

ATTENTION ART EDITORS

For Immediate Release

***SILENT FOR A WHILE: Contemporary Art from Myanmar***



Htein Lin, *Soap*, installation view

**Opening Reception with the artists:** Wednesday, February 3, 6:30-8:30pm  
(Members of the press are invited to attend the opening reception)

**Exhibition:** February 3 – March 13, 2016

(13 January, 2016) HONG KONG-  
10 Chancery Lane Gallery is pleased to present *Silent for a While*, an exhibition of contemporary Burmese art, curated by Moe Satt, from February 3 - March 13, 2016.

The exhibition will feature exceptional artwork by seven Burmese artists including Tun Win Aung and Wahnu, Htein Lin, Maung Day, Zun Ei Phyu, Aung Myat Htay and Moe Satt.

## Curator's Note by Moe Satt

In the Quiet Land...  
In the Quiet Land, no one can hear  
What is silenced by murder  
And covered up with fear.  
But, despite what is forced, freedom's a sound  
That liars can't fake and no shouting can drown.

*From Aung San Suu Kyi's poem "In the Quiet Land"*

There were times when our eyes, ears and mouths were shut. They were the moments of perpetual transfixion, the instants of complete silence. We lived through those moments day in, day out. Now we would like to stop for a minute and look back at what happened. This is the time for reflection, so let's stop for a minute.

Artists participating in this exhibition are Tun Win Aung and Wahnu, Htein Lin, Maung Day, Zun Ei Phyu, Aung Myat Htay and Moe Satt. The artist couple Tun Win Aung and Wahnu are known for their multimedia works. Htein Lin is a former political prisoner, and Maung Day is a poet who does drawings. Zun Ei Phyu, a young female artist, makes paper cut-outs. Aung Myat Htay has his sculptures and Moe Satt his performance photographs in this exhibition.

## Tun Win Aung and Wahnu

"Let's march towards a new socialist society in our own way, in Burmese way." You may still remember this resounding slogan of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. This slogan embodies the military dictator General Ne Win's concept of Burmese Way to Socialism—a 'unique' socialist framework that denies to be measured or comply with any other standards of socialism practiced anywhere in this world. Essentially, it was just military dictatorship wearing a thin skin of socialism.

After seizing power in 1962, Ne Win's government started to propagate peace, which was a bogus move to divert people's attention from the coup. The government was only trying to show the olive branch, the symbol of peace, in one hand, while hiding the other hand, blood-stained and murderous, behind the back, wrote Win Tint Htun in his book 'Myanmar in the Dark'. Shae Tho, the then state-run newspaper whose name in literal translation is 'Forward', printed a photograph of the delegates from the Burma Communist Party walking with their backs to the camera. The photograph was captioned 'Now they have turned their back on the peace process', and emerged after Ne Win's government one-sidedly stopped its peace negotiations with the Communist Party. The cover page of the aforementioned newspaper is the integral part of White Piece # 0178 by Tun Win Aung and Wahnu. The work juxtaposes the title of the newspaper with the phrase "turned their back on...".

Another landmark scheme of Ne Win's government was the nationwide nationalization of private property: newspapers, hospitals, cinemas, printing presses, schools, and a lot more. White Piece # 0178 highlights a photograph of Myanmar soldiers guarding a building they had confiscated. The photograph was printed on a cover page of the state-owned newspaper 'the Mirror'. These photographs reflected upon a society fallen under dictatorship.

After ruling the country without any constitution but with a manner of despotism since 1962, Ne Win and 21 army chiefs decided to take off their uniforms and become a civilian government in April, 1972. It was done in anticipation of writing a constitution and extending their rule. Botahtaung Newspaper covered this news. White Piece # 0177 uses two pages of this newspaper, with one covering the news of the generals retiring from the army and the other about their forming a new civilian government.

All these works emphasize the names of propaganda newspapers, and the artists have used them to create their works. The newspapers include Shea Tho, the Mirror, Botahtaung, the New Light of Myanmar, Workers Daily and Co-operatives. Their six works are part of an ongoing project called 'A Thousand Patches of White'. The couple cut pictures from newspaper and put white patches on certain parts of these pictures. These are work of erasure. And what do they want to achieve by doing that? Do they want to correct the wrong history? Or are they trying to put spotlight on specific facts from the country's history? I am certain that a significant day or event in the country's history has inspired them to do these works.

