

Voices in Moving Image Series: Rajee Samarasinghe

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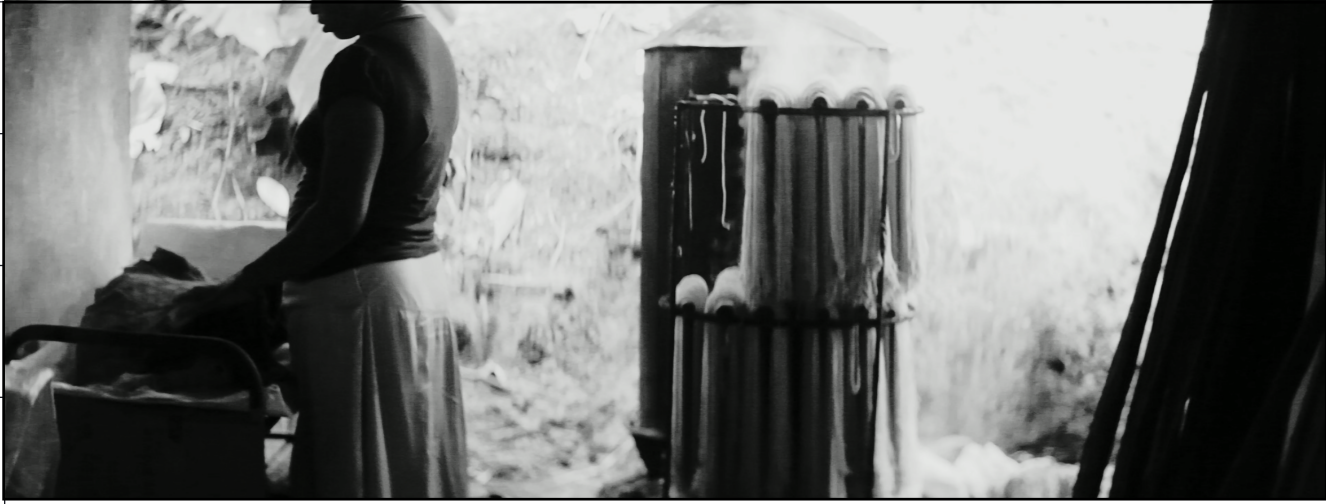
by **Chloe Vuillermoz**



Photo courtesy of Rajee Samarasinghe

VOL.7





Still from *If I Were Any Further Away I'd Be Closer to Home* (2016)
Photo courtesy of Rajee Samarasinghe

The Fine Arts Lecture Series *Voices in Moving Image* has been taking place every Wednesday evening of the Fall 2023 semester, hosted by filmmaker and CCA professor Alison O'Daniel. The engaging series allows for students to connect with artists from all around the world. This experience provides a unique opportunity to pose questions, witness creative processes, and meet several well rooted professional artists. Most of the screenings are held in person, but it is safe to say that even via Zoom this week, this event was impactful. The featured artist and guest lecturer was Rajee Samarasinghe, a Sri Lankan filmmaker based in the US. He received his BFA from UC San Diego and his MFA from California Institute of the Arts, and much of his work is informed by his own identity and experience growing up during the Sri Lankan Civil War. Attendees were privy to viewing seven of his short films from the past few years in addition to clips from his first feature film, expected to be released in 2024. The format of this lecture was widely familiar, since at this point in the global pandemic many students are accustomed to remote lectures and the many technical issues that come along with that environment. It is well established that there will be awkward silences and glitches in shared screens. However, despite this normality, we were quickly transported from the familiar Zoomscape and taken somewhere else; somewhere only Samarasinghe knows; somewhere he has created and we were lucky enough to be invited into.

Samarasinghe's seven shorts were all thick with familial and personal images. As a viewer it was hard not to ask oneself, "what is it I'm looking at?" Scenes of textiles, rivers, chaos, and serenity were all present and a sense of nostalgia washed over the screen of my laptop. The first film we were shown set the tone for this. *Show Me Other Places*, made during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined an array of emotions. At times I was overwhelmed and at other times I was deeply at peace. Samarasinghe has mastered the ability to direct an audience's emotional landscape and inner dialogue. Throughout this film I was thinking about the places in which he filmed, places that made him, but also about the places that made me. As I see it, Samarasinghe is not only a filmmaker, but a poet too. His use of what I would call visual syntax, made the image on the screen indistinguishable from the written word and with the little dialogue present in his films, he still managed to pull at the emotional chords of his audience. This ability of his may stem from the fact that he edits all of his own work; Samarasinghe described "screwing around in the edit" as where much of the magic happens. His process is similar to that of many songwriters in that it is not a matter of melody or lyrics first, but of what works and what doesn't. It is somewhat hard to explain, and that spontaneity is part of the gift of making.



Still from *Show Me Other Places* (2021)
Photo courtesy of Rajee Samarasinghe

Samarasinghe's upcoming feature, *Your Touch Makes Others Invisible*, appears beautifully shot. The colors, textures, and editing he uses make for a haunting foundation for the pointed political message of the film. His shorts are much less explicitly political and the shift in tone for this film is obvious and intentional. This film focuses on the enforced disappearances occurring and devastating families in Sri Lanka, specifically within the Tamil community. It is important to note the extreme lengths Samarasinghe and his crew went to capture the testimonies in this film. Let's put it this way, they were not allowed to film what they did nor were they allowed to ask the questions they are asking, exposing the ramifications of a devastating civil war. Samarasinghe explained that when this film is finally released, navigating public reactions will be challenging; though I think it will be groundbreaking. To capture much of their footage, Samarasinghe and his crew had to pose as making a low budget science fiction film. By incorporating several visuals from their cover story, he has created an evocative combination of science fiction and the true horrors they are exposing. The fiction and nonfiction elements of this film marry together in a way that is quite poignant. To make this film possible Samarasinghe received the Sundance Documentary Fund grant in 2019 and, for the first time, has been working with a full crew on this production. With this preview of his first feature length film, I am left eagerly awaiting the finished piece in 2024.



Still from *Your Touch Makes Others Invisible* (forthcoming 2024)
Photo courtesy of Rajee Samarasinghe



Still from *Your Touch Makes Others Invisible* (forthcoming 2024)
Photo courtesy of Rajee Samarasinghe

As the films came to a close we had time for a brief Q and A, where Samarasinghe answered questions about his editing process, how to get the funding for features, and his inspirations. What really struck me was his explanation of what motivated him to make this film, despite the many challenges standing in his way. He explained that we all create art about what makes us who we are and his experiences growing up during a civil war has shaped his motivation and his art. "What are you willing to die for?" he posed to the group. We sat in silence, reflecting on the art we are each responsible for. While this portion of the lecture was brief, I believe many of us were made to think seriously about the question and to push ourselves as filmmakers, writers, and visual artists.

This event made film and education accessible. Although most of the room contained first and second year graduate students, I would still recommend this series to anyone on campus, but particularly first year undergraduate students who are overwhelmed with their major or elective choices. This series will give a taste of the world of independent filmmaking and its surrounding discourse. Samarasinghe's work was intense and visually stunning, and I exited the Zoom feeling fuller than before. I would advise not letting this series or Samarasinghe pass you by.



Still from *Foreign Quarters* (2018)
Photo courtesy of Rajee Samarasinghe

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