Christopher Kulendran Thomas

**In collaboration with
Annika Kuhlmann**

SAFE ZONE

07_09_2024 _____ 05_01_2025

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A pioneer of post-AI art, Christopher Kulendran Thomas has been using Artificial Intelligence technologies over the last decade to make genre-defying work that examines the foundational fictions of Western individualism. His paintings metabolise the colonial art history that came to dominate in Sri Lanka after his family, who are Tamil, left escalating ethnic violence there. Often these are shown with immersive video installations that remix propaganda and counter-propaganda into a cyclonic vortex of speculative scenarios. *Safe Zone* combines painting with auto-edited television to confront the historical mediums of soft power.

A child of the Tamil struggle for independence, Kulendran Thomas has grown up amidst competing fictions of what constitutes democracy, freedom and nationhood, as well as the seemingly invisible forces that can make one event iconic while repressing another from public record. However, this has not made the artist revert to traditional notions of truth and authenticity, but rather the opposite: to push image-making into hyper-mode. What Kulendran Thomas offers the viewer is not political or even critical art as we are used to encountering it – this is not an educational situation. Rather, his works make monuments to the glittering fictions of colonialism in the same instance as they suck us deep inside their plot holes, simultaneously inflating and exposing. As historical forms of propaganda meet the era of AI, the imperial image-machine starts to feed on itself. We may see the seams, but there is no outside to this fiction. When power asserts itself, the medium is the message.

Curator: Helena Kritis

If you would like more in-depth writing on the exhibition, be sure to also read the green sections by art critic & writer Kristian Vistrup Madsen.

At WIELS Kulendran Thomas presents one very large painting, and a series of small ones illuminated by the warm glow of a spherical video work titled *Peace Core* (2024), all of it newly commissioned. Made together with long-time collaborator Annika Kuhlmann, *Peace Core* features television footage that was broadcast in the United States during a period of several minutes one particular morning many years ago. The work draws from the editing style of early 'corecore' videos on TikTok, in which arbitrary footage and music is combined for emotional affect, projecting meaning into meaninglessness. But the television footage featured in *Peace Core* is anything but meaningless – and it is continually algorithmically auto-edited into a hypnotic meditation, synchronised with an ever-evolving soundtrack composed using AI tools that keep remixing forever the sounds and music that were broadcast that morning.

Peace Core's spherical constellation of screens continually recombines footage from a morning in the United States that is now carved into collective memory: 9/11/01. The screens themselves bring to mind a newsroom or the trading floor of a stock exchange. News, celebrity interviews, trailers for upcoming shows: here was Ideology in action. Across the world Coke cans gave form to "freedom," and the canned laughter of the same TV series resounded with irresistible, uncanny familiarity. As Marshal McLuhan wrote: "If an ad has become so environmental as to be unperceived, that's when it's really doing its work." Paying tribute to the tremendous force of its propaganda, *Peace Core* memorialises the slow denouement of an empire.

And now an ascendent empire has its own, new mediums of soft power. TikTok algorithmically

accelerates media hypnosis. Corecore videos on TikTok internalise the algorithmic logic behind combining image and music to stimulate an emotional response – real feelings, algorithmically mediated. By actually automating that editing logic and accompanying soundscape, *Peace Core* continuously remixes – amongst other things – infinite variations of the most iconic so-called 'world music' of the globalist era, suspended inside an endlessly postponed collapse. The same footage is continually recontextualised and, without ever seeing what happens next, we find ourselves engrossed in an infinite mirage, a never-ending commercial break. Up close and in the dark, the luminous screen hive takes on the additional connotation of a kind of spiritual node. Every day, the strength of this stream of images compelled billions to suspend disbelief. Media, the ball of content seems to suggest, is empire's very own form of miracle.

Peace Core could be seen as a never-ending performance that infinitely extends a final suspended illusion of the end of history. Bathing in the warm light of this historical singularity is an exhibition that draws overlooked connections between the cultural legacies of the West and the violence that has followed in its wake. Far away from *Peace Core*'s seemingly anodyne American morning TV, Tamil Eelam – Kulendran Thomas' family homeland – had been self-governed for several decades as a de facto independent state. But Eelam was wiped out in 2009 by the Sri Lankan government, who were enabled by the global geopolitical shifts of the so-called 'War On Terror,' in which totally unrelated independence movements around the world were re-labelled as terrorists following the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Abstracting the work of early Sri Lankan modernists like Justin Pieris Deraniyagala and George Keyt, Kulendran Thomas' paintings are composed using a neural network trained on the colonial art history that was first brought to Sri Lanka by European settlers. They are then hand-painted and depict scenes from the beaches of Mullivaikkal, Sri Lanka – perhaps from a debauched beach party, perhaps from a brutal massacre.