## Htein Lin

In 1960s in Myanmar, a mother would shout to her son, "Son, can you cut the Shwe Wah soap in half and bring it to me?" The son would then go to the kitchen, pull out a bar of Shwe Wah soap, and cut it with a blunt cleaver. He might have had to carve out the spots where rats had chewed on the soap. This was a routine chore for a young man growing up in socialist Myanmar. After Ne Win established one-party dictatorial state and nationalized the private sector, the government's cooperative shops sprang up together with black markets. Thus, two classes of people—one smuggled goods from the border and the other queued at cooperatives—emerged. The items available for sale at the cooperatives included Shwe Wah and carbolic soap. The first was for washing the body and the second for washing clothes and dishes. It is very difficult to find them at markets today. Htein Lin claims that once you get a whiff of Shwe Wah soap, your memories of the socialist dark age will come back. If you look closely at his work, the map of Myanmar made from small bars of Shwe Wah soap, you will see that each bar represents misery of a political prisoner who has been in a prison for years. Htein Lin has reconstructed his soap sculpture that he modeled in prison. Just simply, he calls this work 'Soap'. Inside the map made from yellow bars of soap, you will see white bars of soap which show the locations of prisons in Myanmar. Soap connotes *cleaning*, and so does the prison for the government. Cleaning times, cleaning political activists, cleaning the public, monks and students. Under the previous military government, so many university students did only the half of their studies at university, they did the rest in prisons that are also called 'university of life' or 'university that you mom does not want you to go to'. Htein Lin used to be a political prisoner for seven years after being involved in student protests. He said in an interview, "We all got involved as student activists fighting for human dignity, good education and freedom, at a very dark time." He did so many paintings during his spell in prison using whatever piece of cloth was available to him, for instance, prisoners' shirts and the *longyi*s of those who were executed by hanging.

His works in this exhibition will also include paintings done on prisoners' shirts. But you may be wondering how he managed to get these paintings out of the prison. Maybe he bribed the warden as there are corrupt officials everywhere in this country. Maybe he

didn't. It does not matter, does it? What matters is these paintings are in front of your eyes now. Artist, prison and drops of paint\*.

*\*Taken from the title of a book written by Saw Wai*

## Maung Day

Everything is concerned with the president.  
And everything isn't concerned with the president.

These lines are from a poem by Maung Day. We have seen a lot of writings addressing directly to the president in this transitional period. Prisoners who were granted amnesty by the president have become the government's stooges. These young and old thugs wore red armbands and staged violent crackdowns on protests and demonstrations. Maung Day's drawing 'The Thug Nation' condemns this. The thugs in this drawing wear on their bodies the tattoos of eagle and phoenix, which symbolize bravery, as well as bad scribbles like 'mom', 'love', and 'courage'. Maung Day's drawings give a narrative account of the present political issues with images. 'The Portrait of the Country as a Snake Queen' utilizes the imagery from folk tales and myths, creating a sense of awe and fear while it is also concerned with rituals and sacrifices. It raises so many questions. Who is this fearsome snake queen, or ogress? Does the picture of paddies and stars on her breast have something to do with the socialist government of old? Is she a mother? And what about the fish scales on her throat, her *longyi* with traditional patterns, and the snake coiled in the shape of a halo? She carries wounds from civil wars and political turmoil too. This work comments on the history and current issues of Myanmar.

