

# LIZ FERNANDO:

Trincomalee *My father's stories and the lost photographs*

November 29, 2018 – January 15, 2019

SHALINI GANENDRA ADVISORY  
Projects & Collections

# TRINCOMALEE

## *My father's stories and the lost photographs*

This is a work about a journey—a journey to a place where the objective of a photograph ponders an evolving interplay between its fragile and fugitive existence. At a personal as well as academic level, my own research into the role of photography in South Asia highlights the different meanings that photography, inhabits, often dealing with the notions of memory wherein the personal archive inhabits a fundamental space, both aesthetically and practically within non-western cultures.

Sri Lanka's Trincomalee became synonymous with the war-ravaged northern region. In contrast, my father's stories are not nostalgic ruminations on its political history but naïve and beautiful little conversational episodes between a Tamil girl and a Sinhalese boy, describing a childhood lived in innocence free from existing social restrictions. It is a visual journey to a forgotten past preserved in my mind's eye through precious oral histories relayed by my father. Though they are at times ambiguous and ungraspable I have tried to formulate them into touchable and palpable pictorial narratives.

Relying on images, the writing is based on the idea of the interweaving of father/daughter memories separated into sections embedded within the descriptions of the actual journey. The juxtaposition of memory and the different stages of the journey give an idea of the reasons for the journey.

Because of the interest in approaching the medium of photography through the practice of writing it is written in a filmic style in order to let the reader participate in my experience, imagining the scene instead of enforcing visuals through the photographs.

LIZ FERNANDO *October 2018*

'Liz Fernando's images are sophisticated reconstructions. Re-imagined lost photographs inspired by the stories her father told of his past life in Sri Lanka, they elide obvious genres.

Surreal, dark and grainy, her images reference the past with hints of Helen Levitt and Brassai but avoid being too nostalgic or sentimental. They skilfully balance complex composition and rich texture with a subtle kind of fashion aesthetic. Each image is strong enough to hold its own whilst creating an unfolding narrative of a childhood remembered.'

- *Rebecca Drew, Editor in Chief of Photoworks, 2011*

## OUR VIEW

Liz Fernando uses photography to reconstruct a physical sense of something seen or experienced, rather than record it. *Trincomalee* comprises lost images preserved from Sri Lanka's collective memory and oral histories relayed to the artist by her father. Partly shot in the original settings of her father's vague memories, there is a powerful sense of loss and longing conveyed through the series of black and white images, exposing the complex personal identity of an artist navigating several cultures. Through her questioning, Fernando has developed a unique and versatile visual language that forms the foundation of her practise. *Trincomalee* describes her father's lived experience as a Sinhalese child before Trincomalee, Sri Lanka was devastated by war. After more than 25 years of conflict, Tamil dominated Trincomalee has become synonymous with this brutal episode in Sri Lankan history. She presents an alternate narrative, focused on conversational episodes between a Tamil girl and Sinhalese boy, revealing a childhood lived in innocence and free from social restrictions of ethnicity and gender. The images form a visual journey into the past, at once descriptive and ambiguous in their representation.

*'In Sri Lanka, my father's place of birth, humidity destroys the photographic object in a painful, slow and unstoppable process until it vanishes completely, as though it had never existed. [...] It is a story ambiguous and ungraspable, it is the story of the lost photographs of my father's childhood and also allows space for the viewer to reconnect with his own memories.'* Liz Fernando

The past viewed through black and white photography can often feel unreachable. Dark and otherworldly, Fernando's images are not immediately recognisable, possessing a dreamlike quality that transcends direct depictions of time and place. They lean towards abstraction, where human elements are fragmented and manipulated using light and shadow to reveal only glimpses of bodies, people and lives. To read these images as we would our personal archive we similarly search for a sense of the subject, of distinct personalities and timelines. Blurred, restless movements are captured alongside piercing moments of stillness and clarity, building a complex and engaging narrative around anonymous characters. The artist's sense of loss and longing is transferrable, and viewers are challenged to reflect on their own and collective histories.

Memory is multifaceted and similarly *Trincomalee* demonstrates several approaches of photography. The inclusion of a filmic style of writing creates an opportunity for the reader to participate in the artists experience by imagining the scene instead of enforcing it through images. Fernando credits this practise to the start of her education and academic training in Zurich, where she met tutors who were highly influential within the field of typographic design. She believes that her use of filmic writing is ‘a complex combination of experimentation, instinct and inheritance’. Referring to her Sri Lankan heritage and the legacy of her grandfather, to whom she dedicated the book *Trincomalee*.

