

# Contemporary Art as a Medium for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation: An Analytical Study of Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

In post-conflict and disunited societies, peace and conciliation extend beyond the absence of violence and involve emotional mending, social trust, and the reconstruction of fractured collaborative individualities. Contemporary art is increasingly honored as a significant artistic practice that engages with these complex processes. This paper examines the extent to which contemporary art has been used to make peace and conciliation, fastening on its abstract foundations, practical mechanisms, and socio-artistic impact in post-conflict surrounds. The study uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary exploration methodology, employing critical literature review, visual and contextual analysis of artworks, and relative case study analysis. crucial sources include peace studies proposition, art literal education, exhibition attestation, and artist- led enterprise. named transnational case studies are examined with an in-depth focus on Sri Lanka to assess how contemporary cultural practices similar as installation, performance, participatory art and community- grounded systems address themes of trauma, memory, relegation and identity. As a example Chandraguptha Thenuwara through his groundbreaking “Barrelism” series, transforms military symbols such as the ubiquitous painted barrels used for roadblocks into recurring motifs that expose the normalization. The Sri Lankan case is anatomized to understand how artists and groups are responding to the heritage of civil conflict by creating indispensable spaces for dialogue, memory and intercultural engagement. The paper argues that while contemporary art cannot serve as a stage-alone medium for conflict resolution or structural reform, it plays a pivotal reciprocal part in peacebuilding. By facilitating dialogue, challenging dominant narratives, and fostering empathy, contemporary art can be seen to have contributed to the convergence of emotional and artistic moments, even when they are often overlooked by formal political processes. The study concludes that integrating contemporary art into broader peacebuilding frameworks enhances the potential for sustainable and inclusive reconciliation.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Art, Peacebuilding, Reconciliation, Conflict, Social Practice Art.

## Introduction

In post-conflict and socially fragmented societies, peace and reconciliation extend beyond simply stopping violence. They involve complex processes of emotional healing, restoring

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social trust, and reconstructing fractured collective identities shaped by long periods of conflict and division. Traditional peacebuilding mechanisms such as legal reform, political negotiations, truth commissions, and institutional interventions have played a crucial role in addressing structural and governance issues. However, these approaches often ignore the affective, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of reconciliation that are essential for sustainable peace.

In this context, contemporary art has increasingly emerged as a critical socio-cultural practice with the potential to engage with the profound psychological and emotional consequences of conflict. Unlike formal political processes, contemporary artistic practices offer alternative modes of expression that allow individuals and communities to confront trauma, negotiate memory, and contemplate identity through visual, spatial, and performative media. Art's ability to operate within ambiguity, symbolism, and metaphor enables it to address sensitive and contested histories without being confined to rigid ideological frameworks.

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship in peace and conflict studies, visual culture, and trauma theory has begun to acknowledge the role of artistic practices in transitional justice, memory activism, and community-based reconciliation. Scholars argue that contemporary art can foster empathy, challenge dominant historical narratives, and create spaces for dialogue in which marginalized voices are heard. Despite this growing recognition, contemporary art has been insufficiently theorized and largely underutilized within mainstream peacebuilding frameworks, particularly in post-conflict regions of the Global South. Artistic interventions are often positioned as additional or symbolic gestures rather than integral components of reconciliation processes.

This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the extent to which contemporary art has been used as a tool for peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. It explores how artistic practices engage with themes of trauma, memory, militarization, displacement, and identity, and how these interventions contribute to emotional and social repair. The research focuses specifically on Sri Lanka, a nation where protracted civil conflict and complex post-war realities have profoundly shaped contemporary artistic expression.

This study has three primary objectives: first, to analyze the theoretical foundations that link contemporary art to peacebuilding and reconciliation; second, to examine the artistic strategies used by contemporary artists to address trauma, memory, and social division; and third, to assess the socio-cultural impact of these practices in post-conflict contexts, with a case study focused on Sri Lanka.

The study is informed by an interdisciplinary literature review drawn from peace and conflict studies, visual cultural theory, art history, trauma studies, and cultural sociology. Central debates within this literature address the potential of art to act as a means of ethical witnessing, to disrupt hegemonic narratives of history and power, and to create alternative spaces for dialogue and reflection. By situating contemporary art within these theoretical frameworks, this research argues for a more inclusive understanding of peacebuilding – one

that recognizes cultural and artistic practices as essential contributors to reconciliation alongside political and institutional efforts.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology. The research design integrates the following approaches:

- **Critical Literature Review:** Examination of scholarly texts on peacebuilding, contemporary art practices, post-conflict memory, and reconciliation theory.
- **Visual and Contextual Analysis:** Close reading of selected artworks, exhibitions, and artistic interventions, focusing on symbolism, materiality, spatial strategies, and audience engagement.
- **Comparative Case Study Analysis:** Investigation of transnational case studies from post-conflict regions, with an in-depth focus on Sri Lanka.

