
Collecting her moments

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by: Jennifer Anandanayagam Out of the mundaneness and monotonousness of everyday life, this young lady shone through with her innovative thinking that has led to stand acceptably as a profoundly unique venture all on her own. Fascination and intriguing emotion were part and parcel as the long road led us to the place where Sharmini Pereira, Director and Founder & Raking Leaves, was housed until her stay in Sri Lanka endured and when a smiling lady in black greeted us with sincerity, it was all the more pleasing to think of the conversation that was to follow. Having heard bits and pieces of the product of her novel thought & "Raking Leaves", it was exciting having the chance to actually sit and listen to her & her story behind the far reaching move, her story behind her passion, her story behind herself.

Raking Leaves is a new publishing organisation instituted to commission artist projects that take the form of a book. Founded by independent curator, Sharmini, all titles published by Raking Leaves embody stand-alone contemporary art projects made by some of the most important contemporary artists spanning around the world. From what Sharmini explained, it was evident that she feels exhibitions are displays and learning vehicles only able to be ridden by a few, whereas books reach far wider and can even rest in the hands of the common man. Thus, her venture Raking Leaves, through the publication of affordable, innovatively designed artist book projects and special editions, aims to encourage a wider awareness, ownership and presentation of contemporary art. In order to mark the launch of Raking Leaves, two outstanding new book projects have been commissioned & "The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005 & October 2007" by four of Sri Lanka's most important contemporary artists, Muhanned Cader, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Thamoatharampillai Shanaathanan and Jagath Weerasinghe and "Pearls" by Simryn Gill. No sooner did Sharmini pull out the two books and laid them before us to explain their creation and content, that it became evident that the projects were no ordinary venture. Leafing through their pages, viewing the intricate artworks, it was hard to overlook the amount of thought, care and talent that had gone into each artwork. The One Year Drawing Project & "An interesting origin" was the thought, as Sharmini described how she was inspired to approach the four artists; the discussions that followed between Sharmini and the artists brought forth a novel concept that runs through the pages of this book. The book is an experimental publishing project that follows a 29 month period of drawing exchange between the four artists. It relates back to the creation of four drawings that were simultaneously drawn in May 2005 and charts the exchange of responses that resulted between the four artists in response and as a consequence to the initial four drawings. What was evident throughout its pages was the diversity of emotions and ideas that were present in the four artists in different periods of time; these were embodied in their separate drawings. Though the book's title suggests one year, the process itself and the unreliability of the Sri Lankan postal service extended the project to 2 ½ years. Pearls Pearls is a photographic record of Simryn Gill's ongoing bead making project that began in 1999, in which she creates books into bead necklaces. This book brings together over 60 sets of beads, each one unique and particular to the specific volume from which it has been created. Titles as far ranging as Gandhi's autobiography, Sylvia Plath's & "The Bell Jar" and more form a selection of the printed matter used by the artist to create a rich and stirring collection of objects. Her forte "I was born in UK," began Sharmini and she added that her entire schooling was done there at two Catholic schools. Her parents, both from Sri Lanka, left the island in the late 50s and returned after their studies. What followed was a decision made by them to reside overseas thereafter. Sharmini graduated from Edinburgh University with an MA (Hons) in Art History and curated her first exhibition in 1994 called New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art, held at the National Art Gallery of Colombo. "I had just finished my degree in History of Art and came to Sri Lanka with the purpose of researching into contemporary Sri Lankan art," she explained adding that, from that time onwards, her interest in contemporary art sprang forth with more passion. She became concerned with creating awareness about contemporary art, not only in Sri Lanka, but in the whole Asian region. "With the contact of artists here, particularly, Jagath Weerasinghe and Chandraguptha Thenuwara, I realized that we had a unity of purpose of wanting to work together; to try and create a situation where there's awareness in Sri Lanka about contemporary art and to also foster an environment where there is support for such an art scene here," she offered. It was this experience here in Sri Lanka, said Sharmini, that created within her a desire for independent curatorship. "It was a really important and very formative period for me," she said. Between the years 1996 & 98, she completed an MA in Visual Arts Administration: Curating and Commissioning Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art in London. Subsequently, Sharmini has worked internationally as an independent curator, editor and curatorial consultant across the public and private sector. She has worked with institutions and organisations such as the Queensland Art Gallery, the Imperial War Museum, The Royal Academy, The Japan Foundation, Albion, the Hayward Gallery and the British Council. In addition to her work with Raking Leaves, Sharmini is a Trustee for Book Works, London, an academic advisor for the Asia Art Archive (AAA) Hong Kong and international advisory board member of Arts Initiative Tokyo, Japan. "In 2002, I curated an exhibition called & "Crafty Thoughts" featuring Sri Lankan artists. It looked at the relationship between Fine Art and Craft," she highlighted. Sharmini was also invited to be one of the three main curators for the 2006 Singapore Biennale; the other two curators were Eugene Tan and Roger McDonald. "That was a really amazing experience. I was selecting artists from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India," she smiled, adding that by the time the Biennale wrapped up, she had already started moving in another direction & a direction that was looking to open up a space to display and enjoy artistic work, not in one fixed venue, but in and through the medium of books. Sharmini is involved in establishing a way of working with artists using paper as a means through which their ideas can be assembled and circulated. She hopes that disseminating artwork in the form of relatively affordable books will allow such artist projects to reach a wider audience. For Sharmini, books solve the problem of producing an exhibition in one fixed place. Raking Leaves In 2005, she established the not-for-profit organisation based in

London, Raking Leaves, which was in 2008 invited to become one of the 33 new organisations to receive regular funding from the Arts Council of England. In addition to this, each project is also accompanied by a specially commissioned limited edition that provides financial support towards each artist's project and the imprint's ongoing publishing activity. Moving from curator to publisher has been indeed a challenge for Sharmini, "It was a new vocation in an industry predominantly European and male. Being one of the few female publishers worldwide, I had no role models." Sharmini moved on to express that her work is tremendously satisfying and she enjoys the experience of creating something new, something unique. "I was working with artists whom I greatly admired," she put in furthering that her profession spans from the everyday task of book keeping to talking with artists and coming up with new projects. "It's a very small business," she articulated sketching the few persons, in addition to her, who are as of late getting involved in Raking Leaves, "and it's very nice that it's small. I don't really want it to grow too big because that's when you loose attention to detail." She intends to publish four book projects every year but was quick to add that the number could be less. "Every year, there will be one project focusing on Sri Lankan artist/artists but I would be working with artists in the region; it wouldn't exclusively be Sri Lanka alone." Speaking of projects, Sharmini gave insight into her forthcoming ventures; her next two book projects are going to be with two contemporary artists in Pakistan - Aisha Khalid and Imran Qureshi. "My parents always encouraged me to study," she sketched adding that her father is an engineer while her mother is a barrister. Having always worked independently, Sharmini feels that her parents are proud that she, being a woman, ventured out in an entrepreneurial initiative on her own. The Sri Lankan art scene Dividing her time coming back and forth to her native land Sri Lanka, Sharmini feels that the art setting here is very vibrant but also remains very invisible, "There are only a few opportunities to see the artwork in public spaces here; there's also not much opportunity to read about it." Among the pressing concerns she bears for our land, she dotted the need for a commercial art infrastructure to develop in Sri Lanka. "When I say commercial art infrastructure, I mean we need to have galleries who support artists," she enthused moving on to emphasize on the important relationship between a gallerist and artist. Pics by Dinuka Liyanawatte (Courtesy : Daily Mirror)