

Catalogue essay for the Daraniyagala Retrospective sponsored by the Deutsche Bank, Colombo, Sri Lanka (December 1992).

(RE) DISCOVERING DARANIYAGALA

by Ellen Dissanayake



Three Figures, Baby and Tortoise. Oil on canvas (148 × 124 cm).
Mr and Mrs. Arjun Daraniyagala Collection.

After twenty-five years of relative obscurity, the paintings and drawings of the mid-century Sri Lankan painter, Justin Daraniyagala (1903 – 1967), have attracted fascinated attention as a result of the retrospective exhibition sponsored by the George Keyt Foundation in early November of this year. We must be grateful to Mr. Bernhard Steinrücke of the Deutsche Bank who has organized another retrospective in December so that people can have a second look or discover the work for the first time.

Learning that such works have been occupying walls, cupboards, and storerooms in the homes of the late painter's close relatives for the past quarter-century is something like finding out that your neighbours have been secretly harbouring an unsuspected family member and, moreover, not a madman in the attic but someone who seems intriguing and rewarding to know.

How could his traces have gone unnoticed for so long? Why has he been hidden away? What is this new presence in our midst really like?

It is always gratifying to discover something wondrous and unexpected: the famous word “serendipity” is perhaps especially appropriate when applied to the felicitous appearance of the works of a painter in the land whose ancient name occasioned the coinage of that word. My response to the uncommon and overpowering experience of Daraniyagala’s work is to want to sort out an avalanche of impressions. Although the late Ranil Deraniyagala wrote a long and perceptive essay about his uncle for the Times of Ceylon Annual in 1968, Justin Daraniyagala’s works seem to be the kind of which there is always more to say. In the present essay, then, I wish to try to understand something about the kind of person he was, to capture the essence of his particular artistic language – his vision or style, and to articulate why certain paintings seem so powerful.

To begin with, there would seem to be a fundamental paradox in his basic nature that can also be discerned in his art. According to those who knew him, Daraniyagala was an energetic, fascinating, nonstop talker; at the same time, he chose in 1942 (at age 39) to leave Colombo for his family home in the village of Nuggedola in Pasyala, where he was to see no one but his parents (his mother was frequently indisposed) and household staff for days on end until the end of his life. He never married, and was in extremely ill health for several years before his death. The contradiction of being a brilliant, stimulating, and eager talker with deliberately choosing to lead a reclusive and introverted life can perhaps be discerned in his paintings in their combination of restlessness, boldness, and daring in composition, themes, and techniques with (what seems to be evident in the work as a whole) a determined solitary path that resulted in a unique painterly language. Obviously his art, and his personal need to make his art, took precedence over everything else.

Daraniyagala’s paintings exhibit an unusual authority and power. Yet they are the opposite of fluent, and few are beautiful in any conventional sense. Only a handful are signed, and even fewer dated, suggesting that he rarely considered a picture to be complete, “finished.” If we did not already know from friends who used to visit him that paintings metamorphosed into many lives from clay to day, week to week, month to month, and even year to year, this continued reworking would be evident from the tormented patches of paint abutting one another, or overlapping, and even laid down like geological strata. While the result often seems to be in whole or in part a mess – a record of good intentions, new avenues sighted, whims indulged, and even desperation, in his most successful works a resting place is achieved. This stopping point is not always a final solution or a happy ending, but the aftermath of a struggle which in the end has amounted to something, even if one is hard-pressed to say just what that *something* is and even though it may leave a wake of unresolved corners or loose ends.

And even when some works appear to reach a kind of perfection, it is not easy to give a reason why, other than one sheerly in terms of painterly achievement. Who, for instance, would expect to want to kneel or weep in front of a picture showing three adults, a baby in arms, and a tortoise? Whatever could such subject matter “mean” that it would inspire a painter or transfigure a viewer? Yet there is *something* (that word again) in the mindless automatic forward motion of the small tortoise at the bottom of the canvas, pictorially admitted into the outplayed fan of feet. There is also something in the mother’s huge but gentle gesture of reaching out, over-reaching in fact and protruding almost out of the canvas toward us, but seeming to shelter the little unaware reptile as her baby climbs twisting up her left shoulder, as babies do. One could say perhaps that the baby and the tortoise are both creatures who are propelled by their nature, not much given to circumspection and thus in need of safeguarding. But this “reading,” which comes to me only as I now write, was probably not in the mind of the painter at all, whose concern surely was more in the luminous tonality of the total canvas and the knot of forms, undergirded and supported by the rayed feet like hammered wedges, than in any “message” these might convey.

