

GARDEN OF EDEN

SANJEEWA KUMARA . SUJEEWA KUMARI

15.11.13
- 30.01.14



SUJEEWA KUMARI, UNTITLED 8, MIXED MEDIA, 41CM X 59CM



SANJEEWA KUMARA, FREE WILL, OIL ON CANVAS, 102CM X 175CM

SUJEEWA KUMARI (b. 1971, Sri Lanka)

Sujeewa Kumari deals with social identity, isolation and women in a post-colonial context. In her works she addresses de-realized memories, cultural images and artistic styles which emerge as complex terms in tension between the local and global, individual and society. She works with a variety of media including painting, drawing, digital photography, video and performance.

She holds a degree BFA from the Institute of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya, as well as an MFA in Fine Arts from the Dutch Art Institute, Enschede.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Forgotten Dream*, Paradise Road Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2010 *Mixed media works, Project Space, Lichfield Passage*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, U.K.
- 2004 *Performance presentation- Living Sculpture*, Gampaha Train Station, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- 2003 *Performance presentation- Skin of the White Tea Bags*, Netherlands
- 2002 *Mixed media works*, Barefoot Gallery, 706, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2002 *Paintings*, Aki Academy of Fine Arts, Netherlands
- 2000 *Paintings*, Paradise Road Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Temporary Permanence: Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka*, collaboration with Saskia Fernando Gallery, XVA Gallery, Dubai
- 2011 *Sri Lankan Contemporary Female*, Saskia Fernando Gallery, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2011 Presented video works at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, U.K.
- 2011 *Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka 2011*, Asia House, London, U.K.
- 2010 *Between Kismet and Karma: South Asian Woman Artists Respond to Conflict*, Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds, U.K.
- 2010 *ARTFUL RESISTANCE: Crisis and Creativity in Sri Lanka*, Museum of Weltkulturen, Galerie 37, Frankfurt, Germany.

AWARDS

- 1999 Prize and selected for the Windsor and Newton World Wide Millennium Painting Exhibition, London, Stockholm, USA
- 1995/1996 G.S.A. Fernando Award, Art Department, Institute of Aesthetic Studies
- 1995/1996 L.T.P. Manju Sri Award, Art Department, Institute of Aesthetic Studies
- 1995/1996 J.D.A. Perera Award, Art Department, Institute of Aesthetic Studies

GRANTS

- 2010 Grants to attend Artists Residency Programme, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, U.K.
- 2004 One month Art Resident Program and exhibition, Nanjing Art Institute, Nanjing, China

THE ART OF SUJEEWA KUMARI

Sujeewa Kumari says that there is no difference or separation between art and life; an unsurprising statement from an artist who creates works which exude mysticism, portraying figures that hover on the peripheries of the real and the imagined. Fluid lines and bright washes of colour lure the viewer into a surreal world of stylized flora, billows of shadowy smoke or voluminous cocoons of silken garments which obscure the serene figure depicted within. However, as Kumari has commented, *'Even though my art mainly portrays imaginary figures...they are based on realistic ideas and feelings'*; thereby leaving the viewer with the vaguely comforting feeling of waking from some half-remembered dream.

The exploration of identity is an abiding and, perhaps, somewhat passé theme in Sri Lankan art, yet Kumari's work gives a refreshingly original interpretation of this perennial topic by investigating the constructed 'otherness' of the post-colonial woman. What is showing and what is not showing; what we see and what we don't see, what is behind this? Driven by the question of social and political identity in the context of post-colonial South Asia, much of Kumari's work explores the place of women in art and society. In addition to her works on paper, Kumari has made extensive use of video as a medium. In performance pieces such as *Living Sculpture* (2004) and *Skin of the White Tea Bags* (2003), she puts herself at the centre of her works, using various symbols such as the sari, hairstyles and body image to reconsider stereotypes of certain feminine representations.

