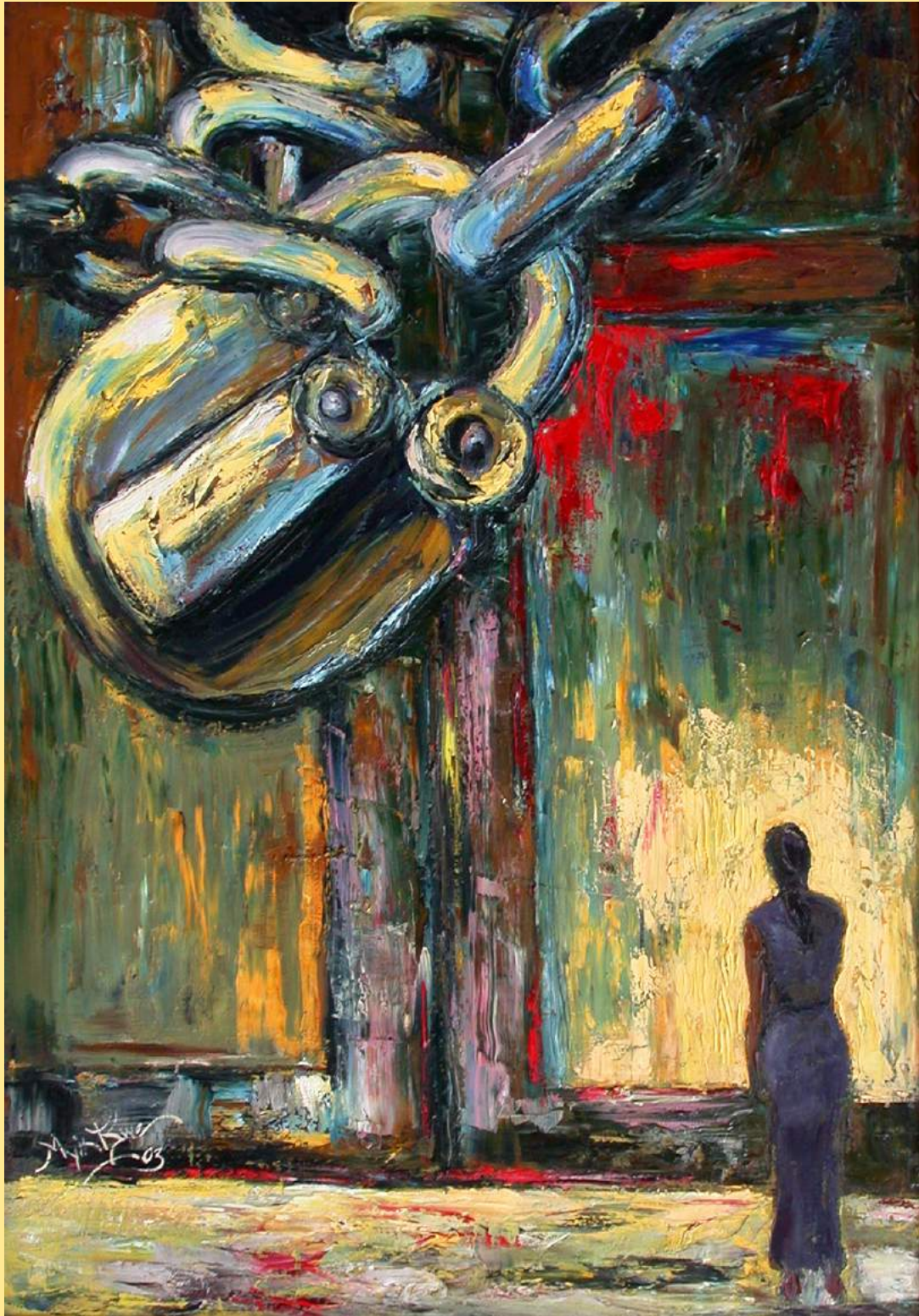


# MYANMAR POLITICAL ART



By Jørn Middelborg



Published 2021 by  
Thavibu Art Advisory, Bangkok  
Email. [jm@thavibu.com](mailto:jm@thavibu.com), [www.thavibu.com](http://www.thavibu.com)

Copyright Thavibu Art Advisory  
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without prior permission from the publisher.