*Trincomalee* began as a book developed for the LCC BA Photography programme degree show at the University of Arts, London. This was the result of several years of research and professional development that started with two significant visits to Jaffna, beginning in 2010. As her practise evolved, Fernando aimed to ‘*extract the complex writing and make it visible on the wall*’. She reiterates that this is part of a wider, personal reflection on her discourse with identity. In 2016 Fernando revisited the work, editing, reprinting and bringing the images in a silver gelatin format on the wall together with a series of embossed prints. The gallery set up reflects the original aesthetics of the book and the concept behind it. Fernando explains that the unusual assemblage of white space inside the book and represented in the installation, ‘*could be read as empty space but rather represents the void that I carried all my life with me [...] the installation aims to mirror the visual experience of the book design within the gallery as an actual space*’.

The process of printing the silver gelatin, black and white photographs involves a distinctive technique that takes a digital print in analogue and is handled by a specialist lab. Areas of the images are blank white, a result of Fernando’s experimental approach to exposure, which challenges the limits of the digital lens. Similarly to the curatorial decision to emphasise white spaces within the exhibition, these gaps represent lost visuals and memory. By grouping the images into several distinct sets and working with the full height of the gallery space, the act of display reinforces the sense of a journey undertaken and becomes a focus within this exhibition. She chooses to group the twelve photographs into four distinct vignettes, created for visual connectivity and to lead the viewer through the journey and character of the children.

Fernando is driven by ‘a scientific, almost forensic search for the boundaries of the understanding and interpretation of photography’. Evidenced throughout her work is the fusion of anthropological questions and modern photographic techniques as a tool to explore wider issues such as a sense of belonging, cultural difference, cultural inheritance, and the question of identity. Fernando’s most recent artistic projects realised in South Asia explore these issues from different perspectives. *Passage of Time, 2016* develops scientific discourse surrounding the loss of photographs. Here Fernando examines South Asian visual archives to form an understanding of ‘the different meanings that the medium of photography and the interlinked notions of collective memory inhabit in a South Asian context’.

*'Photography, the camera itself is just a tool for me, the mechanical extension, the lens in the 'Benjaminian' sense to mirror my thinking into a physical object.'* Liz Fernando

Fernando's body of work collectively explores the roles that identity, history and memory have on non-Western cultures, specifically South Asian. Her first works produced whilst enrolled on the LCC BA Photography program were featured at the Tate Modern in 2011, as part of an exhibition titled, *'After we Arrive, Before we leave...'*. The exhibition was conceptualised to coincide with the opening of the McAulay wing of the gallery and was curated by Sandra Sykorova, Assistant Curator of Adult Programmes, in dialogue with LCC's BA Photographers. The thirteen photographers responded, through their individual artistic voices, to diverse types of public engagement with art within the museum. 'Aptly capturing the experiences that we often struggle to put into words' (Tate, 2011).

As her practice has evolved, Fernando has continued to develop an innate ability to capture something deeper than her subject. In this sense it is possible that the fragmented, ambiguous images in *Trincomalee* are closer to real memories than conventional photographs. Fernando's reconstructions reveal the significance we place on our own archives, which are also constructed to reinforce a narrative. To reflect on identity through photography is universal, *Trincomalee* challenges viewers to reconsider their interpretation through a cultural lens and question how this exists within wider societal frameworks. As a personal reflection on her discourse with identity, *Trincomalee* avoids introspection by leaving space for the viewer's own emotion. Through a skilful and sensitive manipulation of her medium, Fernando creates and deconstructs an unfolding narrative that exposes the fragility of memories and invites viewers to make narratives of their own identity.

Fernando describes the process of *Trincomalee* as 'altogether an extremely intense shoot and journey, with almost one year of preparation and a lifetime of stories.' Expanded from its original form as an artist's book, *Trincomalee* has left the page as a carefully curated combination of vignettes, images and words. The photographs as framed are a special edition, most of which do not feature in the *Trincomalee* book. This is a growing installation where words and mediums converge, developing the experiences of memory, nostalgia and narrative through tactile presence and impenetrable shadows.

**Shalini Ganendra**  
**Holly Lord**



25x21cm,77 pages, edition 6+1 AC

*Artist Book 'Trincomalee', incl. 13 b/w images with artists text. 77 pages.  
Printed in Germany by Steidl publishing printer and conceptualized by  
ArtnetworX Hanover. Bound by hand. 2011 . Ed. 10*

Bold letters, 60/3 Moor Street, Eastern District, Trincomalee was written on the birth certificate. He remembered the name of the street. St. Anthony's School was on the same road. During the colonial period Trincomalee was a strategically important city. The natural harbour had built a circle around the city, stones of the Bay of Bengal were swept to the coast. It was not the light brown and dense green that manifested to mind, it was a white, soft turquoise and a deep shade of blue.

The water, harsh and aggressive clashed the wall and then pulled back to the stream.