Palm trees and bodies proliferate in an expressionistic overload. By the contorted faces of the figures, their limbs tangled into dramatic clusters, this does not look like a regular holiday scene. And there is distance; some reverberating doubt as to how to place these paintings – how to receive them. The blend of styles recalls various European modes of painting from across the 20th century, a swarm of influences that adds up to a peculiar absence of intention, which is, like all absences, only almost invisible. For this post-historical cascading of styles is not postmodernism, but more like a memory of something you've never actually seen. It is this glitchiness between authorial intention, style and place that gives rise to the uncanniness of Kulendran Thomas paintings. Glitchy, that is, only until you step outside of the colonial fiction of individualism perpetuated by the historical power centres that have determined the Western canon.

In the final gallery is a painting which shares its dimensions – 3.5m × 7.77m – and compositional dynamics with Picasso's *Guernica,* among the 20th century's most striking artistic testaments to the horrors of war. Kulendran Thomas' painting depicts a narrow strip of land declared safe for civilians during the brutal final stage of the Sri Lankan civil war in May 2009.

Whereas the bombing of Guernica quickly became a media event, and Picasso did his painting in black and white in reference to the stark immediacy of photography, the bombing of Tamil civilians in that no-fire zone in Mullivaikkal went unwitnessed by the outside world. Since reporting on the massacre was suppressed within the island and no foreign journalists were allowed into the country, Kulendran Thomas depicts something as rare as a 21st-century event without photographic sources. It is made instead by metabolising collective memories from other places and other times (including the Basque town), filtered through the vibrant palette of the island's own modernisms.

> **" THIS WORK BEGAN AS A WAY FOR ME TO PROCESS MY RELATIONSHIP TO THE CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA, AND ITS COLONIAL PRETEXT, THROUGH MY RELATIONSHIP WITH ART ITSELF – WHAT ART DOES AND HOW IT PROLIFERATES. "**
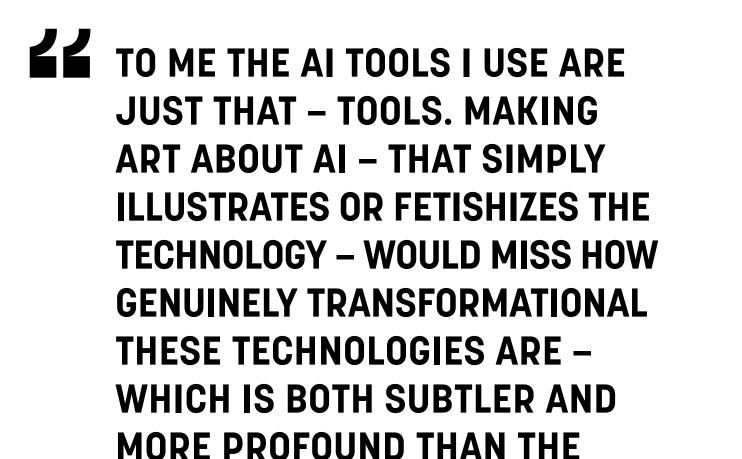
—Christopher Kulendran Thomas

Kulendran Thomas composes his paintings – not just the ones in *Safe Zone* but all his previous paintings – using a neural network trained on the work of many of Sri Lanka's most well-known artists. The AI model generates new compositions extrapolated from algorithmically analysing the art historical influences behind their work. And when the resulting digital images are painted onto canvas in Kulendran Thomas' studio, each of the countless seemingly intuitive micro-decisions made in interpreting the image involves another layer of filtering art historical memes, this time physically but perhaps not *that* different to the operation of the algorithm itself, even when executed by human hand.