*Illustration on the front page: Dead Lock, 2003 by Myint Swe*

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	p. 3
BRITISH COLONIAL PERIOD 1885-1948.....	p. 4
MILITARY RULE 1962-2011.....	p. 5
TWO EARLY MODERNISTS.....	p. 6
Bagyi Aung Soe (1923-1990)	
Kin Maung Yin (1938-2014)	
FIRST GENERATION OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ARTISTS (Born in the 1940s and 50s).....	p. 7
Aung Myint (b. 1946)	
Po Po (b. 1957).....	p. 8
U Hla Han (1941-2019).....	p. 9
MPP Yei Myint (b. 1953).....	p. 10
San Minn (b. 1951).....	p. 11
Myint Swe (1956-2019).....	p. 12
SECOND GENERATION (Born in the 1960s and 70s).....	p. 14
The Rise of Performance Art	
Aye Ko (b. 1963).....	p. 15
Htein Lin (b. 1966).....	p. 16
Chaw Ei Thein (b. 1969).....	p. 17
Phyu Mon (b. 1960).....	p. 18
Nyein Chan Su (1973-2020).....	p. 19
Sawangwongse Yawngghwe (b. 1971).....	p. 21
Phyoe Kyi (1977-2018).....	p. 23
POLITICAL REFORMS 2011-2021 .....	p. 24
MILLENNIALS.....	p. 25
Thu Myat (b. 1986)	
Wunna Aung (b. 1978).....	p. 26
Moe Satt (b. 1983).....	p. 27
2021.....	p. 28
Bart Was Not Here (b. 1996)	
Richie Htet (b. 1995).....	p. 29
Sandar Khine (b. 1971).....	p. 30
PROTEST ART AND COMMUNITY ART.....	p. 31
CONCLUSION.....	p. 32
REFERENCES.....	p. 33

## INTRODUCTION

This publication aims at giving an overview of the history and development of political art in Myanmar with a focus on the most important artists and their art works. The official name of the country is Myanmar though some artists prefer to call it Burma, and their choice has been respected. The resulting publication is based on my interactions with artists and visiting Myanmar from 1996 up to the present. I became acquainted with more and more artists, and it turned out that several of them had a focus on socio-political art. Thavibu Gallery was the first foreign gallery to specialize in contemporary art from Myanmar (hence the name THA-VI-BU after THAiland-VIetnam-BURma), and the first gallery to exhibit Myanmar contemporary art internationally on a regular basis. Thavibu Gallery closed in 2016, but exhibition catalogues are available online, including those featuring Myanmar contemporary art. Please see References at the end.

Myanmar has a troubled history, and the term **political art** is used here to show how the artists respond to those in power and their actions, and how the artists tried to analyze and make sense of the situation. Political art is a more broad and long-term concept than **protest art** which is an immediate response to current events. **Social practice art** is another term that casts a wider net and often includes feminism, LGBTQ, poverty and other social issues and is not included here. In this publication, the artists are featured based on their political art activism only. The artists' biographies have not been described in detail as those can be found in exhibition catalogues in the References section at the end or online at various websites. Many of the artists have produced a variety of works, political or non-political, though this publication only deals with their political art. Much effort has been made to illustrate the art works as a large size as possible so they can speak for themselves without detailed descriptions. Details of the history of censorship in Myanmar can be found in *Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar* (Carlson, 2016).

To understand the history and development of political art in Myanmar, it is essential to keep in mind important events and when they took place.

- 1885** – British Colonial Rule was established and the Burmese Royal Family sent in exile to India
- 1948** – Independence from Britain was achieved after the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Army) was set up in the 1940s, with General Aung San as an important founder, and it successfully defeated the British
- 1962** – Coup d'état and Military Rule by General Ne Win
- 1988** – 8888 Uprising and the Foundation of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Return of Aung San Suu Kyi to Myanmar
- 2007** – Saffron Revolution and Killing of Monks
- 2011** – Political Reforms with General Thein Sein as President
- 2016** – NLD won the election in late 2015 and Aung San Suu Kyi became State Counsellor
- 2017** – Rohingya Massacres
- 2021** – Coup d'état and Return to Military Rule

Many of the pictures in this publication are taken from the internet, and links are provided to the websites as much as possible. This would be considered "*Fair Use*" of images as this is a non-commercial publication for educational and illustrative purposes only.