Daraniyagala’s subject matter is nearly always the human figure, usually female, often alone, but also frequently with another person, a child, an animal (including fish or bird), or an object like a bouquet of flowers, a musical instrument, a candle. These objects may or may not have been

intended at the outset: my guess is that they, and even the treatment of the particular figures, suggested themselves as the artist continued applying paint. To be sure, any painting takes form and evolves under the artist's eyes and hands, but in Daraniyagala's case the process of ongoing discovery, the following of different avenues as they unfold in an eternal present during the act of painting, is in some sense the subject of the painting as much as the ostensible subject given by the title. Indeed, we learn from Ranil Deraniyagala's essay that the artist rarely gave titles, so that those we read in catalogues are more often than not assigned by others for purposes of identification. (This is perhaps why some titles have carelessly changed over the years, or seem in any case perfunctory, as if after the fact).

One can stand before nearly any Daraniyagala canvas for a long time and continue to discern new aspects of form and new resonances of colour, many of exquisite beauty. But it seems that, in general, beauty was not what he was after. One sees a predilection in many canvases for dark even muddy or murky tones or deliberately difficult subject matter or treatment, as if the artist were purposely making the task as difficult as possible – for the viewer as well as himself.

An instance of the latter is the **The Blind Woman**, where Daraniyagala inverts the usual theme of protective mother with helpless child. Here the daughter is sighted; her expression is hard to interpret, but she touches and is turned toward the mother whose uplifted face, with closed sightless eyes, is like a boulder, shapeless and elemental, to be known perhaps by touch (as she herself might perceive the face of another), huge, inert, undifferentiated. It is a curious reversal of what one might expect, and certainly not the sentimental treatment of such a subject that one might desire. Thus we may not “like” the picture, or wish to look at it every day; once seen, however, it is unforgettable.

For those who go to the arts for refreshment, delight, or relaxation, Daraniyagala's paintings for the most part will not satisfy. (The drawings are another matter, being as immediate, sure, and complete as the paintings are reworked and in process). In an analogy with Western music, Daraniyagala is like Beethoven or Cesar Franck, who also continually reworked their compositions and whose work reminds us that life is not often delightful and relaxing – that one may take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them, or then again perhaps not, but instead fail. There *is* ceaseless striving. This is not the message of any single work, but of the career as a whole.

The eroticism of Daraniyagala's work is more overtly evident in his drawings of nudes than in his paintings. Indeed, many paintings of unclothed women, whose breasts resemble piled-up mounds of wet sand or cement, or hard globs affixed like afterthoughts, are disconcerting. They are not exactly hostile, but whether disinterested or driven, they sacrifice conventional appeal for a less easily-achieved goal.

But in certain paintings like **Bathers Surprised**, **Bathsheba**, or **Woman in Front of Mirror**, the viewer's gaze, like that of the artist, partakes of voyeurism. (**Bathsheba** in some catalogues is called **The Voyeur**). The bather's child registers startled alarm by putting its hand to its mouth and starting to point at the intruder, while the mother suddenly turns as she realizes they are being watched – by us. This sudden turn inadvertently offers to view at once her breast with its enlarged and tender nipple as well as a provocatively curved back. The combination of the woman's physically impossible pose (Ranil Deraniyagala describes it as “the fusion of several anatomical details within a single comprehensible form”) with the absolutely accurate reflex response of the child establishes a union of fantasy and reality, dream and waking, that is all the more viscerally jolting for occurring in a split-second, yet being presented to one's view whenever and for as long as one cares to look – that is, for taking place in art rather than life.