Thus Kumari's work allows the viewer to access the liminal spaces inhabited by women; producing, as critic Marian Pastor Roces has commented, *'a very subtle sense of having been reflected in some kind of strange mirror – but only in a quiet, private and circumspect way'*. It is this reflection which challenges given notions of identity in respect to culture, ethnicity, gender and class; complex themes which Kumari's work confidently tackles. Though she has previously adopted the rhetoric of Western feminism, commenting that *'modern art belongs to the West'*, vowing to *'get rid of this one way projected, male dominant art practice'*, and citing Frida Kahlo as an artistic influence, she confirms she is *not* a feminist. Not wishing to be identified by her gender, she instead uses the powerful conceptual imagery conveyed in her work to focus on the strength and constantly fluctuating nature of femininity, grounded with identity at its base. As she states, *'for me this is a discourse about human nature and culture'*, which uses the specifics of femininity to address wider, universally applicable tensions between the local and global.

Kumari's work often requests that the viewer confront the fallacy of identity, exposing it as a social or personal construct. As such, her art clearly makes a statement on the construct of the 'self' in relation to Sri Lankan women, but it is a statement unburdened by the expectations of the artist. Her images confront calmly, with no exorbitance – the viewer is compelled to fully engage with the work and arrive at their own interpretation of the 'identity' of the surrealist figures depicted within.

Kumari's work combines many different techniques, materials and elements, each piece created with a mixture of ink, watercolour, acrylic, pencil and charcoal. By not limiting herself to a single medium, she retains the freedom to forge her own artistic identity unfettered by predefined stylistic perceptions, and takes pleasure in finding the perfect combination by mixing and layering her work. In Kumari's hands, this medley of media comes alive, her art capturing a combination of physical and mental sensations which transport the viewer to her whimsical realm of magic realism.

To conclude, Pastor Roces' allusions to Freud's *'thoughts on the uncanny, the moment of unheimlich, the point at which one sees the stranger within oneself'* in relation to Kumari's work seem pertinent. As the critic comments, *'in the silent, momentary locking/looking of image and viewer upon each other, difference, one realizes, is fluid, unpredictable, negotiable, lively and strangely familiar...most importantly, the strange one is not the person in the image. The stranger is the someone within the viewer'*. Kumari's dreamlike conversations incorporate fleeting, ephemeral memories of the past with the unyielding realities of the present, resulting in works which offer unsettling yet compelling insights into the modern experience. What is real, what is imagined? It is left for us to decide.