I thank everyone who has contributed to this publication, including the artists themselves. Special mention must be made posthumously of Shireen Naziree (1947-2018) who was the curator for many of the Myanmar exhibitions in Bangkok and who researched and wrote extensively about the art and the artists. Thanks also to Ralph Kiggell for checking the language.





Saya Saw, ca 1900, *Portrait of the Royal Family*, Gouache on cloth, 58 x 60 cm. Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan

The above painting is executed in the royal style of painting which developed during the Konbaung Dynasty and a few years after the British sent King Thibaw and his family to exile to India. This royal style of painting could possibly have at least three interpretations, when made during the British colonial rule: 1) It can be taken at face value, as an adoration of the Royal Family; 2) It can be seen as subtle criticism of the Royals, who lived a privileged life far removed from the poverty of most of the population; and 3) It may be viewed as a piece of political art that was supportive of the Konbaung Dynasty and thus in opposition to British rule at the time.



Sawangwongse Yawngkhwe, 2016, *The 2nd of March 1962, Rangoon, Burma*, Acrylic on linen, 405 x 210 cm

This painting addresses the coup d'état undertaken by General Ne Win in 1962 and is painted by Sawangwongse Yawngkhwe, executed in 2016, to illustrate the historical event. In this painting his uncle, who was the son of the President Sao Shwe Thaik, was murdered.

During the early army rule from 1962 to 1988, little political art appeared. The country was very isolated, and even canvas and paint were hard to come by.

The major 8888 demonstrations took place in 1988, and Aung San Suu Kyi (The Lady) returned to Myanmar from Britain. She was swiftly placed under house arrest from 1989. From this point on, no portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi were allowed, and we can say that the 8888 Uprising was the starting point and inspiration for political art although it really only took off in the 1990s. All portraits or figures of women were suspiciously viewed by the government censors at that time – could it be a portrait of The Lady? Censorship was implemented with a heavy hand. Every exhibition had to be pre-approved, and if the censors did not like it or did not understand it, it would not be allowed to proceed. It could be that the colours were “wrong” or there were abstractions they did not understand. This form of censorship pushed the need for symbolism to develop where the subjects were not entirely what they seemed to be.



## TWO EARLY MODERNISTS

Bagyi Aung Soe and Kin Maung Yin were two early modernists who paved the way for the contemporary artists who followed.

### Bagyi Aung Soe (1923-1990)



Bagyi Aung Soe is often considered the “Father of modernism” in Myanmar painting. He spent time in 1951 at Santiniketan in India, founded by the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. He probably received much influence from the artists he met there, including the Indian painter Nandalal Bose, who was his teacher, and the Indonesian painter Affandi. Andrew Ranard writes: “Aung Soe should be appreciated in the context of a painter who dared to explore the Dionysian aspects of Burmese art.” (Ranard, 2009). Bagyi Aung Soe has recently been the subject of a retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2021).

The art work to the left is obviously a reaction to the bloodshed that happened during the 8888 Uprising.

[Bagyi Aung Soe, \*The Buddha Injured by a Slingshot from the 8888 Uprising\*, 1988](#) (?). Collection of Gajah Gallery

### Kin Maung Yin (1938-2014)

Kin Maung Yin was one of the early organizers of the Modernist Movement in Myanmar in the 1960s and 70s. (Ranard, 2009).

Kin Maung Yin produced a series, “Seated Dancer” (also known as “Myanmar Lady”) (c. 1970s–2013) portraying a woman, thought to be a Burmese dancer, without hands, smile or movement. The stillness of the image and lack of the customary twirl with which most dancers are portrayed in Myanmar’s traditional paintings is a silent but powerful commentary on the artist’s distress over the treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi. He used the ambiguity afforded by abstraction to embed political messages. His 2002 “Guns” series, in which angular shapes portray a gun leaking blood, is a protest at Aung San Suu Kyi’s house arrest. (Carlson, 2014)



[Kin Maung Yin, \*Myanmar Lady\*, year unknown](#)

## FIRST GENERATION OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ARTISTS (Born in the 1940s and 50s)

### Aung Myint (b. 1946)

Aung Myint is a self-taught artist who is regarded as a pioneer, and perhaps as “The Father” of contemporary art in Myanmar and was one of the founding members of Inya Art Gallery, the first private art gallery in Yangon in 1989. It was not only a gallery, but a centre where he and his artist friends could meet and talk together. Aung Myint has produced many kinds of art over the years, from paintings to sculptures and art installations. He was also a pioneer of performance art in Myanmar. Some of his art is abstract, some is conceptual and some may be considered political. Aung Myint distanced his art from the traditional romanticism that came before and instead chose to address social and critical issues through his multidisciplinary artistic practice that includes performance and installation art. However, he is best known for his ongoing *Mother and Child* series, a subtle, but critical interplay between his own emotional and social parameters.