Extract from Art Book 'Trincomalee', incl. 13 b/w. Printed in Germany by Steidl publishing printer and conceptualized by ArtnetworX Hanover. Hand Bound . 2011

*"The idea of the order of this gallery set up is based on the aesthetics of the book and the concept behind it [...] The entire Trincomalee body of work is based on the ambiguous nature of this narrative and the missing metamemory, questioning the notion of memory and photographs and the results in the process of assembling the memory rather than 'having' it or having it represented by photographs."*

– Liz Fernando, 2018

Dust and clear wind around my ears.  
Close my eyes and see the light brown  
and dense green rushing by. I don't know  
whether it is hot or cold, summer, spring  
or autumn. I heard the cracking stones  
under the wheels of the bicycle, the ped-  
als spinning continuously, my feet hung  
in the air and the curly hair leaning  
against his warm chest.

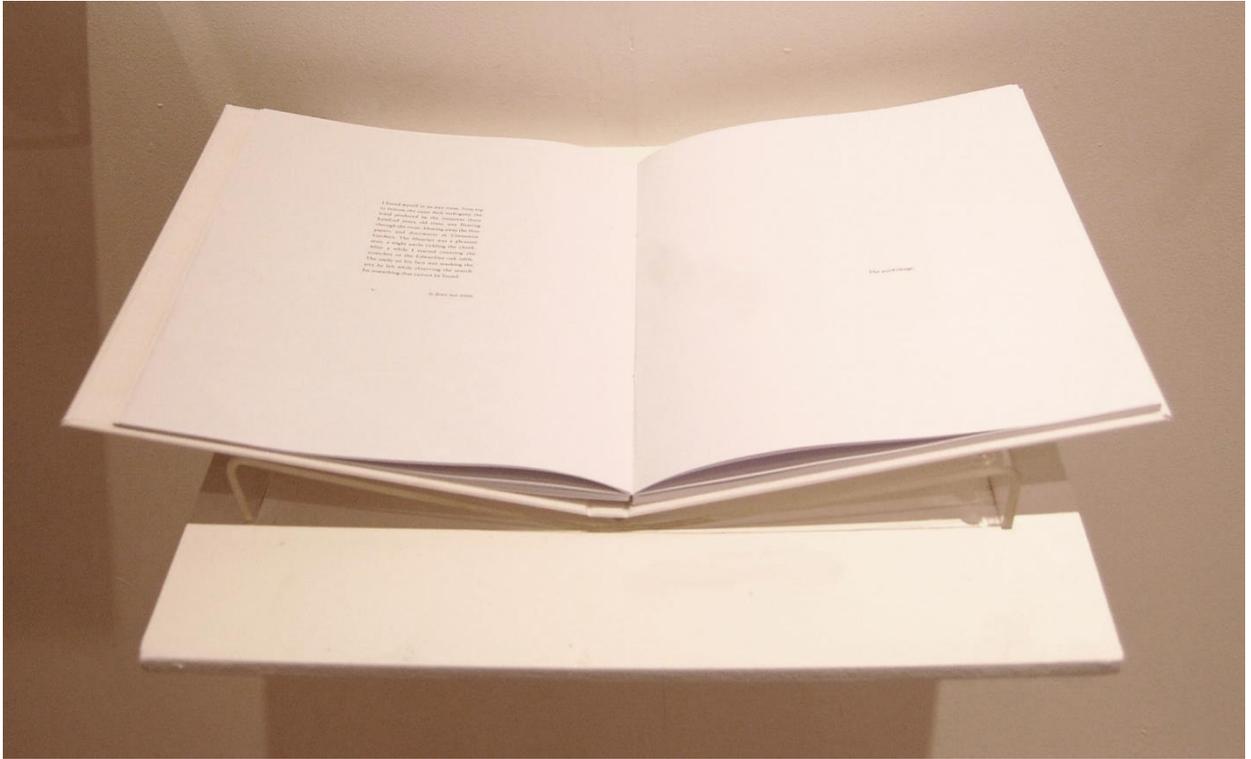
It must have been 1986.

I remember the exact colour of the seat I  
used to sit on the front of my father's bi-  
cycle. This precious dusty path, between  
river and forest, it is the pure image. Be-  
cause it was stable. Nothing shattered it.

