

Text for Munich Museum catalogue

Foreword from Gill Pattison – River Gallery, Yangon

As the Myanmar Spring draws ever more visitors to Myanmar, many are surprised to find a small but thriving contemporary art scene. Rushing to learn about this undiscovered market, collectors and gallerists sense that we are at an inflection point -- leaving behind an older, quieter world and rushing headlong into the global art market of the 21st century.

Artists with exemplary skills, who have grown up in a country isolated from external influences and under a censorship regime, which forced them to be very careful in their choice of subjects, now enjoy a new freedom. But it is still early; most artists continue to paint the scenes they see around them. Myanmar art's often tranquil beauty is the silver lining from the years of isolation and repression. Unable to express criticism or negative comment about the country's myriad problems through their work, artists focused on their extraordinarily picturesque country, finding inspiration in the landscapes, people and religious icons all around them.

Over the years I have asked many Myanmar artists about their choices under a pervasive censorship regime. It seems that people react according to their temperament – some are philosophical, not letting themselves be bothered by the restrictions; for others, it was the annoying stone in the shoe which never goes away. These artists found ways to vent their frustration – they painted political works, but then hid them away, or they inserted subtle political references into their paintings that escaped casual scrutiny. A few went on creating even under the most dire circumstances. One such is Htein Lin, an artist caught up in the dissident movement and unjustly imprisoned for six years. While in jail he continued to create works of art with whatever objects he could find, using the white cotton longyi (sarong) worn by prisoners as his canvas and paints smuggled into the prison. During six long years in a series of prisons, he created over 200 works of art, an extraordinary body of work and a testament to his irrepressible creative spirit.

As Myanmar rejoins the international community, we have no doubt the artists will step up to the challenges posed by the expectations of a global art market. Already we are seeing a flourish of experimentation; artists are thinking about new media and new ways of expressing themselves. Yet, while there is a more expansive sense of possibility, artists still face serious obstacles in developing as professionals. There is no public support for the visual arts in Myanmar – no art museum or national art gallery, no foundations, no archives or libraries, no art education in schools and only two small, poorly resourced art colleges. Isolated from the rest of the world for the past 50 years, Myanmar artists have had little exposure to the currents of the global art world – until very recently. Given this unpromising environment, it is surprising to find a thriving art community and more than a handful of extraordinary artists, who couple technical brilliance with a unique creative vision.

For this unprecedented exhibition of Myanmar contemporary art in Germany, River Gallery of Yangon has brought together seven of Myanmar's leading talents. Each draws inspiration in different ways from their country: the Myanmar culture, religion, landscapes and people – but each of them transforms these familiar subjects with a surprising twist or juxtaposition, forcing or cajoling us by stealth to see them in a new way that delights our senses and stretches our imaginations.

Nann Nann

Coming from a family where both parents were artists, it was no surprise that Nann Nann started drawing and painting from an early age. After she graduated from secondary school she spent seven years studying at both The State School of Fine Art and The University of Culture in Yangon, graduating in 1997 with a BA in Sculpture and a Diploma in Fine Art.

As well as numerous exhibitions in Myanmar, her works have been included in group shows abroad, in New York, Boston, San Francisco, Princeton, Toronto, Chiang Mai and Hong Kong. In parallel with her career as a professional artist, Nann Nann has always taught art to children, both in the international schools of Yangon and in private lessons. Nann Nann says, “I don’t teach the children, I learn from the children”, and indeed her work often has a child-like simplicity, images stripped down to their bare essentials in support of her narrative.

Nann Nann is inspired by the humble pot. She has always appreciated both the beauty and function of pots, finding a visit to Japan, where ceramic art is highly developed, a revelatory experience. Her works in this exhibition feature stylized pots or jars, or just an allusion to their shape – some with subtle gradations of silver and grey, others with a startling dash of hot pink. Thousands of tiny threads of paint build a texture reminiscent of the rough surface of a rustic pot, but utterly transforming it to something both glamorous and mysterious.