Aung Myint, *Mother and Child*, 2008. Acrylic on hand-made paper laid on canvas, 82 x 82 cm

This painting and the series as a whole could perhaps be considered more as referring to social issues than to political issues, though they are obviously interconnected. The bars could point to a physical prison, but they could also refer to all instances of the limitations and poverty in society that were consequences of the army rule. Further details about his career and art can be found in the catalogue *Speaking Alone* (Naziree, 2009a) and other publications online.



**Po Po (b. 1957)**



[Wholeness 1988/2020, Oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 92 x 93 x 6 cm. Yavuz Gallery](#)

Po Po is an artist who mostly worked on his own and who had little interaction with other artists. His body of works is often conceptual and include paintings, sculptures and small and large installations. Many of his works were conceived and sketched early on, such as in the 1980s and 90s, and only realized later. The piece above was envisaged in 1988 and painted and exhibited in Singapore in 2020.

Paintings both by Aung Myint and Po Po often include the colours black and red. Colour coding was important as black and red were forbidden colours. Black was considered the colour of “evil” and red was considered to be a reference to “revolution” and the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi’s party. The NLD’s emblem is a yellow peacock and a white star on a red background. The painting above may be considered political – with the insertion of the red line to divide the black space. But we should also keep in mind that artists who follow a Buddhist philosophy could refer to concepts of “wholeness” and “division” from a Buddhist rather than a political point of view.

As Melissa Carlson writes: “The general rule was to avoid political commentary and anything that might be perceived as counter to Burmese culture. Thus censorship confined the portrayal of Myanmar to agrarian, Burman and Buddhist themes while discouraging modern, contemporary or abstract works, which the government viewed as gateways to protest.” (Carlson, 2014)

## U Hla Han (1941-2019)

U Hla Han was a painter, mostly of traditional landscapes and people, as the majority of Myanmar painters are. However, he ventured into political art with hidden references. The 1990s were repressive, and overtly political paintings were not possible to exhibit.



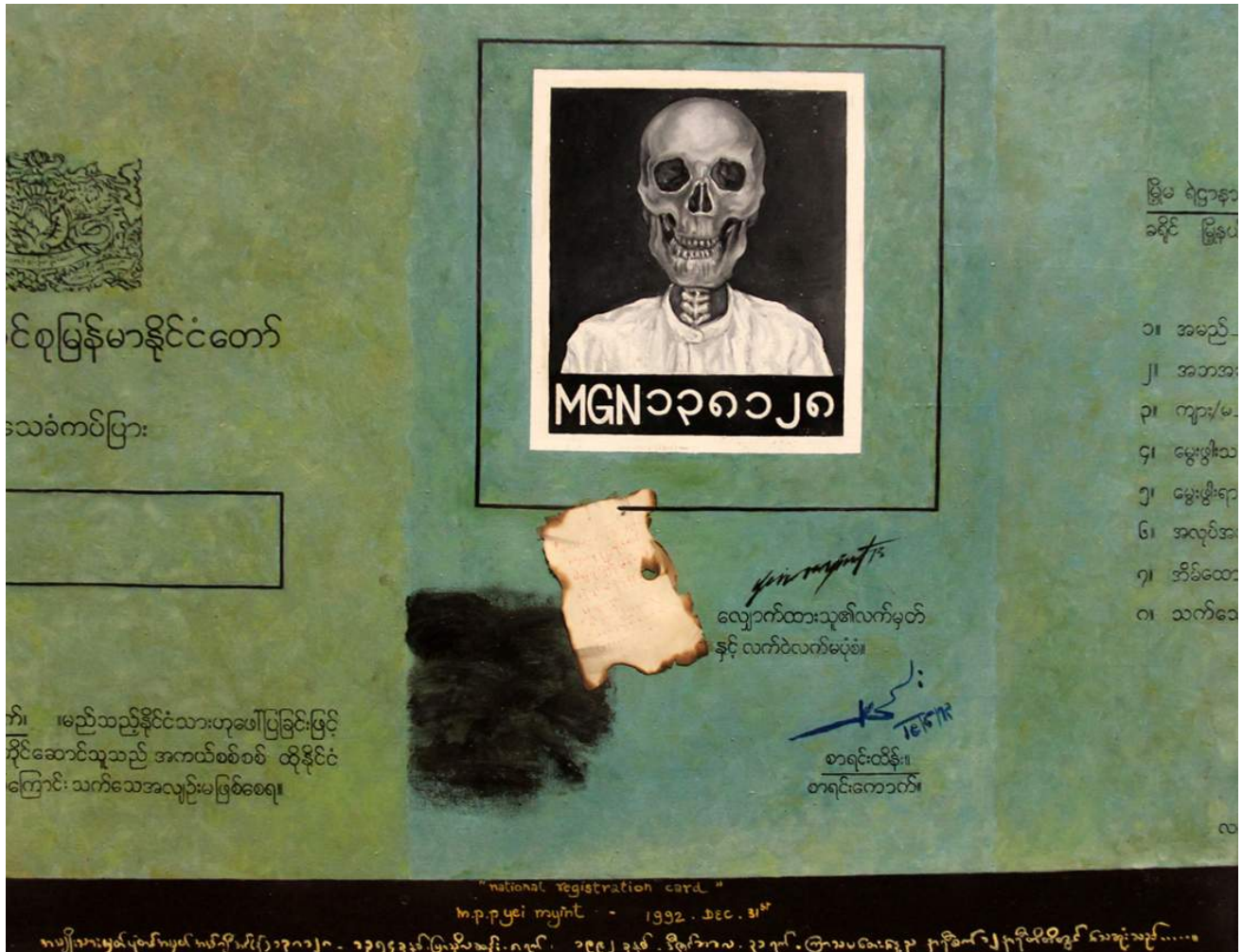
*Contrast*, 1995-98, Oil on canvas, 120 x 90 cm