Extract from Artist Book 'Trincomalee', incl. 13 b/w. Printed in Germany by Steidl publishing printer and conceptualized by ArtnetworX Hanover.  
Bound by hand. 2011

*"The running element of white space in the book and also now reflected in the installation could be read as empty space but rather represents the void that I carried all my life with me."*

*- Liz Fernando, 2018*



25x21cm,77 pages, Ed. 100

*Interior of Artist Book 'Trincomalee', incl. 13 b/w images with artists text. 77 pages. Printed in Germany by Steidl publishing printer and conceptualized by ArtnetworX Hanover. Hand bound. 2011 Ed. 10.*



58x 44.5cm



44x 34cm

*Vignette 1, Silver Gelatin b/w photographs on Ilford Digital Silver 1K, 2016, Ed 10 (6+ 4AP). Signed on verso.*



58x 44.5cm



44x 34cm each

*Vignette 2, Silver Gelatin b/w photographs on Ilford Digital Silver 1K, 2016 (6+ 4AP). Signed on verso.*



44x 34cm each

*Vignette 3, Silver Gelatin b/w photographs on Ilford Digital Silver 1K, 2016, (6+ 4AP)  
Signed on verso.*



Large size triptych, framed approx. 150x150cm each

*Vignette 4, Silver Gelatin b/w photographs on Ilford Digital Silver 1K, 2016, (6+ 4AP).  
Signed on verso.*

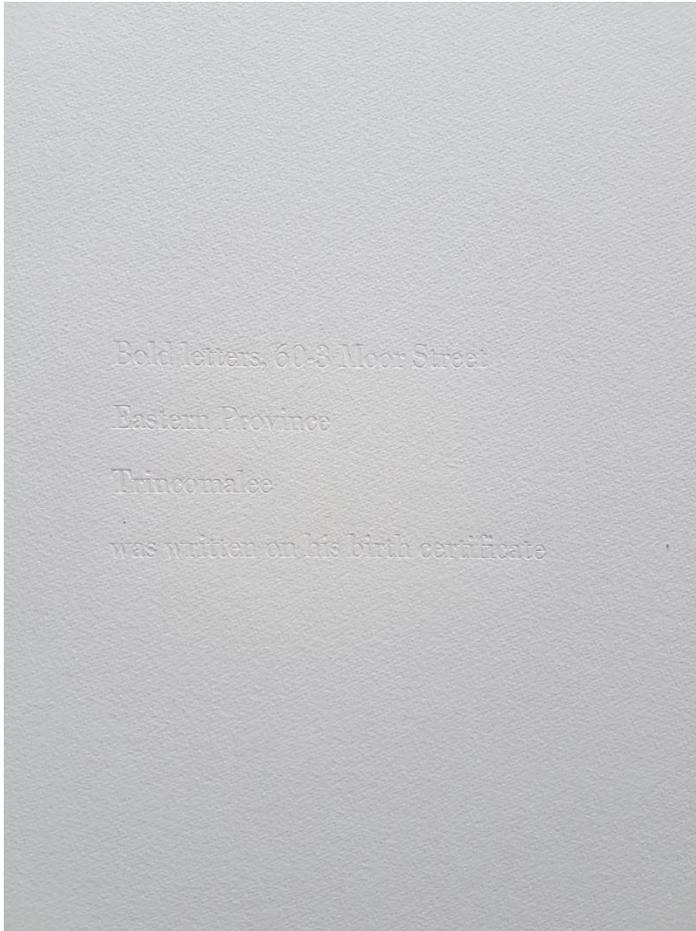


*Series of six (6) distinct, hand composed, hand-cast hot metal type letterpress embossed prints on acid free 300gsm Hahnemuehle mould-made print making board, 2016 (6+ 4AP). Signed on verso.*



