

Jagath Dheerasekara

Seemingly Innocent

2020

eight-channel video

00:09:57min each

Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery for Hobart Current: Liberty 2020 Inaugural Biennial. With thanks to Jerome Pearce and Lyndal Irons.

Between 2013 and 2018, Jagath Dheerasekara filmed himself standing before a series of seemingly innocent building façades in Sri Lanka, those such as schools, gymnasiums, factories and theatres. These are the buildings that, although initially intended for the community, were temporally repurposed for the use of interrogation and torture during the 1987-90 Southern Uprising. Decades later, the buildings have either been demolished or resumed their original functions, their walls freshly painted and their surfaces clean. They bear no visible trace of the violence Dheerasekara remembers.

I do not know why I did it— perhaps to preserve memory, to resist the state's erasure...

Creating the work was both an endurance and a catharsis: a way to honour the thousands lost, including close comrades and friends, and a fulfilling of an obligation carried for decades.

Seemingly Innocent draws on over two decades of the artist's research into Sri Lanka's torture chambers, making visible what he remembers: ordinary household objects such as clothing irons, pens, books and plastic bags being repurposed as instruments of torture; and unassuming building-fronts which belie the acts of violence that once ensued within. Dheerasekara, standing resolutely in each frame, returns through memory the truths which have, for so long, been buried beneath an innocent façade.

Presented here as components of a museological display, *Seemingly Innocent* reckons with the task of preserving and archiving that which no longer tangibly exists. By presenting traces of memories and a subjective lived experience as historical record, Dheerasekara resists the notion that historical truth must depend upon a physical trace or a position of neutrality. Here, the idea of the 'archive' is repositioned as a repository of the invisible, intangible, and felt— something that can continually reshape and expand our understanding of the past, and in doing so, broaden our assumptions of whose voice authors the historical narrative.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Memorabilia Box from Home

2019

mixed media: polymer, silk, cardboard

35 x 38 x 28cm

Courtesy of the artist. With thanks to Sue Harris

Sri Lanka is often portrayed as a tourist haven, a tropical island paradise, and at first glance, *Memorabilia Box from Home* resembles a keepsake or souvenir: a pristine white box lined with the bright colours of the Sri Lankan flag and its iconic lion emblem. Yet the delicate objects that lie within this polished container are, upon close inspection, a facsimile set of bones.

In recent decades, more than twenty mass graves have been uncovered across the South and North-East of Sri Lanka, a literal and metaphorical resurfacing of the island's violent past. These discoveries serve as tangible reminders of the lives lost and histories buried from the 1987-90 uprising in the South and the struggles in the North and East over thirty years; fracturing the paradisaical, state-sanctioned image of serenity.

Each revelation deepens the dissonance— between the curated paradise and the persistence of the dead.

The term 'memorabilia' is used to describe something which stirs or recollects the past, often in association with ornamental objects treasured for their sentimental value. *In Memorabilia Box from Home*, recollection is neither comforting nor ornamental. The memorabilia Dheerasekara carries are charged with grief and resistance, but they are carried, nonetheless.

To keep this box is to endure in the difficult labour of remembering. It is a simple and honest act – to resist forgetting – and yet its faculty is one of profound determination, resilience, and resistance. *Memorabilia Box from Home* acknowledges 'home' as a space of duality for Dheerasekara – a site of both belonging and of traumatic memory – and transforms the act of keeping into one of bearing witness.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Flag: Mythology, Pride, and My Experience

2025

pigment ink on linen

90 x 130cm each

Courtesy of the artist. With thanks to Jerome Pearce, Lisa Barrett, Next State

Sri Lanka's flag carries deep cultural and religious symbolism, interwoven with ancient legend and postcolonial identity. When independence was granted in 1948, the lion – long present in Sinhala mythology, with *Sinhala* being the Sinhalese word for 'lion' – was adopted as the symbol of the new state. Its later embedding within the framework of Buddhist nationalism further entwined these ideas of faith, power, and belonging.

Here, those historical virtues are reconsidered through a personal, reflective lens. Four framed flags, at first appearing identical and unassuming, each reveal a subtle intervention: in the lion's grip, instead of the usual *kastane* (sword), rest everyday household tools such as a clothes iron, battery clips, and pair of pliers – objects used in interrogation centres during the 1987-90 uprising. These substitutions transform the emblem from one of national pride into a meditation on personal and collective memory, and the hidden complexities of history.