This painting shows a scene from a traditional game where children play with traditional colourful tops. A circle is drawn with charcoal, and the red top is placed in the centre. The aim of the children is to strike the red top with the other tops. In Myanmar, the red one may be seen as a foe whom the other players want to hit or punish.

This is the kind of painting whose meaning is far from obvious, but an explanation has been given by the artist. Another of his paintings shows a cockfight. The symbolism of a cockfight where two parties fight each other to death, has also been used by other artists. It becomes even more obvious if one fighting cock is white and the other black.

## MPP Yei Myint (b. 1953)

MPP Yei Myint lives in Bagan the ancient capital, though he has had several exhibitions in Yangon, such as at the Inya Art Gallery with Aung Myint. A few of his paintings push at the limits of what was allowed to be produced and exhibited, such as a show of erotic paintings camouflaged as abstracts so that the censors would have problems identifying the subjects. In fact, abstractions were often banned since the censors did not understand what they were looking at. Paintings might also be banned if they contained the colours black, white and red (see Po Po above).



*National Registration Card*, 1992 Oil on canvas and paper. Collection of the Singapore Art Museum

In the above painting, MPP Yei Myint painted a version of his National Registration Card that includes name, nationality, religion, birth date, employment and many other details. MPP Yei Myint has stated that this is too much personal information exposed so he wrote at the bottom in the black section: “MPP Yei Myint died on Thursday at 12 midnight on 31 December 1992” – to protest against and avoid being a part of the intrusive surveillance society.



## San Minn (b. 1951)

San Minn was born in Yangon where he studied painting under some of Myanmar's most noted art academics including U Nyunt Tin, U Ba Lon Lay, U Lun Gwye, U Thu Kha and U Nann Waii. He is a member of an artist collective called *Gangaw Village* which he helped establish in 1979, and he has often worked closely with the Inya Art Gallery. He is one of the few artists whose focus has been on socio-political issues all along. In a personal statement: *An Artist must have loyalty, sincerity and confidence in his Art*, he explains the approach to his art practice. Sann Minn's artistic commentary on Myanmar's socio-political environment has raised significant critical discourse during a period when self-censorship and stereotyping appeared to be the norm. Known for his explosive dynamics, Sann Minn is best recognized for his bold folkloric references on the homogenized discourse of corruption and economic manipulation. (Naziree, 2013)

Melissa Carlson writes: "In 1979, Burmese artist San Minn submitted several paintings for an exhibition in Yangon only to have four returned to him. Rejected by the censorship board, the works were stamped 'not allowed to show' on both sides. None of the four paintings were remotely political in content, although they did reflect the artist's embrace of experimental art." (Carlson, 2014). This is an example of how the censorship board rejected art they did not immediately recognize or understand.