*It is the earliest memory*

Approx. 83.5x66cm (incl. frame), Ed. 10, *Signed on verso*. Text as stated



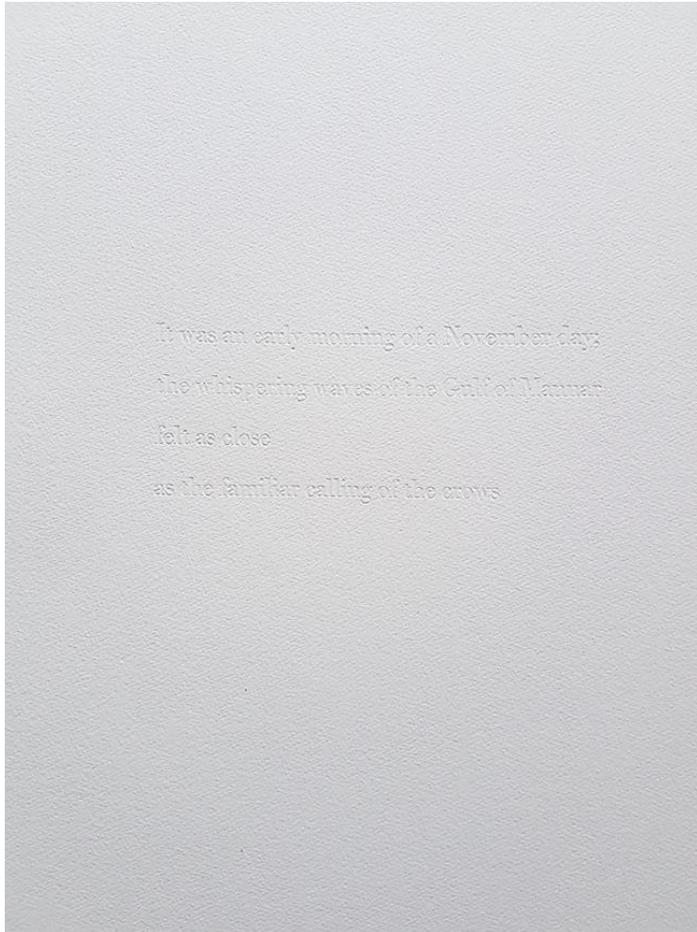
*Bold letters, 60-3 Moor Street*

*Eastern Province*

*Trincomalee*

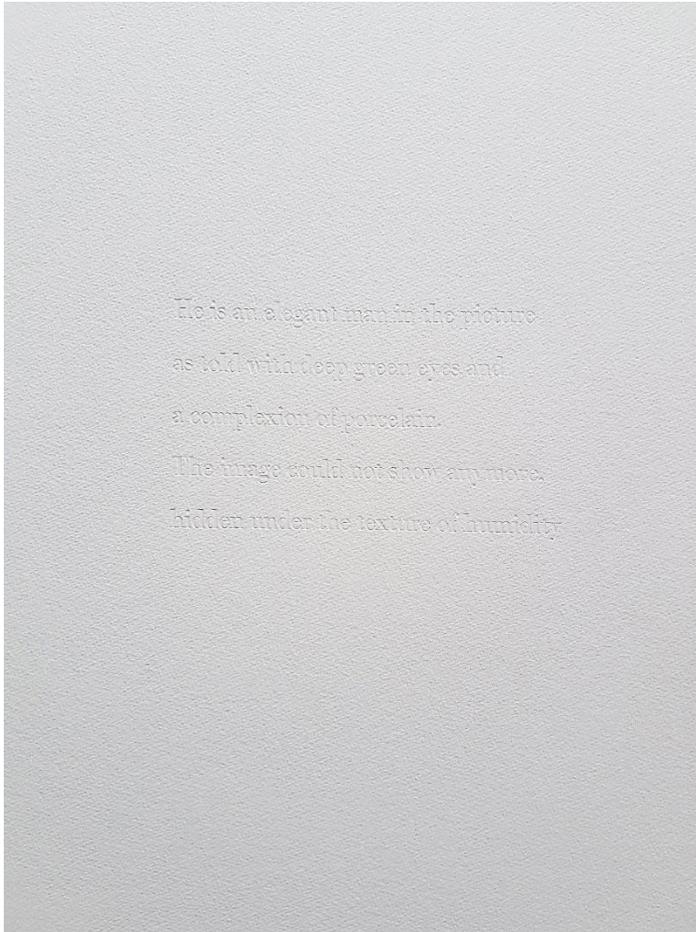
*was written on his birth certificate*

Approx. 83.5x66cm (incl. frame), Ed. 10 , *Signed on verso*. Text as stated



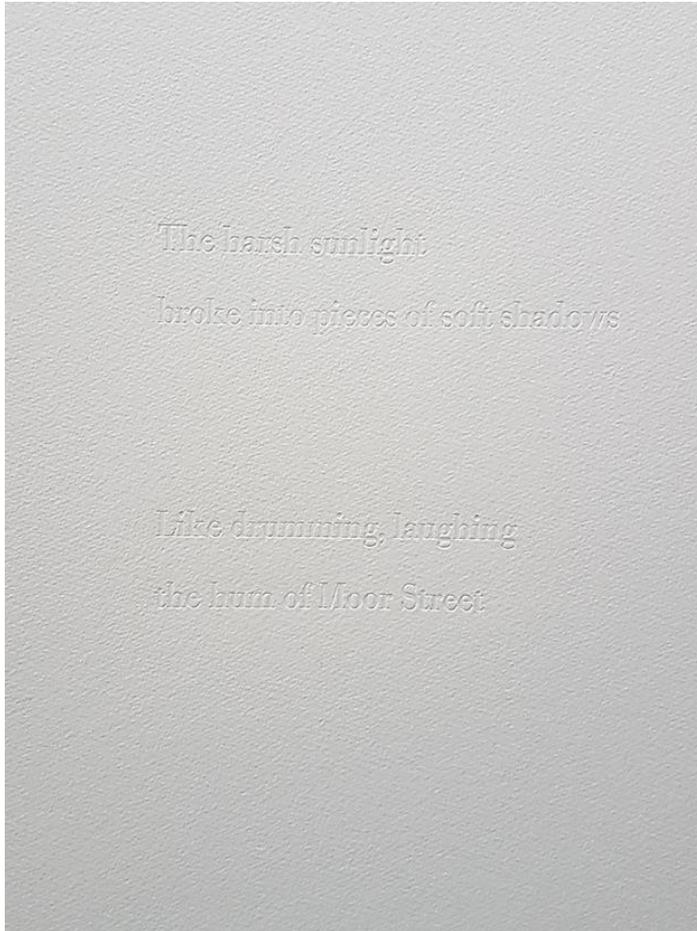
*It was an early morning of a  
November day;  
the whispering waves of the Gulf of  
Mannar  
felt as close  
as the familiar calling of the crows*