Dheerasekara's reimagining acknowledges the layered meanings that accrue in national symbols over time. For the artist, the lion flag no longer speaks solely of mythic origins or collective pride, but of lived experience. Of how state power can silently shape, and often distort, narratives of identity and unity.

It has become the emblem of the state's duality: historical iconography concealing sanctioned brutality.

By placing seemingly ordinary domestic tools within the lion's grasp, Dheerasekara creates a site of contemplation: an emblem of resilience and remembrance, where familiarity is charged with unease, and where symbols of heritage are made to reflect the weight of the history they carry.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Dystopian Inheritance

2022

found objects

38 x 50 x 25cm

Courtesy of the artist. With thanks to Anita Johnson and Liz Jenid's Art Studio

Precarity and an uncanny tension between belonging and unbelonging are evoked in *Dystopian Inheritance*, an assemblage of objects invariably suggestive of the domestic such as bottles, teapots, ornaments, and an inverted plastic crown. These objects, undoubtedly imbued with memory, appear mismatched: salvaged and re-oriented, re-staged and re-contextualised. Yet as components which seemingly should not co-exist, together, they project an unsettling sense of authority and order.

Granted dominion independence under the British crown in 1948, the country inherited not liberation but a carefully stage-managed dystopian legacy

Dystopian Inheritance reflects on Sri Lanka's paradoxical 1948 independence by confronting the enduring colonial legacies of the island's past, drawing upon remnants from the successive Portuguese (1505-1685), Dutch (1685-1796) and British (1796-1948) occupations. The sculptural components reveal how the ghosts of empirical rule persist— not only through material remains, but through inherited hierarchies, aesthetics, and moral codes that imbue the social and cultural fabric of the island nation.

Observing how sovereignty has taken shape in Sri Lanka's post-colonial statehood, *Dystopian Inheritance* questions how a nation can begin to build an authentic sense of self when its very foundations remain entangled within the structures imposed by colonial rule.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Dinner Table

2025

printed enamel plates and wood

80 x 120 x 75cm

Courtesy of the artist. Made in collaboration with Bargo Men's Shed
(Richard de-Groot, Peter Sutton, Mick Vince and John Wooton)

A familiar symbol of hospitality and gathering, the domestic dinner table is here transformed into a site of subtle unease. The table legs uneven, the surface skewed. Rather than perpetuating an image of warmth and connection, *Dinner Table* signals an imbalance and an underlying disquiet that lingers beneath the surface façade.

During Sri Lanka's Southern Uprising, similar tables were reportedly used in interrogation centres as instruments for humiliation and torture. Detainees were served meals on the same enamel plates used to feed stray cats and dogs, collapsing the boundary between human and animal, transforming this apparatus of daily life into one subsequently devoid of humanity.

Dheerasekara spent several months working collaboratively at the Bargo Men's Shed when building this object, a process involving conversation and sharing of personal histories. Working collaboratively becomes a collective act of remembrance, one that brings to light narratives suppressed by the state and, through shared authorship, reaffirms their place within the historical record. Personal memory becomes communal resistance. By reconstructing this object, Dheerasekara reveals how everyday items can betray their unassuming exteriors, bear the weight of complex and traumatic histories, and echo the distortion of historical truth in official, state-sanctioned narratives.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Breath

2025

letterpress printing and hand colouring on cold-press watercolour paper

20 x 160 x 12cm

Courtesy of the artist. Made in collaboration with Penrith Museum of Printing
(John Berry, Steve Boyd, Graham Elphick, Dennis Cox, Matt Tilbury and Robert Lockley)

Over several months, Dheerasekara has been working collaboratively with the Penrith Museum of Printing to create *Breath*, a concertina book of hand-coloured prints and traditionally typeset poetry, printed using traditional historical printing press materials and techniques.