Another important inspiration for Nann Nann is her Buddhist faith. An earlier series of works paid homage to the devotional aspect of Buddhism, whereby offerings are made by sticking squares of gold leaf onto pagodas and Buddha images. The individual squares of gold leaf have a metaphorical significance, representing individual acts of merit, which are either being collected in some vessel or are flowing from one place to another. Having used gold leaf in her art practice for many years, Nann Nann has learnt that each square has a specific place and position in the composition. Each work has a precise number of squares – one more or one less destroys the balance and harmony of the work.

Of her work Nann Nann says, “We Buddhists try to do small good deeds every day, believing they will build up to something big. In my work, I try to show the energy that comes when those tiny good things are collected together.”

Zaw Win Pe

Born in 1960, Zaw Win Pe graduated from the State School of Fine Art in 1984, and is now one of Myanmar's most well known and successful artists. Starting his career as an accomplished figurative painter, Zaw Win Pe first came to prominence with a distinct, new style when he won the Myanmar Contemporary Art Awards 2004 with a vivid, semi-abstract landscape. Since then, these radiant works have found admirers all around the world, and a large piece currently resides in the Singapore Art Museum.

In addition to participating in numerous group shows both at home and abroad, Zaw Win Pe has had solo shows in Yangon, Singapore, New Delhi, and Chiang Mai.

Drawing his inspiration from Shan States in northern Myanmar, we have all seen Zaw Win Pe's landscapes of rolling hills, rocky terrains and patchworks of fields in a half-remembered dream. They are painted with intense tropical shades, at those times just before dawn or dusk when the incandescent light seems to tremble and shimmer. The landscapes, vivid and theatrical, burst with vitality, and make us believe that the world the artist inhabits is bright with the warmth of a sun that never sets.

He paints with the knife, achieving a mosaic-like feel. The cubes of warm, rich tones trace the patterns of the terraced tea plantations, lime green paddy fields awash in the sun, mauve pathways cutting across in diagonal lines. The evening skies in deepening shades of blue and indigo are streaked with pink, a portent of gathering darkness or a radiant dawn.

Only occasionally in Zaw Win Pe's paintings do we see any trace of humans. Small dwellings cling to hillsides or nestle in hollows, but these are insignificant against the backdrop of the majestic landscape. And indeed, it is the age-old landscapes which speak to Zaw Win Pe:

"I am inspired by the landscapes of the Southern Shan States, but I do not paint with the idea of showing particular places. I paint the emotions that hit me when I look out over a particular scene. Sometimes it seems as if my feelings are exploding and the hills are ringing with color. I believe color can tell everything about a person's thoughts and feelings."

Htein Lin

Htein Lin is one of Myanmar's most famous artists, known as much for his extraordinary achievement of creating works of art while incarcerated for seven years in Myanmar prisons, as for the raw, powerful works themselves.

After being released from prison in 2004, he married and moved to the UK where he lived for seven years before returning to Myanmar in 2013. During this period overseas he participated in the Venice Biennale and other international art events, and had his work shown through Europe, Asia and North America. His 000235 series of work on old prison uniform longyis, completed secretly with smuggled paints and found materials, were exhibited to international acclaim, including at Asia House in London in 2007 and the old Carcere (prisons) in Turin.

The two dominant influences in Htein Lin's life, Buddhist meditation, and Myanmar's political and humanitarian struggle, feature in most of his work. He is inspired not only by his time in jail, and the painting techniques he developed there, but also his nine months in detention with almost a hundred other fellow students in the All Burma Student Democratic Front camp in Pajau on the Chinese border in 1991-1992.

Detained in prison, Htein Lin found various innovative ways to create artworks, starting by scratching on plastic bags and graduating to printing on longyis and carving soap. One of these carvings, showing a prisoner confined in a cell, intended to express his feelings to an official of the International Committee of the Red Cross, is now exhibited in the ICRC's Geneva museum.

The years in prison marked Htein Lin in many ways; but far from staunching his creative genius, it has been a continuing inspiration. Bearing his captors no ill-will, this remarkable man now delivers courses in meditation technique to prison guards.

His faith is the inspiration for the installation of monks alms bowls included in this exhibition, a Buddhist version of the Catholic rosary beads, depicting 108 black lacquer bowls, strung together on a rope. Other works have been painted with hands and fingers, techniques he developed and practiced while in prison when he had no access to paint brushes.