Women security is a big issue in Myanmar today. The parliament has recently passed the Interfaith Marriage Law, restricting women's rights to marry whomever they wish to. Maung Day's work 'Salmonella' discusses this. This law, in my opinion, is just a 'vagina guarding law'. Pardon my French. Why should the government have signed this law? Was it really necessary? Or was it a move to use religion for political gain? I think this drawing, which consists of the images of two monks with a *Pyiyt Tine Htone*—a traditional doll that always lands on its feet when tossed—between them, denounces this law and supports women to stand up to it. It also portrays violation of women's rights as a disease; that is shown with a woman's head vomiting. Regardless of all these issues, life goes on, and love goes on. Love cannot be stopped. As in the lyrics of an old Myanmar son, grandpa will say 'I love you' to grandma with a kiss, dad will say 'I heart you' to mom with another kiss, and love birds in the parks keep on kissing, losing the track of time and forgetting to eat. Meanwhile, cataclysms, both social and political, wait for a good time to pounce on these lovers. This is the story told by Maung Day's 'Kissers in a Park (Kissing through Time)'. I remember that most songs recorded during the reign of the military regime were love songs. A protest song hardly came by because of the state censorship. A friend of mine once said love is also political. What do you think?

## Zun Ei Phyu

Zun Ei Phyu's work called 'Hidden Layers' consists of three layers in one piece. Hidden Layers talks about hidden things, both straightforwardly and subtly. The first layer is

conspicuous whereas the other two layers are vague to the eye and merging with each other. On the top layer are children rolling hoops. The second layer shows houses caved in and destroyed after the recent landslide in the hilly areas of Chin State. The third and last layer shows people praying and asking for forgiveness from God in a football field for they thought the disaster was God's punishment. Look how simple these folks are; they still connect natural disasters with God.

'There was always fun and happiness when you were a child. You were content, ate when it was time to eat, and always had a good sleep at night. I want it back, my childhood without any worries,' sang the late singer Sai Htee Sai in his famous song 'Paradise Lost'. Yes, we all want it back, but it is not possible. Children know no worry. They can play and have fun anywhere anytime. You can say the same thing about refugee children. They use everything they can find to make toys, and of course, they roll hoops too. Recently, heavy rains caused serious floods and landslides in some parts of the country especially the hilly Chin State. The disaster destroyed houses. In some towns, 50 per cent of the houses were knocked down, therefore no longer suitable to use. They need to be resettled elsewhere. The town in Zun Ei Phyu's work is located in a hilly area, underdeveloped. Due to bad transportation routes, the inhabitants did not receive humanitarian aid in time. It was largely ignored by the government initially too. Development workers needed helicopters to drop food stuffs and other accessories from the sky. In this dire situation, the first thing the inhabitants did was go to the football field and prayed together. They believed they were punished with this disaster. Some observers may view this as naivety or superstition, and for some, this means that they are still embedded in their own spiritual and cultural roots. What can we do for people who live in remote areas without any proper mode of transportation and underdeveloped? What kind of positive changes will the new government bring to them? This newly elected government has declared 'it's time for a change'. So let us wait and see what changes they can implement in reality.

## **Aung Myat Htay**

Aung Myat Htay has named his three bronze works 'Human Prototypes'. They are life size (or rather the size of most Asians) sculptures, 5 feet 6 inches tall, and have the faces of an ogre and a celestial being on their chests. The face of the ogre represents 'evil' and the celestial being 'good', the two sides of the same coin. The controllers of mind, the slave driver of action. "The beast in us transfigures & roams the earth. The beast as eternal twin, as perpetuation of internal bleeding, as continuity of seismic story," wrote Maung Day for one of his performance pieces. Aung Myat Htay's work takes us back to the origin of human being. In her book 'Humanism for Children', Nada Topic Peratovic wrote that according to Chinese folk tales, the earth was created by an enormous man who came out of a giant egg floating in the universe. The Andean tribes from Japan taught their children that the earth came into being when mud on the back of a huge turtle dried up. Likewise, Norwegian myths say that the first man and woman were made of a tree's bark, while Jews and Christians, based on the Bible, believe that God Almighty created the earth in six days. The Koran says the first man was sculpted from clay. For Scientologists, humans came from different planets from the universe. This work by Aung Myat Htay may have originated in one of his earlier work which was human-figured cut-outs. He made holes in the chests of those cardboard human figures and covered the holes with colored plastics, making them see-through. In his another series of work exhibited at the Museum of Fukuoka, he again made human-figured cut-outs with holes, but this time, he inserted the images from Buddha's life

stories in the holes. The three sculptures for this exhibition can be viewed as extended versions of the previous cut-outs, by using bronze plates in stead of cardboard, probably to make it last longer.

