

War art, instinctual drives and nationalism with reference to “The Shrine of Innocents”: Interpreting contemporary history through war art

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War art is presented to public in many forms which vary from painting, sculpture, installations to graffiti, which in all their forms propel the message of either propaganda or futility of war. “The Shrine of Innocents” falls into the latter category. The installation artist, Jagath Weasinghe was commissioned by then government, to create the war monument cum war installation piece. It was erected in commemoration of over 60,000 youth who had lost their lives during the 70’s and 80’s insurrections. The objective of this research paper is to investigate the reasons behind its rather clandestine existence and disappearance. First, it was a constant reminder and acknowledgement of an individual’s right to oppose the authority and order which challenges the power of the hegemony. I will be using Freudian concept, when “Taboo” is no longer such and transforms itself to a “totem”, and consequences to the authority. Secondly, the power of higher art in inducing critical thinking which reinterprets the recorded history as discussed by Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson. Thirdly, “The Shrine of Innocents” was a physical reminder of the parody of predominantly Sinhala Buddhist identity which breeds nationalistic ideology among the general mass. Fourthly, by acknowledging one group of youth the government has to acknowledge other groups of youth who fought for their rights from the North, East and South who were also victims of the system thus, damaging the fable of nationalism. In conclusion, I will be using works of Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson to investigate the research question as presented above in order to reinterpret the contemporary history through the war- monument, “The Shrine of Innocents”.

Keywords: critical thinking, ideology, insurrection, nationalism, taboo, totem