

# Rendering the Sacred

by Nedra Rodrigo

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*It begins with a smell. Something both sweet and savoury. Something that reaches in through your nostrils into your belly and carves out a void. There is hunger that is not hunger and you begin to know a desire that now has a name.*

In the 15th century, Iberian explorations led to the creation of new trade routes, an intercontinental trade economy and the growth of colonial empires. Portugal and Spain sailed armed with Papal sanction to establish trade monopolies and religious expansion. Lanka grew in fame as a spice island. Waves of traders and settlers, Portuguese, Dutch and later English, changed both its natural and linguistic landscape. These waves left their mark in place names -- evocative Kurunthuwatte (Cinnamon Gardens), utilitarian Kochikade (Kochi market), and sinister Slave Island (also known as Kompaniveediya). The island itself shifted from Serendib to Ceylavo to Ceylon over the coming centuries. The settlers left their mark in churches scattered throughout the island, but it is in Catholic churches that devotees of multiple faiths gather in syncretic prayer for miracles. There they light candles and murmur novenas in churches of scaled down gothic architecture, pitching trades to icons and frescoes, the deities of merchant.

*This thing you crave will draw you across waters – deep, unfathomably deep, through parching days and storm-wracked nights, through waves that lift your vessel to the heavens and crash it down into brine and you pray; you pray to every deity you can summon from your childhood litanies. Holy... pray for us... save us...pray for us...you make vows, make promises, and wait out those desperate infinite hours until one day your vessel heaves itself onto a sandbank and you fall out, staggered, drenched, wrinkled, exhausted, onto ground that stays.*

Joshua Vettivelu's exhibition *prayers for a word (or a lack that builds the world)* draws from a history that is both rich and suffocating, confronting the ways in which internalized narratives of death, spirituality, sexuality, and colonialism may be externalized through the production of art. In casting their grandmother's hand in a gesture of benediction drawn from religious iconography, Vettivelu references the permeation of colonial and religious dominance into intimate filial spaces. The medium of *prayers for a word (or a lack that builds the world)*, beeswax coloured with spices, underscores the inseparability of ecclesiastical and mercantile interests as they each buttress the other in the colonial project. Trade incursions brought with them missionaries who prescribed the lives of saints as exemplary of moral behaviour and reified settler colonial power through the surveillance and production of docile bodies among local populations. The gesture of the wax hand is both a blessing and a sign to stop, each deriving its legitimacy from the other. *prayers for a word (or a lack that builds the world)* also speaks to how religious icons and artworks are consumed by their respective audiences. As the wax hands slowly melt during the exhibition, they connote the wear on the limbs of religious icons subject to the devotional caresses of the faithful.

*And the promises, the vows collide in your head, and you cast around and you say, there... I will build a cathedral, a church, a chapel there... and the ground stays and you are safe.*

Where the displayed work of art is kept out of reach, its consumption is suggested through the inhalation of the fragrance of the spices that emanate from the melting hands. The wax hands lose shape and take the form of their display plinths. This pedestal shifts the viewer's gaze from the object displayed to the practice of displaying objects for reverence. The disappearance of the object and the lingering scent of spices that grow increasingly cloying and unpleasant as they burn, speak to the violence of the spice trade and the colonization of Sri Lanka as well as post-independence insurgencies, pogroms, and war.

*The journey becomes a memory, lines cross-hatching a map like the palm of your hand and there will be more journeys, and more trade, and more of that spice and it feeds you and yours and you cannot imagine a meal, a celebration without it and it is yours now, and it has a name, and it enters your language, and it becomes metaphor, and you know it was always there.*

*prayers for a word (or a lack that builds the world)* invites the observer into an exploration of reliquaries and cultural artifacts that are deemed worthy of preservation. The site of the exhibit, a former mill that supplied the British Empire with a popular Cream of Barley cereal, resonates meaningfully with the histories of colonization, monocultures, and commerce critiqued by the installation. Consistent with Vettivelu's oeuvre the installation turns on the practice of curation itself, raising intriguing questions on the nature of value, the permanence of historicization, the commodification of the sacred, and the deep threads of violence that underpin them all.