Primary and secondary sources include exhibition catalogues, artist statements, interviews, archival documentation, and reports from artist-led initiatives and cultural organizations. The Sri Lankan case is foregrounded to explore how contemporary artists and collectives respond to the legacy of civil conflict through installation art, performance, participatory practices, and community-based projects

### **Results and Discussion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that contemporary art contributes to peacebuilding and reconciliation primarily through symbolic, emotional, and socio-cultural engagement rather than through direct political negotiation or institutional reform. Across the selected international and Sri Lankan case studies, contemporary artistic practices emerged as alternative platforms through which individuals and communities could negotiate trauma, memory, identity, and coexistence in post-conflict contexts. The analysis reveals that contemporary art functions not merely as aesthetic production but as a critical cultural intervention capable of shaping collective consciousness and facilitating processes of emotional and symbolic repair.

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of contemporary art in addressing collective trauma and memory. In post-conflict societies, traumatic experiences are frequently silenced, politically manipulated, or unevenly represented within official historical narratives. The study found that contemporary artists employ symbolic imagery, fragmented forms, ephemeral materials, and performative strategies to externalize psychological wounds that remain difficult to articulate through conventional discourse. Such artistic practices create what trauma theorists describe as “spaces of witnessing,” where personal suffering becomes collectively acknowledged.

In many of the analyzed artworks, materials themselves functioned as carriers of memory. Recycled military objects, damaged domestic materials, abandoned personal belongings, and fragmented architectural forms were repeatedly used to evoke absence, displacement, and mourning. The visual language of fragmentation reflected the fractured

nature of post-war identities and social relationships. These artistic strategies allow viewers to emotionally engage with experiences of violence without relying solely on documentary representation. As a result, contemporary art creates forms of affective communication capable of transcending linguistic, ethnic, and political boundaries.

The findings further indicate that contemporary art plays an important role in disrupting dominant narratives and challenging structures of power. In many post-conflict states, official histories are shaped by nationalist ideologies that privilege certain memories while marginalizing others. Contemporary artists often resist these hegemonic narratives by presenting alternative perspectives rooted in personal testimony, marginalized experiences, and counter-memory practices. Through irony, symbolism, abstraction, and spatial intervention, artists expose the complexities and contradictions hidden within state-sponsored narratives of nationalism, heroism, and victory.

This was particularly evident in the Sri Lankan context, where artistic responses to the civil war frequently questioned the normalization of militarization and ethnic division within everyday life. The research identified that Sri Lankan contemporary artists utilize visual metaphors to critique systems of surveillance, violence, and ideological control without directly reproducing political propaganda. Such approaches are significant because they enable artistic critique within politically sensitive environments where direct confrontation may be restricted or socially divisive.

A particularly important example examined in this study is the work of Chandraguptha Thenuwara and his influential "*Barrelism*" series. Thenuwara transforms the painted metal barrels commonly used as military checkpoints and roadblocks during the civil war into recurring sculptural and visual motifs. Through repetition, abstraction, and contextual displacement, these ordinary objects become powerful symbols of the militarization of public space and the psychological normalization of violence. One of the works from the "*Barrelism*" art series created by Thenuwara is shown in the image below.



Figure 1. Chandraguptha Thenuwara, *Barralscape*, on display at the Recurrence 2020 Exhibition, Lionel Wendt Centre, Colombo Sri Lanka.



Figure 2. Chandraguptha Thenuwara, *The Monument for Innocent Victims of War and Labyrinth*, 1999, Fukuoka, Japan, Barrels

The barrels no longer function merely as physical objects; instead, they become visual indicators of fear, restriction, and state authority embedded within daily civilian life. The study found that “*Barrelism*” effectively destabilizes the viewer’s perception of ordinary urban objects, forcing critical reflection on how conflict silently shapes social environments and collective consciousness long after physical violence declines.

Similarly, Jagath Weerasinghe’s works reveal how contemporary art can function as a form of moral witnessing. Weerasinghe’s installations and mixed media works often use ritual settings, distressed surfaces, and symbolic physical images to communicate the emotional consequences of war and social fragmentation. His artistic practice emphasizes grief, memory, and moral accountability, and encourages viewers to confront uncomfortable histories that are often excluded from official public discourse. The study observed that such practices contribute to reconciliation by maintaining spaces for reflection, discord, and dialogue rather than by offering simple solutions.

Among the works of Jagath Weerasinghe In this series, created between April/May 2019, Weerasinghe responds to the Easter Attacks that occurred in Sri Lanka. In Los Angeles during this time, Weerasinghe began a smaller series of work on paper and installation in response to news of the attacks. These artworks were exhibited at the Saskia Fernando Gallery as part of an art exhibition titled “*Backpacks, Bombs & Borders*”.



