussion Points

1. What kind of representation is offered of Colombo's recent transformation into a world-class city in *Lotus Power*? Why?
  2. What do you think is the purpose of this transformation and how does it affect locals?
  3. What do "ghettoization" and "underserved communities" mean?
  4. Why do you think people disappeared during the Sri Lankan civil war?
  5. How does *Living with The Disappeared* engage with the themes of justice and reconciliation?
  6. What does the artist mean when he refers to "emotional torture" in his concept note? Do you agree? Why/why not?
  7. Reflect on the differences and similarities in the two artworks in terms of themes, perspectives, media and styles. How do they relate to the wider *Living on the Margins* project? Which one do you prefer and why?
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