

**Vishmi Helaratne**

***Work from home.***

**16 Nov – 9 Dec 2023**

Learning how to work from home amid the global pandemic was a difficult adjustment for many. Creating a multi-functional personal space without it feeling suffocating is a tricky thing to achieve, especially when you have previously had the freedom of moving through the world as you please. Playing with terms commonly used in computer and internet settings in the titles of their paintings, the artist Vishmi Helaratne, explores ideas of 'working from home', questioning which practices are considered productive and accorded value.

For some, forming this compact personal bubble was not so unfamiliar, particularly for those of us who did not grow up in homes where privacy was a given. The houses we lived in, each room, and everything inside were the possessions of our parents, and this extended to us. In order to have objects that were truly our own we quickly learned to hide things in the corners of dark cupboards, and between mattresses and bed frame slats. We also learned to keep our intangible possessions to ourselves; hiding the desires and deeds that we knew our parents would not deem appropriate secret in a deep guilt-ridden burrow. We practised behavioural code-switching as we opened the front door to our family home, quietening ourselves so as not to draw attention, only exhaling in the quiet of our rooms as we closed the door behind us. In these rooms we keep all our secrets, our crushes, our sexuality, our desires, our true personalities. In response to the strict list of parental expectations, we hid all the fantasies and aspirations that did not make their pre-approved list of hopes for us. This included our desire to dance, sing, paint, and draw. Creativity and playing were frivolous and reserved for children of other races. These activities were not considered productive since they did not serve to set us up for the high paying jobs for which our parents had moved to this country.

So, in our childhood rooms we started making art and working from home: exploring our aesthetic visions and learning how to experiment with paint, colour, and composition, in secrecy and solitude. Helaratne's fluorescent paintings of colourful structures represent the great freedom that playgrounds held for us as children. These public sites were set out in the open where the air was fresh instead of stagnant and compacted. This was not somewhere where we had to be studious or proper, but an environment that was dedicated entirely to play. The monkey bars, see-saws and swings were brightly coloured and shiny. You were allowed to scream and run and be just as athletic as all the boys. The skirts that our mothers made for us didn't have a place here. Wearing shorts meant that you could hang upside down on the monkey bars without flashing your undies. The skin on the back of your knees

would tug and squeak along the metal bars with such a sound that would make our mother's wince. For short afternoons these were spaces of rebellion and freedom, but when our mental timers rang, we knew we had to start the walk back toward home. Back to the places where childishness, imagination and aspiration, must be left at the door. This inevitable return home hung like a shadow over visits to the park, a sense of ominosity that is evoked by the dark backgrounds of Helaratne's paintings.

At home, one form of artistry that we were allowed to observe, and sometimes even partake in, was the preparation of food. Made out in the open, for everyone in the household to see, experimentation with colour, texture and flavour were encouraged. It was one of the very few ways that we were allowed to show creativity within our homes and outside of our bedrooms, because it was disguised as humble domestic nourishment. It was a sensory experiment that became special occasions when we invited other families to share these meals together. Spicy, tangy, sweet and salty bright orange sambol that resembled damp sand that would loosely clump together when pressed. Soft butter yellow rice served on a large rectangular dish dressed with thin brown fried slices of onion, perfectly quartered hard boiled eggs, and dark brown raisins that sweetened each bite. Perfectly julienned beetroot that floated in a thin, but vibrant and a dark purple sauce that would bleed through every other dish that it shared a plate with. At the end of the meal, if we were given permission, we would be served a small piece of pastel coloured birthday cake with buttercream that was often too sweet and slightly gritty. The cake was the final feature of a neighbourhood dinner that none of the children were allowed to help with. It was too important to have anyone with small inexperienced hands come near before it was presented to everyone for the feminine brownie points that were given by every guest who laid their eyes on it.

This culinary form of creativity stuck with Helaratne. Working with the same tools used to embellish physical representations of wifely competency, and in an act of defiance against gendered expectations, those piping bags that were used to precisely place icing were instead put to paint and board to create three-dimensional paintings. The thick shiny paint resembles the glossy surface of iced animal biscuits — a favourite childhood treat of the artist—referenced in the titles, colour and faceless shapes of several works within this exhibition. The contrast between these indistinct but slightly ominous beings and the immediate joy that these brightly iced animal shaped biscuits produced, reminds us of the contrasting forces with which Helaratne is grappling. There is the great innocence and freedom of childhood and then the weight of heavy expectation that can be placed upon the children of immigrant parents.

One painting that defies the rest and provides a sense of bright relief was never intended to be a painting at all. The drop sheet that once protected the floor of the artist studio shows the outline of the painting that it used to hold. It is covered in sporadic marks, contrasting to the rigidly sequenced dots that make up the other pieces. These loose marks were not intended to be made, but here they are nonetheless, and its bright pink colour has become a

beacon of optimism in this series. The character of this painting is like each of us who emerged through the course of many ultimately happy accidents, resulting in a vibrancy that could not be replicated by careful planning or any form of practised moulding. *WORK FROM HOME* deals with a series of juxtapositions; work and play, lightness and weight, rest and recreation. It is the child of the playfulness that we exercised in our rooms that then spilled into our everyday lives, turning us into the makers that now showcase our creativity publicly, no longer hiding.

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