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Reconnecting with Her Roots



By Sadhana Senanayake

Frances Ferdinands is a globally renowned artist, having showcased her work in galleries, museums, corporate, and private collections all over the world. Frances' work has gained recognition for being powerful, thought-provoking and intensely personal.

She was born in Borella, and her family immigrated to Canada when she was a young girl, but she always maintained a strong connection with her homeland. When her father died in 1996, she felt that she needed to get more connected to Sri Lanka, and when her mother died, these feelings amplified.

Her mother was a painter and had a design book called Sri Lankan Decorations and Paintings by G.S. Fernando, documenting various temple designs that Frances inherited once her mother died.

“This book had a tremendous impact on me when I was young.” explains Frances, “I was very attracted to the designs in the book and felt an intense connection to it. So after my mother died and the book came to me, I felt that I needed to go back to Sri Lanka and connect with my heritage.” Frances used the book to form a proposal for her project which brought her here to Sri Lanka to learn the history and cultural significance of these designs and also find a way to incorporate it into her own art.

The project, which is a Career Development Grant, is Frances being mentored by individuals who are experts in three different cultural arts, the first was traditional temple painting, taking floral motifs and learning how to paint them accurate and learning their history and cultural significance.

“The project is really learning about things that are connected to my cultural heritage, that was the main focus to me when I did the proposal for this project.”

The other two segments of the projects were batik and beeralu lace. “When I met my mentor for temple paintings, I saw that she had the same book that my mother had!” says Frances.

“I felt that I was more than just coincidence that she would have the exact same book. This was what I was meant to do, and the book was what led me here, it was the centre of the whole project.” This project was not Frances’ first connection with Sri Lanka; she had been here earlier before the tsunami happened. “I was emotionally affected by the tsunami and it really catapulted my work to being more directly connected to Sri Lanka.”

This led to a series called “Food for Thought”, which were a collection of paintings influenced by the events of the tsunami and its impact. She has also used things connected to her own biography, such as documents that her family had to produce on arrival in Canada to prove their Dutch heritage in her paintings.

Frances plans to create a body of work around her project and she has a show booked in September at a gallery in Toronto She also hopes to showcase that work here too sometime next year.

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