

War and Its Objects: Reflections of the Sri Lankan Civil War in S. P. Pushpakanthan's Art

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This paper examines visual texts by the Sri Lankan artist S. P. Pushpakanthan, whose art is positioned at the intersection between the effects of war and its material effect on objects. Two research questions frame this paper: what knowledge(s) about violence do Pushpakanthan's texts produce as reflecting, reflected objects? how do these texts challenge anthropocentric views of objects and violence and create an esthetics of the "democracy of objects," as Levi Bryant would put it? To answer the first, I turn to what Steven Miller has called "violence worse than death." Miller proposes that violence targets more than the death of a single, delimited life, and sees violence as being directed toward the totality of the living and non-living world. To answer the second, I draw on Object-Oriented Ontology, implied closely by the artist's own description of his work as being about the "ontology of the object." In Pushpakanthan's art, objects function as a visual coda for violence; they are traces, not only of the immediacy of killing, but the totality of the violence against all things. The esthetics of such an ontology is a formal reflection of the affective effects of violence of war that destroys much more than mere life.

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