Approx. 83.5x66cm (incl. frame), Ed. 10 , *Signed on verso*. Text as stated



*He is an elegant man in the picture  
as told with deep green eyes and  
a complexion of porcelain.  
The image could not show anymore,  
hidden under the texture of humidity*

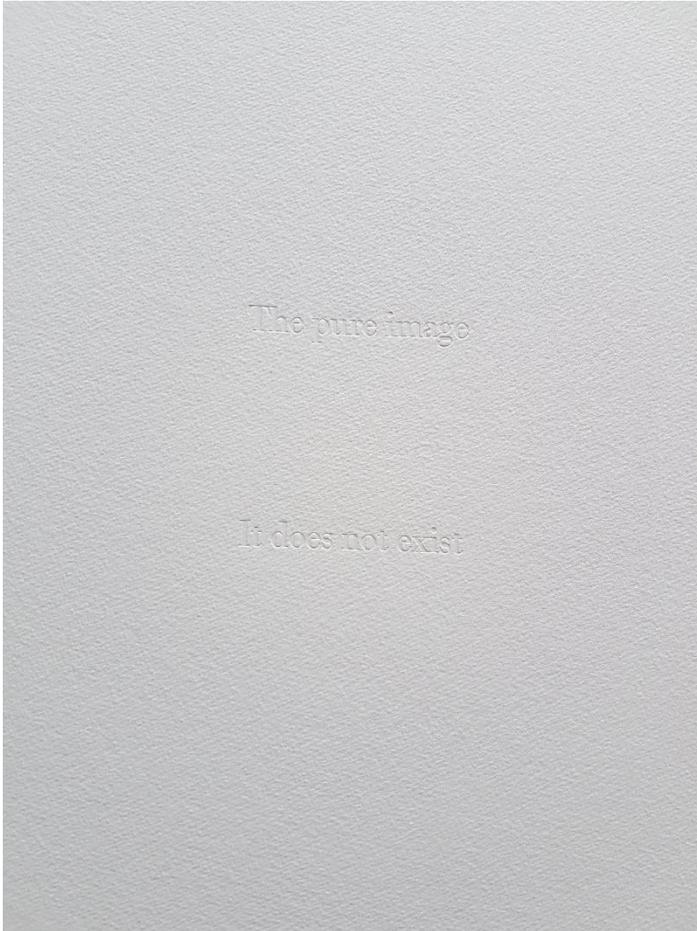
Approx. 83.5x66cm (incl. frame), Ed. 10 , *Signed on verso*. Text as stated.



*The harsh sunlight  
broke into pieces of soft shadows*

*like drumming, laughing  
the hum of moor street*

Approx. 83.5x66cm (incl. frame), Ed. 10 , *Signed on verso*. Text as stated.



*The pure image*

*It does not exist*

Approx. 83.5x66cm (incl. frame), Ed. 10 , *Signed on verso*. Text as stated.

# LIZ FERNANDO - Select Bio

*'Where many images are possessed, there is always implicit narrative to be elucidated.'*

Liz Fernando was born in Germany (1982) and studied in Zurich, Geneva and London. In 2011 she graduated from the prestigious LCC BA Photography programme at the University of Arts, London. In May 2012 she was selected as winner for the Worldbank South Asian Art Contest, *Imagining our Future Together*. Several selected photographs taken from her award-winning work "Trincomalee – My father's stories and the lost photographs" were acquired by the World Bank in Washington D.C for its permanent collection. Her work continues to receive critical praise from influential editors and curators and is currently featured in numerous private collections.

Whilst enrolled on the LCC BA Photography program Fernando was featured at the Tate Modern, London in 2011 as part of a group exhibition titled, 'After we Arrive, Before we leave...'. The exhibition was conceptualised to coincide with the opening of the McAulay wing of the gallery and was curated by Sandra Sykorova, Assistant Curator of Adult Programmes, in dialogue with 13 selected LCC BA Photographers.