While staying in contact with Myanmar culture and society throughout the years in the UK, Htein Lin longed to return. Almost exactly seven years after departing Yangon, he moved back to take advantage of new freedoms and opportunities. Since July 2013, he has been immortalising the arms of former political prisoners in plaster of Paris and recording their experiences in a project called 'A Show of Hands'. This will be turned into an installation once he has reached a thousand arms.

Khin Zaw Latt

Born in 1980, Khin Zaw Latt is one of Myanmar's most accomplished and well known younger artists. Though raised in a small town in the Ayerwaddy Delta with little exposure to fine arts, Khin Zaw Latt comes from an artistic family, and his talent was recognized early on. In 1996, in ninth standard, the budding artist arrived in Yangon and in 1998, he joined the University of Culture to study painting and sculpture.

After graduating, he spent two years in a monastery studying English, and it was here he gathered inspiration for the paintings that first brought him to the attention of international collectors and gallerists. "I am interested in figurative art. I saw the face of Buddha in every corner of the monastery, and I felt I had to draw it," he said. But Khin Zaw Latt's Buddhas are not realistic depictions; they are faint, allusive outlines of the familiar image, behind floating patches of gold paint applied with a roller. The works are given depth and texture by the use of a repeating small stamp of the Buddha head on the canvas.

In 2010, Khin Zaw Latt was the winner of the Myanmar National Portrait Competition, with a painting of his young daughter. His other submission to the competition was a portrait of Aung Kan Suu Kyi. This was a defining moment in Myanmar's political history, as no-one had dared to display images of the famous democracy icon in public before. But she had just been released from house arrest, the media had won new freedoms and the Censorship Board reviewing the competition paintings finally agreed with the artist's declaration contained in the title of the work, that the painting was "Just a Portrait." The latest in this small series of works can be seen in this exhibition.

In 2012, another subject tugged at his heartstrings. While on holiday, he met Myanmar children begging, selling postcards on the street and seashells on the beach. "Each of these children has a tragic story. Some have parents. Some don't. They said they are happier making money outside on the street rather than studying in school....I photographed the lovely faces of the children. When I arrived home, I started to make a series of street faces that would make people take notice of their lives."

Not long after starting this series of two-square-foot paintings of children's faces, a fire ravaged his home village, destroying the houses of most of the inhabitants. Khin Zaw Latt went into overdrive, painting dozens of new works to sell to raise funds for the homeless families. After a week, he handed over US\$30,000 to rebuild the village. This was not the first time Khin Zaw Latt had helped those in need. In 2008, at the time of Cyclone Nargis, a devastating storm that killed more than 140,000 people, Khin Zaw Latt was the winner of The Myanmar Contemporary Art Awards. Taking his prize money, he immediately traveled to the Ayerwaddy Delta to donate the money and take part in the relief effort.

Khin Zaw Latt has recently been named a “Young Global Leader”, as part of the World Economic Forum. He is a quiet, unassuming young man, with actions and artworks which speak boldly of his heritage and the deep sense of responsibility to help others less fortunate than himself.

S. Moe Z

Born in 1977, S Moe Z attended the State School of Fine Art from 1997 to 2000. One of Myanmar's most exciting emerging artists, S Moe Z's current series of graphic works of monks and nuns have found admirers around the world.

Embarking on this series before Myanmar started to open and liberalize, S Moe Z said this about the inspiration for his moody works of monks and nuns:

"I appreciate the value of light. Because of light, we can feel and see all objects. In my paintings, I always paint darkness – so that we may appreciate the light. Without light, nothing is possible. The dark in the paintings represents suffocation in this country where most people are trying to survive. There is only a very little hope, which is like a dim flickering light."

Of his painting process he says, "I underpaint the canvas black, and then I draw the figures directly. I take pleasure in omitting the shadows and just painting the light against the deep black background."