Jessica Worsdale



Sujeewa Kumari
Untitled 8, 2013
Mixed Media
41 cm x 59 cm



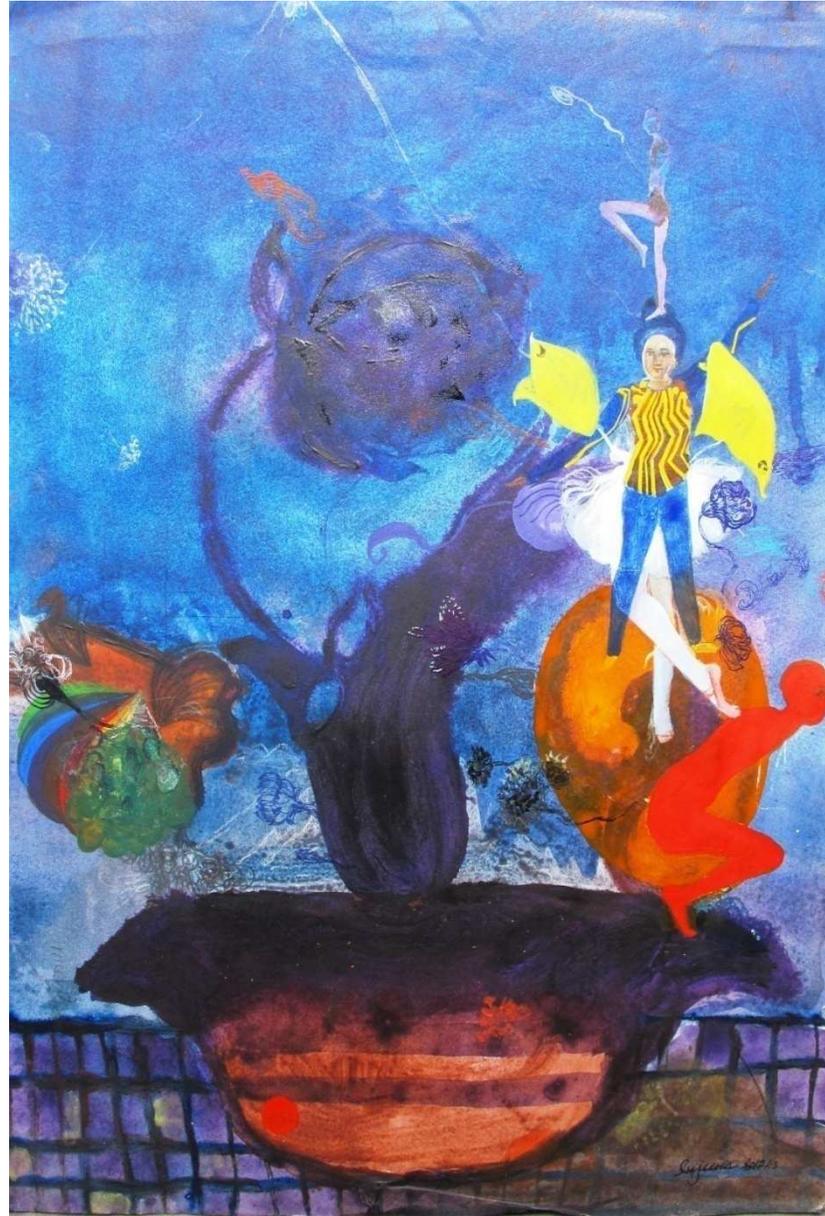
Sujeewa Kumari
Untitled 10, 2013
Mixed Media
41 cm x 59 cm



Sujeewa Kumari
Untitled 12, 2013
Mixed Media
41 cm x 59 cm



Sujeewa Kumari
Untitled 15, 2013
Mixed Media
41 cm x 59 cm



Sujeewa Kumari
A Dance, 2012/13
Mixed Media
45 cm x 31 cm



Sujeewa Kumari
Shadows, 2013
Mixed Media
40 cm x 50 cm



Sujeewa Kumari
Untitled, 2013
Mixed Media
41 cm x 59 cm



Sujeewa Kumari
Untitled 2, 2013
Mixed Media
31 cm x 45 cm

SANJEEWA KUMARA (b. 1971, Colombo)

EDUCATION

- 2003 Masters of Fine Arts [Interdisciplinary research of visual arts and media], Dutch Art Institute, The Netherlands
- 2001 Diploma [Painting], AKI Academy of Fine Arts , The Netherlands
- 1999 Bachelor of Fine Arts [Painting], Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Colombo, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
- Visiting Lecturer, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka [2005 to present]

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Paradise Road Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2010 Paradise Road Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2005 Paradise Road Galleries , Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2004 Head office in Prins Claus Fund , The Hague, The Netherlands
- Villa De Bank, Enschede, The Netherlands
- 2003 Paradise Road Galleries, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Gallery Art Korner, The Hague, The Netherland
- 2004 Galerie De Waagh, Oldenzaal, The Netherlands
- De Tjongerschans, Heerenveen, The Netherlands
- 1996 Alliance Francaise, Kandy, Sri Lanka

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka*, Asia House, London, U.K.
- 2009 *Colombo Art Biennale*, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- 2008 *ARTFUL RESISTANCE Crisis and Creativity in Sri Lanka*, Museum of Ethnology
Kunsthistorisches, Museum Vienna, Austria
- 2008 *'Expressions of Independence'*, The Mona Bismarck Foundation, Paris, France
Recent developments in contemporary Sri Lankan paintings, Gallery Art Korner, The Netherlands
- 2005 *Sri Lankan and Australian Artists Exhibition*, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, Australia
NOT HOME SICK, Villa De Bank and Rijksmuseum, Twenthe, The Netherlands
- 2001 *'Visva Karma'*, Head office Hivos, Den Hague, The Netherlands. Organized by Gate Foundation, Amsterdam
Galerie-Beeldentuin-Kunstuitleen Molenhof, Weert, The Netherlands
De Witte Kamer Gallery, Delden, The Netherlands
'Art Affairs', Galerie für Internationale Kunst, Starzach, Germany
'Update 001', Das Atelierhaus, Gronau, Germany