It is often said that those living in exile inhabit two places at once. For Dheerasekara, Australia is now home, yet the memory of Sri Lanka persists, an internal landscape shaped by a continual reckoning with the past. Through the printing of his poetry, which recalls his experiences as a survivor of torture and as a political and human rights activist during Sri Lanka's 1987-1990 Southern Uprising, Dheerasekara brings to light narratives long obscured by state-sanctioned histories. By situating these poems within the context of print, a medium once used to disseminate official news, he reclaims the process as a space for testimony and truth-telling. And in doing so, extends witnesses from the individual to the collective, opening a dialogue that connects his personal memory to broader experiences of hidden histories.

The collaborative process with the traditional printmakers – John Berry, Steve Boyd, Graham Elphick, Dennis Cox, Matt Tilbury and Robert Lockley – further subverts the historical function of the printing press as an instrument of authority. Here, Dheerasekara reimagines it as a tool for recovery and circulation of suppressed truths.

Re-staged in *Breath*, the concertina book unfolds Dheerasekara's fragmentary poems and hand-coloured prints in a continuous form, one with no beginning or end, evoking a history that – much like a river – reveals, unravels, and renews itself over time, its folding structure embodying a tension between revelation and concealment, between the seen and unseen, between the known and forgotten.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Lament of Mahaveli

2025

single-channel video

00:10:00min

Courtesy of the artist. With thanks to Lorand Golebiowski and Sandakelum Bandara

The sacred Mahaveli River, the longest waterway in Sri Lanka, moves here in a quiet, constant motion. But it is a deceptive calm. The image of tranquillity is interrupted by the ripples in the current and by the water's edge, which reveals faint human profiles emerging from the paradisaical, rhythmic flow of water. Resurfacing echoes of those who, according to the state-sanctioned narrative, 'disappeared' following a massacre on the banks of the Mahaveli in 1989...

...erased into silence by fear and the river's current.

Presented as a video installation, *Lament of Mahaveli* depicts the river as a dual site of serenity and sorrow, a notion that is all the more resonant as the perennial Yandhai/Nepean River, with its own memories of historical violence, flows opposite the Lewers House Gallery. The river here becomes a metaphor and a method for the continual submerging, uncovering, revealing of memory. Constantly charged and able to wash away, the river emerges as a site of remembrance, carrying and resurfacing sediment in time. That which seemingly disappears beneath the surface persists, disguised by the reflections and refractions of water.

Lament of Mahaveli does not merely represent the past, it presses it into a living body, into matter. The Mahaveli, then, becomes a silent witness to violence and decimation, a quiet archive of what official histories sought to conceal. Memory is forged into a coursing current that persists from the past to the present moment, countering practices of imposed, manufactured forgetting.

Through this subtle yet haunting animation, Dheerasekara allows the Mahaveli to testify to its own histories. The timeless, melancholic current of water refuses to forget. A river is a witness and, by becoming part of its lament, we too share in the re-memory of histories to challenge the forces that seek to bury them.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Glass Turned Steel

2025

glass, wood, steel

30 x 80 x 25cm

Courtesy of the artist. With thanks to Bargo Men's Shed (Peter Sutton and John Wooton) and Lisa Barrett.

*Between 1987 and 1990, in Sri Lanka, detainees taken into custody did not return...
The state recorded them only as 'disappeared.'*

It is a misconception that what cannot be seen is something which does not, or did not, exist; that to have 'disappeared' from sight is the same thing as a presence erased. *Glass Turned Steel* is a work made from glass shards, steel, and wood— found objects that are subsequently charged with personal and collective memory through acts of re-contextualisation and re-assembly. Here, the precarious sculpture rests on a domestic bookshelf, as though an object from a personal archive, a marker of a particular moment in time. But its modest scale and familiar setting belie the gravity of what it holds, turning the quotidian environment into a site of reckoning.

I remember...

Time has worn off some detail, yet some memories remain deeply rooted, refusing the softening that happens over time.

Glass Turned Steel not only evinces the physical endurance of memory; it also brings to light that state erasures leave a piercing echo behind, persisting as memories, still visible when light catches their sharp, jagged edges. Here, histories and 'disappearances' are made visible and tangible through the tactility and metaphorical potential of glass. Suppressed memories can pierce through the smooth veneer of official history. And by looking through this work, through the sharp translucence of glass, we see what the state once sought to render invisible. In this act of seeing, *Glass Turned Steel* becomes both memorial and defiance, an assertion that the disappeared persists in memory, light, and material form.