He explained that the main feature of his work was this contrast between darkness and light, and that the subject – monks and nuns – was almost incidental. Originally, he had chosen them because the color of their robes contrasted well with the deep shadows. But as time went by, his monks became symbolic of something that was going on in Myanmar at the time. For example, in 2007 when the monks instigated a protest movement which directly challenged the military government, S Moe Z started painting works which showed large groups of monks, with titles like "Ten is more than Five", These titles referred to an ancient and forgotten law forbidding public assembly of more than five people, which had been resurrected by the government at the time of the protests to legitimize their crackdown. More recently, as the country has opened up and some monks have become political activists, some of his works have included, along with the monks, high brick walls riven with cracks.

Many Myanmar artists paint monks and nuns, one of the chief icons of Buddhism seen everywhere in the country, but few create works with such graphic power as S Moe Z. The image of the humble monk on his journey, a small point of light in the enveloping darkness, tells a story of the country's progress towards the light, accompanied by the gentle presence of the devotees of the Lord Buddha.

Thar Gyi

Born in 1966 in Yangon, Thar Gyi is self taught, studying under various master artists as a young man. He has participated in numerous exhibitions both within Myanmar and abroad, including a solo show in Singapore. Unusually for a Myanmar artist, he has extensive experience abroad from attending residencies, workshops, seminars, and as a guest lecturer and competition judge in Thailand and Japan.

In the context of Myanmar painters, Thar Gyi is also unusual in his attraction to the abstract; and his predominate use of light or neutral tones. In amongst the great swathes of tropical color in the dramatic landscapes or portraits of his peers, his works stand out as quietly reflective, rewarding longer contemplation.

Thar Gyi is a contrarian at heart. He describes his current art practice, which explores the subtle shading and toning created by the application of closely spaced ridges of paint across the canvas, as “non-paintings”. He wanted to move away from depictions of familiar subjects, and create something that is inward looking – concerned with internal rhythms and chromatic harmony.

The initial inspiration for this series of artworks was a trip with a group of friends to Bagan, an ancient city in Myanmar with a dense concentration of temples and pagodas. They clambered up onto one of the pagodas at sunset, and while the others were photographing the setting sun, Thar Gyi was looking in the opposite direction, entranced by the shadow that the pagoda was casting over a newly ploughed field, and the deeper shade between the ridges of earth. This scene lodged in his artistic imagination and started him creating these spare and subtly nuanced works. Over time he has stripped away the dark colors of the shadow, generally using warm or neutral tones.

Some of these artworks include barely perceptible silhouettes of figures in the background, underneath the ridges of paint, suggesting human life far in the distance – or in the past. It is almost as if they are gesturing to us not only across space, but also across time itself.

Yan Naing Tun

Yan Naing Tun was born in 1979 and brought up in a small fishing village. After finishing high school, he moved to Yangon and entered The University of Culture in 1998, earning a B.A in Painting in 2002. He now lives in Yangon working as a professional artist.

He participated in his first group show in Yangon in 2004 and since then he has been involved in a series of exhibitions in Myanmar and abroad, including solo shows in Bangkok and in Vienna. He gained 'Special Prize' for the best of the year in Myanmar's annual Tun Foundation Art Competition in 2009.

This current monochrome series has resonated with collectors from around the world, with its poignant scenes from everyday life in Yangon. The works capture people in the most humdrum circumstances – in the teashop, at the bus-stop, in trains, and the daily processions of monks. Yan Naing Tun's artistic imagination subtly alters these everyday scenes, rendering them in monochrome, a color palette that reinforces the emptiness in these corners of the day.

Some of his artwork features texture, created using a traditional method that "prints" words and script on the canvas without paint by slightly raising the surface in the shape of the script. Barely discernible from a distance, when closer the script reveals itself – ranging from banal tea-shop conversation to prayers in the Buddhist language Pali.

Speaking about his current series, Yan Naing Tun says, "I use the green color to make the audience look at these everyday subjects in a fresh way. The figures are distorted, which helps people see a different reality. I want the viewer to feel a sense of peace and tranquility, but also to know how much waiting there is in the lives of ordinary people. We are always waiting for something."

Since 2012, when Myanmar began to open up to the outside world and to reform and liberalize, Yan Naing Tun has added color to some of his artworks. He also commonly features newspapers – either as background collages or depicted realistically with his characters reading them during their everyday life. He says he feels that ordinary people are deeply interested in the news these days, avid to read how change is coming to Myanmar.