*Money*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 176 x 111 cm

This painting is a commentary on how money, guns and repression are interlinked in Myanmar. We should keep in mind that the country has been flush with money related to smuggling of people, weapons, gemstones, jade, timber, drugs, and so on - sometimes involving ethnic groups and supported by various factions of society or by neighbouring countries.

## Myint Swe (1956-2019)

In this generation of artists, Myint Swe stands out since the majority of his paintings are political. They were mostly done from the mid-1990s until around 2011 when the country started to open up. He was a student at the State School of Fine Arts and later studied painting under S Tin Shwe. His work has also been strongly influenced by the paintings and philosophies of U Thein Han, one of the most important pioneers of Burmese modern painting practices. He established Vision Art Gallery in Yangon as a platform for his art in the 1990s. Shireen Naziree curated his solo exhibition and wrote a catalogue with many of his most important works featured, in *Burma: The Quiet Violence* (Naziree, 2009b). His political paintings fall broadly into two groups: paintings about Aung San Suu Kyi, and paintings related to the country's political struggle.



Myint Swe, *Waiting for the Last Station*, 1999  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm

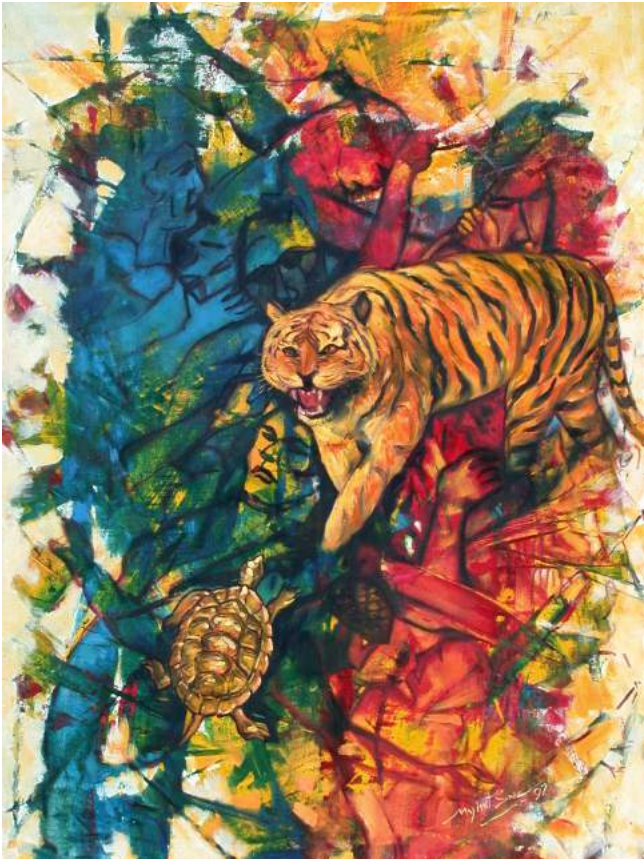


Myint Swe, *Dead Lock*, 2003  
Oil on canvas, 105 x 150 cm

*Myint Swe:* The Lady is going on a very long journey. As she sits in her solitary compartment, she contemplates the passing scenery of her possible commitments – waiting patiently to reach her destination.

The painting to the left could perhaps pass the censorship board, but likely not - since it shows a lone female, and they do not know what she is doing. The painting to the right would be outright dangerous to display.





Myint Swe, *Might and Right*, 1998,  
Oil on canvas 90 x 120 cm

*Myint Swe:* Tigers are fierce, wild and cruel animals that use their power to kill and devour other animals. Tortoises are small, timid and harmless. But they are adept at avoiding danger and are courageous in confronting their enemies. They simply retract and hide in their shells, patiently accepting torture while waiting for the danger to pass. Do not give up your courage. Truth is like the tortoise shell; it will prevail and will protect you from the tyrants.



Myint Swe, *New York*, 2003,  
Oil on canvas 105 x 150 cm. Exhibited at the  
Chiang Mai Art Museum, Thailand and the  
Dahlem Museum, Berlin

*Myint Swe:* Two ships are on a collision course in New York harbour outside the United Nations Building. Will they ever resolve their differences?