The concept of an evolving interplay between the fragile and fugitive existence of a photograph lies at the heart of Fernando's work, which often derives from a sense of nostalgia, building upon a personal archive of aesthetic and practical reflections within non-western cultures, specifically South Asian. She describes her practise as:

*'The scientific, almost forensic search for the boundaries of the understanding and interpretation of photography, the fusion of anthropological questions and modern photographic techniques as a tool to explore wider issues such as cultural difference, cultural inheritance, belonging and identity'.*

She has previously lectured at the Raffles Design Institute Singapore, Colombo Branch and recently participated in the KHOJ International Artists Association Curatorial Intensive South Asia Fellowship in New Delhi, India. She currently lives and works in Hamburg, Berlin and Colombo.

*“Photography, the camera itself is just a tool for me, the mechanical extension, the lens in the ‘Benjaminian’ sense to mirror my thinking into a physical object.’*

**Select group shows:**

- *Fauna of Mirrors*, Chennai Biennale, 2019
- *Portraits of Resistance*, Aicon Gallery, New York, USA, 2017
- *Shadow Scenes* - curated by Natasha Ginwala, Colomboscope, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2015
- *Serendipity Revealed*, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London UK, 2014
- *The Reading Room*, Gallery Romain Rolland, Alliance Francaise, New Delhi, India, 2014
- *Making History*, JDA Perera Gallery, Colombo Biennale, 2014
- *Imagining our future together*, World Bank HQ, Wolfensohn Gallery, Washington D.C. USA, 2013
- *Imagining our future together*, Shilpakala National Gallery, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2012
- *After we arrive, before we leave*, Tate Modern, McAulay Gallery, London UK, 2011

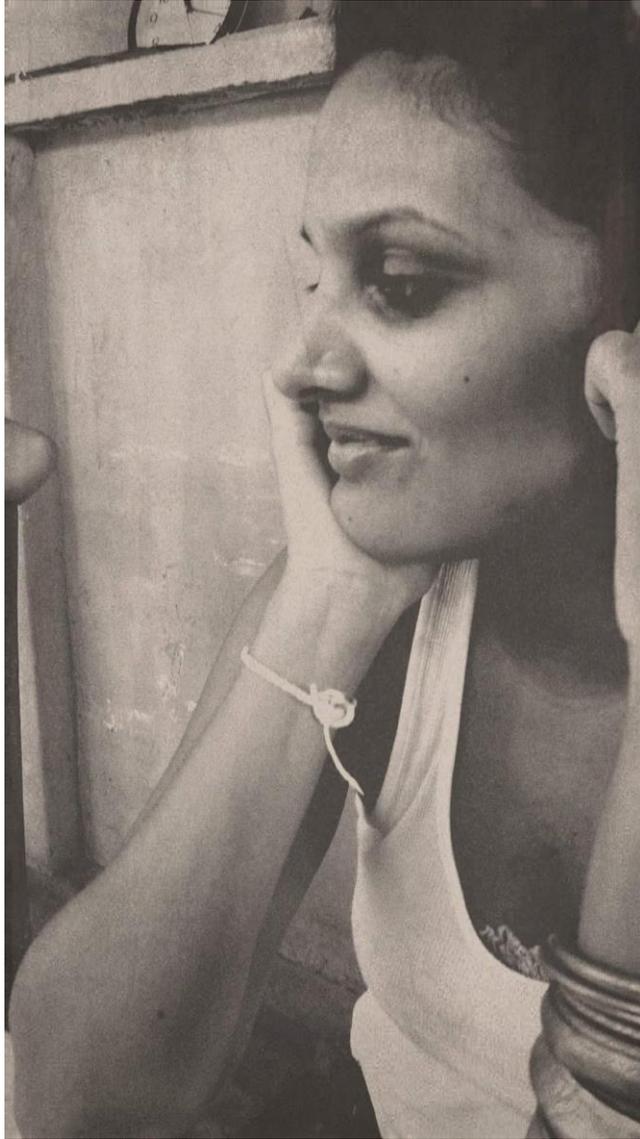
**Select solo shows:**

- *Trincomalee, My Father’s Stories and lost photographs*, Shalini Ganendra Advisory, Malaysia, 2018
- *Open studio / Passage of Time*, 1ShantiRoad Gallery, Bangalore, India, 2017
- *The Imprint of Lovers*, Red Dot Gallery, Theertha Collective, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2015

**Significant collections:**

- World Bank
- Goethe Institute
- Amerasinghe Ganendra Collection

Numerous private collections.