Daraniyagala's work (like his life), more than that of any other painter of his generation, seems to me to be about art more than life. In response to the often cited remark made by George Keyt (“Justin paints women; I paint woman”), I would say “George makes pictures; Justin makes paintings”. This is not to say that one is to be preferred to the other but to illustrate a point. Whereas most great artists, like Keyt, are primarily interested in creating pictures (of observed reality, of their imagination, of their private obsessions, of abstract forms), some, like Daraniyagala (and one could mention also Frans Hals, Delacroix, and Cézanne), find their concern to be equally or more with the act of painting itself.

In the latter painters, rather than subject matter becoming the inspiration for making a painting, the act of painting brings forth the subject matter. I don't wish to belabour this point, because in all picture making there are elements of chance or accident leading to unforeseen results. And certainly Hals, Delacroix, and Cézanne, like Daraniyagala, were concerned to paint lace ruffs, lion hunts, Mont Sainte-Victoire, or heads, hands, and feet. But it seems necessary to stress that what is most puzzling and most glorious in Daraniyagala's paintings has to do with his predilection for exploring what comes of the paint. That he ends up with recurring subjects (mothers with children, women with bulls, one figure attending to a second one, single figures with various objects, lovers) has more to do with whatever leads one person to "see" a ship in a cloud and another person to "see" in the same formation a person's head or body than with preconceived ideas for images to capture.

In describing Daraniyagala's work, one is aware that any generalizations can be countered with exceptions. His "method" was relentless experimentation, a setting of challenges for himself, abrupt reversals. For example, in his painterly way he can be said characteristically to build up forms with brushstrokes and colours so that his painted works look very different from the outlined, linear forms that characterize, say, Keyt's or Beling's works. Yet Daraniyagala also will occasionally employ dark outlines with light figures, as in **Girl with Iris** or **Girl with Telephone**, or negative (white) outlines with dark figures (**The Bride, Seated Figure, Girl**).

One can ask whether there is anything specifically Sri Lankan about Daraniyagala's work. His themes are largely universal ones – the human figure, especially women, mother and child, artist and model, and animals. There are no peraheras or Kandyan dancers, no local landscapes, no markets or fishermen in his paintings, and no echo of Sigiriya ladies or temple frescoes. His personal ascetic isolation is less that of a monk than of one type of legendary Western artist (typified by Piero di Cosimo, Gauguin, or Albert Pinkham Ryder) who forsakes the ties and pleasures that give life meaning for most of us – marriage, children, work in the world, a "social life" – and lives to paint. If anything, Daraniyagala's figures have recognizably Sri Lankan body types, postures, and skin colouring (even, some might say, a "Pasyala look") and he may occasionally show some local flora and fauna. But he is unique among 43 Group painters in his apparent lack of interest in depicting either traditional life, the national heritage, or the legends and themes of Asia.

I have heard people speak of "profound humanity" in Daraniyagala's work, something I have to say I do not find, at least not very often or in the way in which I think the words are meant. (Although his most humanly-convincing portrayals are of children). In the drawings I detect an excited, inquisitive, and exceptionally skillful eye and hand at work; in the paintings I find the curiosity of the intellectual to see what comes and the quest of the pure modern artist to bring forth from nothing, something.

I do not mean to suggest that his works are not deeply moving – on the contrary. But whatever depths his art touches seem to me to be of the same kind that great music touches – not depicted incidents or even emotions in the usual sense of that word (such as compassion or courage or outrage or lust or tenderness) but rather as it were the indescribable felt interior embodiedness of incidents and feelings – their weight, or contrast, or contour, their ease or difficulty, their greatness or smallness, roughness or smoothness, their surge and swelling. Preverbal and interior, these are what we respond to in the journey Daraniyagala's canvases take us on.

To me it is a measure of Daraniyagala's greatness, and even more of his modernity, that his paintings do not have to tell a story or depict an incident to engage the viewer. They individually become their own world (as does, on another level, his oeuvre), a record of an exploration or of a growing to maturity of that elusive modern Western phenomenon that before it is anything else is "(a work of) art," to be responded to in kind.