

A delight to the eye and a challenge to the conscience

Lesley Burgess writes on Anoma Wijewardene's recent London exhibition

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Anoma with two young art enthusiasts and (bottom right) with author Romesh Gunsekera. The single small red figure in painting in the background is a reference to Greta Thunberg

The opening of the exhibition at the Camden Image Gallery in London was a lively event, the gallery was overflowing with guests. It was a cold November night but in the gallery the warmth was tangible – not just the heat from crowds of visitors but also from the excitement aroused by this exhibition. The exhibition *Our Existence Abstracted* curated by Jana Manuelpillai, the Director of Noble Sage, showcases the work of three very different South Asian artists: Priya Barcot, Athiveerapandian and Anoma Wijewardene. However, it was Anoma's work, although perhaps the most restrained and considered, that made the strongest impression on me. Her maturity from 50 years as an artist is apparent in these new works as was her ongoing commitment to highlighting issues of climate change. It is no coincidence that she was selected to show her work during this year's Venice Biennale- the first solo artist from Sri Lanka to ever show work at this influential international venue.

Anoma has suggested that perhaps the 'message' in these paintings about climate change is too subtle, but linger a little longer, look a little closer and her concerns and references, although abstracted, become so clear you wonder why you didn't see them immediately. Perhaps this is the part of her message, imploring us to stop and take time to reflect on what we are doing to the world. Anoma explains how these new paintings are a tribute to the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg for 'her extraordinary passion and commitment to take the world on, to raise a clarion call for critical international action before the planet is annihilated'. In fact the single small red figure that inhabits each of her paintings in this show is a reference to Greta

Thunberg. In fact this is the first time ever that the artist has named a figure in her works. It is no coincidence that the Swedish embassy in London have taken an interest these paintings.

The works on display are smaller and more intense than many of Anoma's earlier 'mixed media' paintings. In this new series entitled 'The world is not given by his father but borrowed from his children' a quote from James Audubon, the tense twisting lines, contorted cracks and fractured fissures evoke a sense of pending danger, yet they still manage to reference the sublime - the intangible, ethereal elements which dominate her earlier paintings.

They are both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually demanding, a delight to the eye and a challenge to the conscience.

The titles of the paintings are carefully selected quotations from eminent scholars and thinkers both past and present including the ancient Lao Tsu 'The World is a sacred vessel. If you try to meddle with it you will ruin it. If you try to own it you will lose it', and David Attenborough's statement this year 'We are a plague on earth. Either we limit our population growth or the natural world will do it for us'. Each title powerfully reflects and reinforces the message in the paintings they accompany.

But, for me, the most poignant quotation is this one by Anoma's father - Ray Wijewardene: 'We need a fresh paradigm towards a permanent truce with nature, in concurrence with her pace and in sync with her rhythm'. This quotation gets to the heart of Anoma's driving concerns. The need for a paradigm change – one that is in tune with nature. These powerful abstract paintings, in their dramatic use of composition and colour, allude to what will happen if we do not.

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