Myint Swe often provided statements, as in the examples above, to accompany his paintings. He was disappointed with the international community, especially the UN, who he and many other Myanmar people thought may come to help. We know however, that the UN does not have a mandate to “interfere” in each country’s internal workings, and any sanctions or other actions are subject to approval from the UN Security Council and its veto-holding powers.





Myint Swe, *Death Row at Insein Prison*, 2003,  
Oil on canvas 102 x 120 cm

This painting speaks for itself. It is an example of a painting that clearly would not pass the censorship board.



Myint Swe, *Gunfire*, 2005,  
Oil on canvas 160 x 210 cm

This is an abstraction, and could possibly pass the censorship board – if the title of the painting was not provided. However, abstractions were suspect in the eyes of the censors, and it depended on the whim of the censors. In the end Myint Swe decided not to exhibit most of his works in Myanmar, though they were all exhibited in Bangkok in 2014.

## SECOND GENERATION (Born in the 1960s and 70s)

Many artists in this generation spent time in prison or fled abroad. The generation who were young adults and students after 8888 often have politics in their blood. They could see injustice everywhere and became vocal – often as activists; their art was often more direct and obvious than that of the earlier generation. After the country slowly started to open up, they received inspiration and support from outside. Foreign visitors and artists started to bring books, art materials, and began to teach local artists about video and performance art. Later, street art also came to the fore.

### The Rise of Performance Art

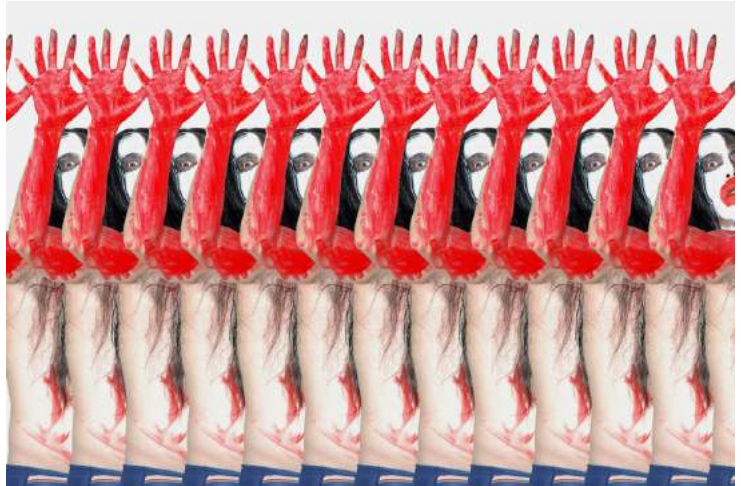
Performance art became an important art form in the 2000s. Aung Myint pioneered performance art earlier, and due to continued censorship the younger artists often wanted to express themselves freely, and this could be achieved via performance art that took place in friends' homes and at secret locations so as to avoid the censors. The immediacy of performance art allowed artists to reveal hidden truths and reach a wider audience. Pop-up performances became commonplace. The Heinrich-Böll Foundation started in 2008 to fund a performance festival called *Beyond Pressure* with Moe Satt as the first Artistic Director.

## Aye Ko (b. 1963)

Aye Ko was born in 1963, and although trained in classical and traditional painting under the master artist U Min Soe, he has established his international reputation through contemporary forms of expression that have become his hallmark. He paints at times, but works more in digital art, video art. As a renowned performance artist, he made his international debut in 1999 at the *Asiatopia II* performance art festival in Bangkok. With subsequent performances in Hong Kong, Nagoya and New York, Aye Ko often used elements such as fire and water to support his ritualised movements. Aye Ko has participated almost annually in international performance art festivals, and he established the art space *New Zero* in 2008 in Yangon as a venue and resource centre for learning and exhibiting. He spent three years in prison as a political prisoner. (Naziree, 2009a)

Aye Ko, *Transfixed, Where am I?*, 2008,  
Giclée print, 136 x 90 cm

Aye Ko's stretched out bloody arm could symbolise the need to push away danger, perhaps also to alert us to danger, or to come and help us fight the danger. Aye Ko presents his emotions as imagery, emphasising the negative through a potent use of primary colours.