## **Moe Satt**

“Hey brother, why are you doing this?” A man approached and asked me this question when I was doing a performance on the bank of Kandawgyi Lake for a performance photograph series. I simply replied that I was performing. Then the man said I should not be doing that because it was inappropriate to be wearing Myanmar traditional dress and rolling a hoop like a child.

When I was doing the same performance in Mahabandoola Park, older women taking their morning exercises shout to me, “Hey the boy in a bridegroom’s dress, we have a bride for you. Tell us if you need one.” One of them asked whether I was taking photographs for the imminent SEA Games. These are people’s response to Moe Satt’s performance in public spaces.

In the photographs of his performance “Rolling a Hoop in Yangon”, you can see Moe Satt rolling a hoop, wearing the full traditional dress the color of a chick. The backgrounds change, but it’s still him rolling the hoop in that dress. He has worn traditional dresses in most of his performances. He chose the color of a chick because people of Myanmar regard it auspicious. His dress contradicts his action in most people’s eyes for people only wear such dress to attend special events and ceremonies, such as religious events and weddings. Or they may wear it because they are senators.

The artist explains of this performance, “I am trying to put a socio-political twist to a child’s game, one that I liked most when I was young.” This work, which also embodies the artist’s childhood nostalgia, was done in the setting of Yangon City, where the artist was born. He chose four landmark places to do the performance and photographed it. The places include the bank of Inya Lake where students were shot by the Myanmar Army back in 1988. The artist joked that he liked the place because this was where he hang out with his girlfriend when they were high school students. All these four places have some kind of important history. He ha also picked Mahabandoola Park adjacent to Sule Pagoda and in front of the City Hall. The Sule Pagoda area was considered to be the center of Yangon when the city was first built in the old days. This is a heritage place and rich in history. So you may say Moe Satt has entered the country’s history and rolled his hoop in it.

### *About the Curator*

Moe Satt lives and works as a visual and performance artist and curator in Yangon, Myanmar. Moe started creating art after graduating from East Yangon University in Myanmar with a degree in Zoology in 2005 and is part of a new generation of emerging Burmese artists.

In 2008, he founded and organized Beyond Pressure, an international festival of performance art in Myanmar. As a performance artist, Moe has performed in galleries and also on the streets of Yangon. He has been actively participating in live arts festivals in Southeast Asia and South Asia, and on the international stage. Through his travel

encounters, Moe sees the differences between performance artists from both open and those from more restricted societies. While contemplating the regional landscape of performance art and on the artistic mind-set of individual countries in the region, he has developed a greater understanding of his own identity as an artist and as a person.

Moe Satt was a finalist for the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award 2015 and participated in the 2nd CAFAM Biennale at CAFA Art Museum in Beijing, China, in 2014, and in the group exhibition "A Journal of the Plague Year" at Para Site Art Space in Hong Kong in 2013. The artist also curated the exhibition "General / Tiger / Gun" at Rebel Art Space in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2014.

*About 10 Chancery Lane Gallery*

Since 2001, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery has been a driving force in contemporary art in Hong Kong and is one of Asia's leading contemporary art galleries. Representing the Asia-Pacific, the gallery is particularly interested in emerging art movements and historically important artists from the region.

Representing important artists such as Huang Rui and Wang Keping (China), Atul Dodiya (India), Bui Cong Khanh and Dinh Q. Lê (Vietnam), Manit Sriwanichpoom (Thailand) and Ken Matsubara (Japan), 10 Chancery Lane Gallery is committed to playing a role in documenting the development of Asian art. The gallery has worked with curators Feng Boyi, Beyond the Red Curtain - China, Erin Gleeson, Forever Until Now - Contemporary Art Cambodia, iola Lenzi, Subjective Truth - Thai Contemporary Art, Zoe Butt and Dinh Q. Lê, Time Ligaments - Vietnam. Katie de Tilly is co-President and one of the founders of the Hong Kong Art Gallery Association.

For press enquiries and to arrange interviews, please contact Bo Kim on [bo@10chancerylanegallery.com](mailto:bo@10chancerylanegallery.com) or +852 2810 0065.

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(Members of the press are invited to attend the opening reception)

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