SELECTED GRANTS/ AWARDS

- 2001 Grant for study abroad, The President's Fund Sri Lanka
- 2000 Local grant, The Netherlands Embassy, Sri Lanka
- 1999 Grant for travel to Netherlands, Prins Claus Fund, The Netherlands

E ART OF SANJEewa KUMARA

ist wanted to be free. Freedom is of enormous importance to an artist, as well as to my work". Sanjeewa Kumara's pictures transport the viewer into a fantastically free world, where unicorns trot among blossom trees, whilst a woman covered by an upside-down umbrella glides through the air towards a grand piano. Kumara dubs these works "pictures" rather than "paintings" because this "implies a space one goes into". This transformative effect helps to explain why such creations do not merely depict a heavenly land, but a passage from paradise. A man's disappearing head peeps out from behind a shield in 'Who are you King', and a figure plunges down towards a garden of eyes in 'Tree of Life Started to Fly'. These journeys conform to Kumara's belief that any object must pass through all stages between its appearance and disappearance at some point. In this way, both artist and viewer are given the freedom to be transported to indeterminate times and places, with a seemingly limitless pool of figures and contexts, somewhere between the earth and the heavens. Describing his pictures as "uncanny, fantastic, marvelous and supernatural", Kumara brings harmony and beauty to the fore-front of his imaginary scenes.

nara's sense of freedom is evoked by the melting pot of cultural influences present within his work. He calls upon his childhood "visual fantasy" of the 1970s and 80s; the age of Night Rider, Rambo and Superman as Western icons. Kumara's time spent studying in the Netherlands heightened his awareness of multiculturalism and led to introspection surrounding his own identity. Whilst studying at the 'Dutch Art Institute' for his Masters in Fine Arts, which he attained in 2003, he became aware of the influence which the Northern European masters were exerting upon his work. However, such Western inspiration was balanced by Kumara's position as an expert in Asian, and specifically Sri Lankan, art history. Kumara thus characterizes his own work as "Non western-western art".

jeewa's historical awareness caused him to reflect upon the impact of colonialism on his personal, national and artistic identity. He traces his heritage from Sri Lanka's previous place as a mercantile hub on the 'Silk Road'. This was comprised of a series of trade routes connecting the East and West at various periods, from around 200 BC to its eventual demise in the mid fifteenth-century. These voyages allowed ancient Roman, Chinese and Arab traders to access Sri Lanka, and such historical "hybridity" helps to answer questions of identity posed by Kumara's pictures.

Kumara applies such historical perspective to modern-day Sri Lanka. He feels it is now time for his home country to open up discourse surrounding its own national identity, both politically and culturally, having already “*played with*” communism and liberalism. Hence, Kumara describes his paintings as “*re-imaginings*”, as Sri Lankan art endeavors to forge its own identity and fulfill its own potential. This quest has a central place in Kumara’s work; when asked why he became an artist, Sanjeewa explained that “*Politicians and traders cannot develop a culture*”.

Kumara further engages with his sense of the past through his artistic technique. He believes his use of oil paint stems from his desire to be a part of the development of man. He achieves this by using the same tools as pre-historic cave painters- “*a stick with some hair on the end of it, minerals from the earth mixed with some oil*”.

Sanjeewa Kumara’s colourful realms unite people with deities and cities with the natural world. They impart cheerfulness, beauty and harmony by channeling the past, as well as commenting upon the current state of nations. Most importantly, however, they represent the freedom in one’s imagination to pass through limitless places, times and cultures.