©Liz Angel Fernando

# GALLERY RESIDENCE EXHIBITION SPACE

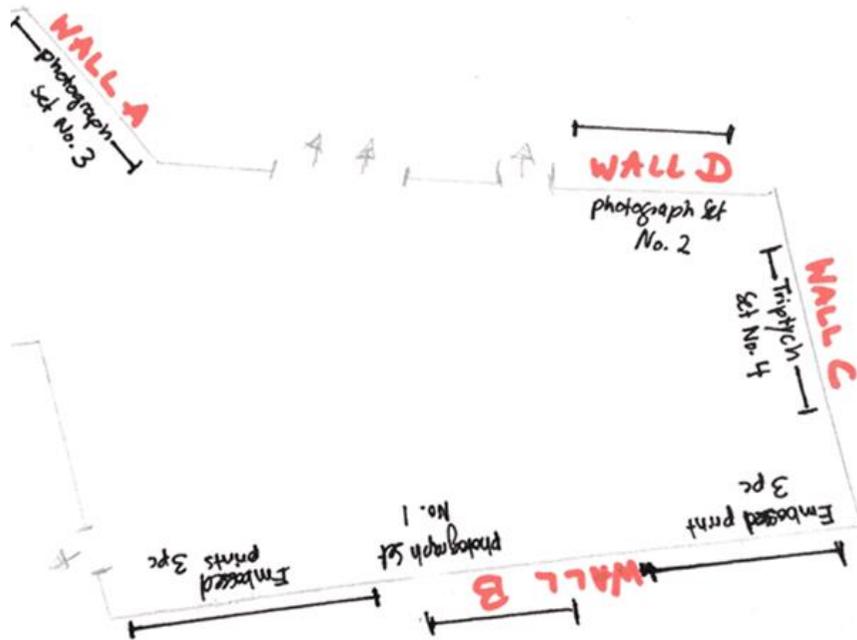
*‘The installation aims to mirror the visual experience of the book design within the gallery as an actual space.’*

Trincomalee began with a book of images, created in 2011. In 2016 Fernando revisited this work, aiming to ‘extract the complex writing and make it visible on the wall’ as part of a wider, personal reflection on her discourse with identity. She has selected images to hang in sets, dividing the twelve silver gelatin format images into four groups, further expanding on the visual narrative of this quietly dynamic body of work.

The gallery set up reflects the original aesthetics of the book and the concept behind it. Fernando explains that the unusual assemblage of white space inside the book and reflected in the installation, ‘could be read as empty space but rather represents the void that I carried all my life with me [...] the installation aims to mirror the visual experience of the book design within the gallery as an actual space’. Fernando has carefully curated the placement of the four sets of images and six embossed prints, with the artist’s book Trincomalee to be placed centrally. Her decisions are sensitively informed by the natural light of the Gallery Residence exhibition space, the ambulatory flow, and entry.

*“The order of hanging builds a narrative around the discovery of two characters, who are the main characters from my imagination. At the same time their identity will never be intensely revealed because the narrative is vague, the memory is ambiguous and frail.”*

- Liz Fernando, 2018



Wall A.  
Vignette No. 3

Wall B.  
Set of 6 embossed prints lined up along the wall, 3 embossed prints in a row then the middle of the wall will feature Vignette No. 1, to continue with the remaining 3 embossed prints.

Wall C.  
Vignette No. 4

Wall D.  
Vignette No. 2

The Artist 's suggested presentation and framing was followed in detail for this showing.

**Vignette 1/2/3 :**

Recommended framing is a standard 3cm (width) white wooden frame for each photograph.

**Vignette 4 :**

- Framing recommendation is a large size box frame, the 3 separate photographs will be hung very close to each other with a small white gap between each other approx. 1cm, no mount boards.
- The photographs should be hung 'floating' inside the frame, hung on white backdrop and fixed with tapes from underneath.
- About 8 cm free space should be kept on each side from edge of frame to the row of 3 pictures, the same as the embossed prints.
- Please use in any case always acid free tapes for all b/w photographs in the entire collection.
- Recommended framing is a standard 3cm (width) white wooden frame.

**Embossed Prints (6) :**

- For the embossed prints, box framing with glass as backboard, no mount board.
- Keep a gap between the edge of frame and the print, it should be min. 7-8cm from each 4 sides/edges of the frame and equal on every side.
- The embossed prints shall not be sandwiched or framed the usual way unless it's a box frame with no pressure from the back since the embossing will get flattened and damaged.
- Recommended framing is a standard 3cm (width) white wooden frame.

**Book:**

To be presented open, with gloves to be worn before handling.

*Note: For framing, only acid free materials shall be used, especially the photographs with the complex silver coating will discolour immediately into a green tint i.e. when framing please use acid free tapes.*

*For further inquiry, please contact:*

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