Figure 3. Jagath Weerasinghe, *The Backpack*, 2019. Mixed Media



Figure 4. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Backpack 7*, 2019, Mixed Media on Paper

Another key finding is the participatory and conversational nature of many contemporary artistic initiatives. Unlike traditional monumental art, which reinforces fixed historical interpretations, participatory contemporary art often invites direct community engagement and collaborative interaction. Community-based projects, workshops, public installations, and socially engaged performances create temporary spaces where individuals from divided ethnic, linguistic, or religious communities can interact outside of formal political structures.

In Sri Lanka, several artist-led initiatives have focused on creating intercultural dialogue between Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim communities affected by decades of conflict. These projects often involve storytelling, collaborative creation, public discussion, and shared memories. The study found that participatory artistic practices help reduce social distance by encouraging empathy and interpersonal communication. Importantly, these interactions do not necessarily eliminate political disagreement; rather, they establish conditions in which multiple perspectives can coexist within a shared symbolic space.

The findings reveal that site-specific artistic interventions are of particular importance in post-conflict reconciliation processes. Many contemporary artists deliberately situate their works in former conflict zones, abandoned military sites, memorial landscapes, or contested urban environments. These locations hold historical and emotional resonance, allowing art to reactivate repressed memories and encourage public reflection on the relationship between place and violence. Through spatial transformation, artists symbolically reclaim places associated with fear, exclusion, or trauma and transform them into temporary spaces of contemplation and dialogue.

Despite these contributions, the study also identifies several limitations and contradictions in the relationship between contemporary art and peacebuilding. First, the social impact of artistic interventions is difficult to quantify using traditional peacebuilding indicators. Emotional transformation, symbolic repair, and shifts in collective perception occur gradually and unevenly, making measurable evaluation challenging. Furthermore, contemporary art often circulates within urban cultural institutions and elite intellectual networks, limiting access for the broader rural or economically marginalized population.

Second, the study found that artistic interventions can be politically contested. In polarized societies, artworks that address war memory, accountability, or ethnic violence can provoke resistance, censorship, or accusations of political bias. As a result, artists working in post-conflict environments often face tensions between artistic freedom, institutional constraints, and public acceptance. This suggests that contemporary art is not inherently neutral or universally tolerant; rather, its impact is highly dependent on social context, audience interpretation, and institutional support.

Another important observation concerns the temporal dimension of reconciliation. Formal political peace agreements often prioritize immediate stability and institutional reconstruction, while artistic practices are associated with the long-term emotional consequences of violence. The study suggests that contemporary art contributes to what can be described as “slow reconciliation” gradual processes of psychological healing, memory negotiation, and cultural reflection that unfold over generations. In this sense, art operates less as a direct solution and more as an ongoing process of cultural mediation.

Comparative analysis with other post-conflict regions further reinforces these findings. Similar artistic strategies have been identified in contexts such as Bosnia, Rwanda, South Africa and Latin America, where artists have used memorial installations, participatory performance, documentary aesthetics and community-based practices to address violence and historical trauma. This shows that the relationship between contemporary art and reconciliation

has international relevance, but each context produces distinct visual languages shaped by local histories and political situations.

Overall, the results suggest that contemporary art contributes to peacebuilding through five interrelated functions:

- Facilitating emotional expression and trauma.
- Challenging dominant political and historical narratives.
- Creating dialogic and participatory spaces.
- Encouraging collaboration and ethical reflection.
- Symbolically reconstructing fractured social and cultural identities.

These findings support the view that peacebuilding should not be understood solely as a political or institutional process. Sustainable reconciliation also requires cultural, emotional, and symbolic engagement. Contemporary art, therefore, occupies an important complementary position within broader peacebuilding frameworks by addressing dimensions of human experience that formal political mechanisms often fail to reach.

## Conclusion

This study argues that contemporary art plays a critical, albeit complementary, role in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. While it cannot act as a stand-alone solution for structural reform or political conflict resolution, contemporary art facilitates critical emotional and cultural engagement that is often overlooked by formal peace mechanisms.

By activating dialogue, questioning entrenched power structures, and presenting alternative narratives, contemporary art contributes to the convergence of emotional healing and social reflection. Integrating contemporary artistic practices into broader peacebuilding frameworks can enhance inclusive and sustainable reconciliation, especially in post-conflict societies such as Sri Lanka.

The study recommends greater collaboration between artists, cultural institutions, policymakers, and peace practitioners to identify and institutionalize the role of contemporary art in reconciliation strategies. Further research is encouraged to explore audience reception, long-term social impact, and comparative regional studies in South Asia and beyond.

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