Bryony Thomas



Sanjeewa Kumara
Tree of Life, 2013
Oil on canvas
33.5 cm x 46 cm



Sanjeewa Kumara
Untitled, 2013
Oil on canvas
30 cm x 41 cm



Sanjeewa Kumara
Uncanny Personality, 2013
Oil on canvas
35.5 cm x 28 cm



Sanjeewa Kumara
Star, 2013
Oil on canvas
30.5 cm x 40.5 cm



Sanjewa Kumara
Who are you King, 2013
Oil on canvas
14 cm x 14 cm



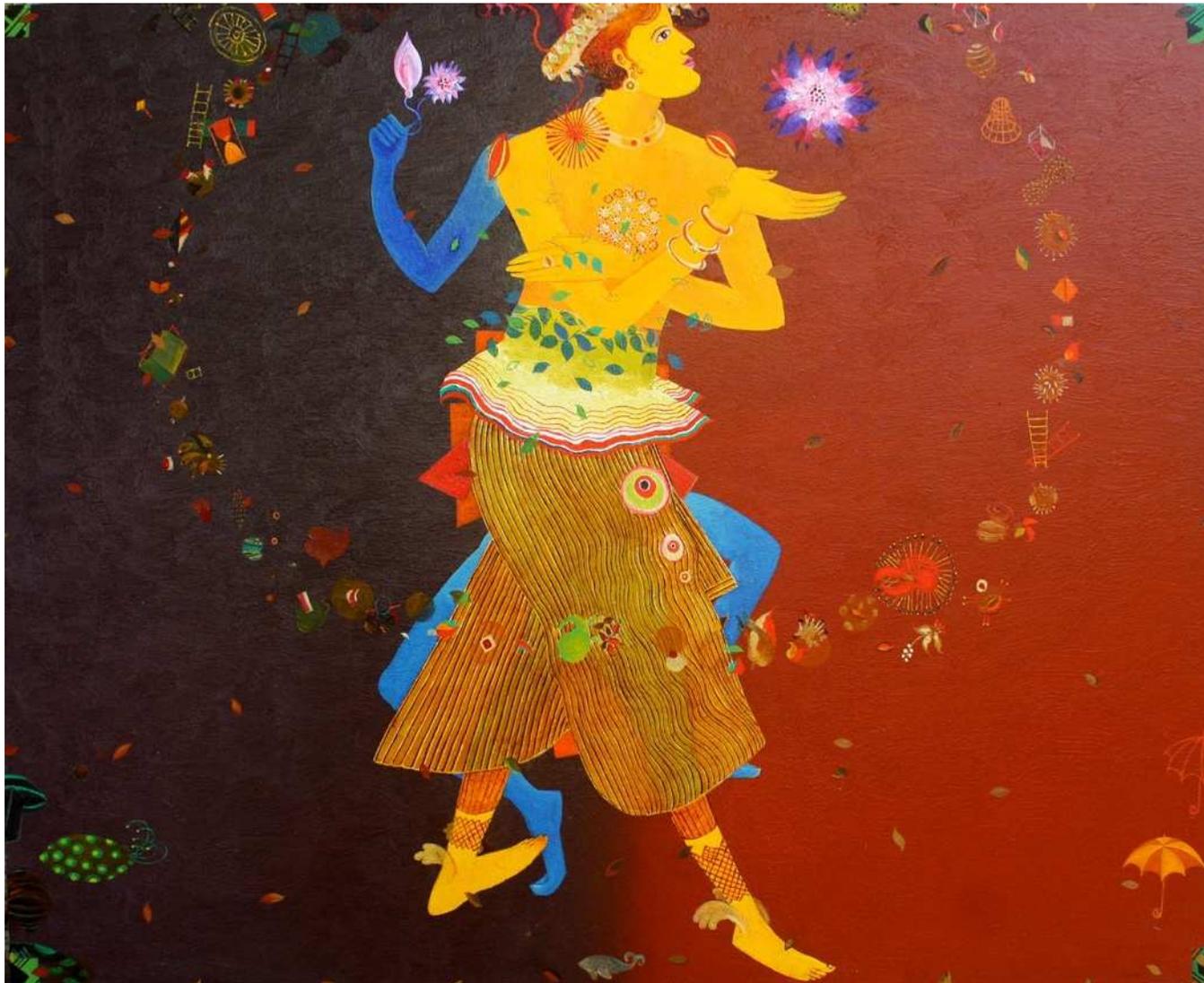
Sanjeewa Kumara
True Affection, 2013
Oil on canvas
35.5cm x 28cm