We can say this painting is expressive – but of whom? Familiar – but from where? While the massacre in Mullivaikkal was not seen by the outside world, it was definitely shaped by it, on many levels over many years – from the British Empire's policy of 'divide-and-rule', that sowed the seeds of ethnic conflict, all the way to the American Empire's 'War on Terror', that gave the Sri Lankan government the narrative pretext for ethnic cleansing. Kulendran Thomas' painting stands as a monumental rebuke not just to the invisibility of the massacre in Mullivaikkal but also to the restrictive and crumbling narratives exported by the centres of globalisation. What we see instead are multiple understandings of what painting is, mobilised as an epic harnessing of this most historical of mediums to *see through* the world-making myths of Western individualism.

One of the foundational fictions of the empire that we call 'the West' is that we are free and individual agents – a tale in which artists are often cast as protagonists and art proliferates as its ultimate expression. What makes AI so exhilarating is precisely how it challenges the myth of the free and independent agent, instead reflecting how networked, plural, unstable and yet somehow predictable humans are and have always been.

Safe Zone straddles three event horizons – one that was seen in real-time at the twilight of the broadcast era, another that occurred in its geopolitical aftermath but went largely unreported for years, and a third that we face now at the dawn of a technological convergence in the era of artificial intelligence.

Making art in the post-AI era means making art that does not take the novelty of the technology as its subject, and much less as its aesthetic. AI doesn't have an aesthetic; the mediums of the future are invisible, and they are so pervasive

that they transform the past. Art post-AI comes from a *way of seeing* that is profoundly aware of the network of influences that produces not only images, but reality itself.

> **"TO ME THE AI TOOLS I USE ARE JUST THAT – TOOLS. MAKING ART ABOUT AI – THAT SIMPLY ILLUSTRATES OR FETISHIZES THE TECHNOLOGY – WOULD MISS HOW GENUINELY TRANSFORMATIONAL THESE TECHNOLOGIES ARE – WHICH IS BOTH SUBTLER AND MORE PROFOUND THAN THE 'LOOK' OF GENERATED CONTENT."**
>
> —Christopher Kulendran Thomas

Inside the mise-en-abyme of artificial intelligence – its black hole of meaning – we see a world where temporalities are layered, spaces simultaneous, and existence always already mediated. Language is technology, and vision is filtered by our expectation of it. Encountered in art, these things are not themes or metaphors, but simply indicative of the ontological reality of life imitating machines imitating life. In Kulendran Thomas's work the question of the individual – their agency, their responsibility – is rephrased as a question of a series of relations: of authenticity to experience, of expression to subjectivity, and of perception to individuality. At the heart of this inquiry is a bold sense of doubt as to what (the performed fiction of) being human even is, or, indeed, has ever been.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Christopher Kulendran Thomas is an artist, of Tamil descent, who spent his formative years in London after his family left escalating ethnic oppression in Sri Lanka. Now working with advanced technologies across myriad disciplines, the artist's studio is a fluid collaboration that brings together technologists, architects, writers, journalists, designers, musicians and activists from around the world. Kulendran Thomas' work is represented in major collections like that of The Museum of Modern Art in New York and solo exhibitions of his work have been held at Kunsthalle Zürich (2023); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2022); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2022); Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2019); Institute for Modern Art, Brisbane (2019); Spike Island, Bristol (2019); and Tensta konsthall, Stockholm (2017).

Annika Kuhlmann is a curator who works predominantly through longterm collaborations. In 2024, together with artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas and writer Dean Kissick, she founded Earth, a new art space in New York City. Previously she ran Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, together with Nina Pohl and worked as a curator at Berlin's Gropius Bau and Haus der Kulturen der Welt. She is also Creative Director at 0001 (previously New Eelam), an ongoing architecture project that she cofounded with Christopher Kulendran Thomas.

EVENTS

Christopher Kulendran Thomas in conversation with Beatrix Ruf (EN)
Sat. 12.10, 16:00

Look Who's Talking: Helena Kritis (NL)
Wed. 06.11, 19:00

Lecture: Hammad Nasar on Christopher Kulendran Thomas (EN)
Sat. 30.11, 16:00

Nocturnes with guided tours (NL/FR/EN)
Every 1st Wednesday of the month, 11:00–21:00

THANKS FOR YOUR VISIT!

The exhibition is co-commissioned by: WIELS, FACT Liverpool (UK), and Artspace Sydney (AU)

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More info at WIELS.ORG

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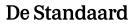**Image credit:** Christopher Kulendran Thomas, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.