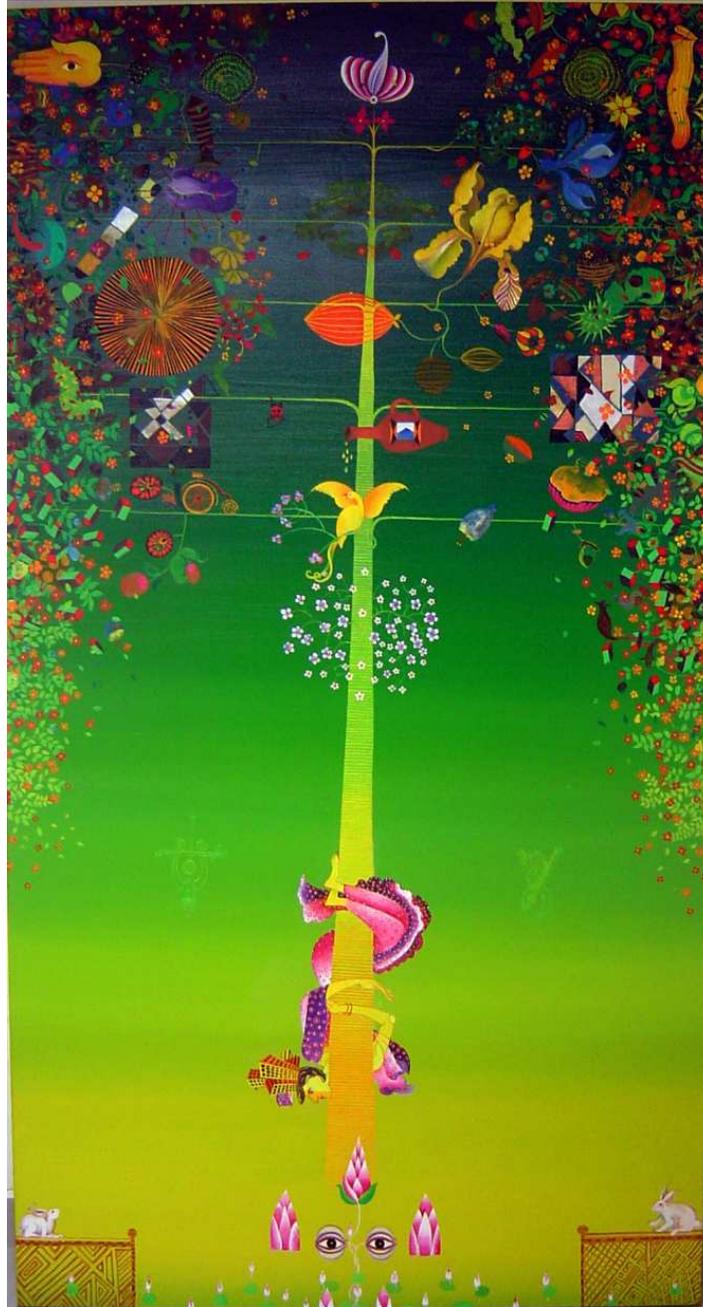
Sanjeewa Kumara
Silence of Joy, 2013
Oil on canvas
35.5cm x 46 cm



Sanjeewa Kumara
Free Will, 2013
Oil on canvas
102 cm x 175 cm



Sanjeewa Kumara
Duality Who Am I, 2013
Oil on canvas
80 cm x 100 cm



Sanjeewa Kumara
Tree of Life Started to Fly, 2013
Oil on canvas
102 cm x 175 cm

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