*What is Peace?* A performance by Aye Ko held in 2013 at Thavibu Gallery for the exhibition *Tradition or Change*, curated by Shireen Naziree.

This performance included tuning-in or tuning-out antennae, and the Peace/Power umbrella could possibly shield against the signals and indoctrination or fake news. Aye Ko has relied on a subtle visual vocabulary, such as his white suit in *What is Peace?* rather than traditional dress to question the possibility of peace as well as Myanmar's modernizing.

Prominent in Aye Ko's performance works is the use of the written word, which can at once be quietly revealing and secretive, a source of bonding as well as of separation that often portrays people under impossible conditions. (Naziree, 2013)

Several videos of Aye Ko's performances can be found online.



## Htein Lin (b. 1966)

A student activist, Htein Lin spent a number of years as a refugee in the jungles of Northern Myanmar and was imprisoned for seven years as a result of his protests. It was while in prison first in Mandalay in 1998 and later while in Yangon, where he developed his iconic style of painting, improvising by using prison uniforms (longyi) as canvasses and a variety of found objects (such as soap bars) as well as his fingers in lieu of paint brushes. He is also well known for his performance art, a genre that he pursued over many years. While he does not regard himself as a political activist, politics has provided a voice for his art. (Naziree, 2010)



Htein Lin, *Homage to the Monks of Burma*, 2010, Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 91 x 91 cm  
This painting and an accompanying performance address the Saffron Revolution in 2007.



*On the Table*, 2005.  
Performance by Chaw Ei Thein and Htein Lin

Htein Lin originally developed the important performance piece *On the Table* for the entertainment of his peers during his years as a political exile. The work took on a new and political meaning when he redesigned it in 2005. With Chaw Ei Thein dressed as Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi when she was released from prison in 2002, *On the Table* was a representation of the events that followed her release: after her attempts to cooperate with the ruling junta, her supporters feared that such actions would damage her reputation. Ultimately, it was the government's dissatisfaction with Aung San Suu Kyi's refusal of their offers that finally led to a mistrust between the two opposing factions. (Naziree, 2010)



## Chaw Ei Thein (b. 1969)

Chaw Ei Thein graduated from Yangon University with a Bachelor of Law degree in 1994. With her father, Maung Maung Thein, as her art teacher and mentor, Chaw's art developed into a diverse practice. Highly regarded as a painter and a conceptual as well as a performance artist, her international career is profiled as she candidly portrays the contradictions and conflicts of her socio-political environment. She currently lives and works in New York.



[September Sweetness, Singapore Biennale 2008, with Richard Streitmatter-Tran, a Vietnamese-American artist. 5.5 tons of sugar.](#)



The two artists conceived and produced a temple in Myanmar style made from 5.5 tons of sugar for the 2008 Singapore Biennale. The sweetness may refer to what the tourists often perceive as the beauty and goodness of the country they see when they visit. Also, Buddhism is often viewed as peaceful. However, we know that the reality is more complex and the perceived sweetness on the surface can often hide something bitter or sinister underneath. After time passed in Singapore, the ants quickly came to eat the sugar, and rains would erode it away.

*September Sweetness* the site-specific installation was a response to the 2007 protest by monks in Myanmar that was eventually crushed by the ruling military junta. The ultimate decay and collapse of the work signified the same erosion of hope by the Myanmar people. (Naziree, 2010)

## Phyu Mon (b. 1960)

Born in 1960 in Mandalay, Phyu Mon graduated from Mandalay University with a Bachelor of Arts degree and studied painting under the master artist U Ba Thaw during 1978 and 1979. She was introduced to video and film production through a programme at the University of Finland. Phyu Mon is one of the few women artists in Myanmar who works with digital photography, a medium that has enabled her to address the angst that many Myanmar women experience. Her work is based on the cultural values that have encompassed her world as a daughter of Myanmar, but with an element of ironic contemporary commentary. Digital photography has allowed Phyu Mon to work at the intersection of several cogent themes, although gender, presence and absence are paramount in her work, which has also included performance. Her early career focused on paintings that reflected her interest in surrealism. Intellectual explorations of poetry and the spirituality that embodies the self have provided her with a link to her world fractured by prejudices, philosophies and crises of identity. Phyu Mon is also a performance artist and a renowned poet in her native Myanmar language. (Naziree, 2009)



Phyu Mon, *Hope*, 2005, Digital photo print, 25 x 38 cm

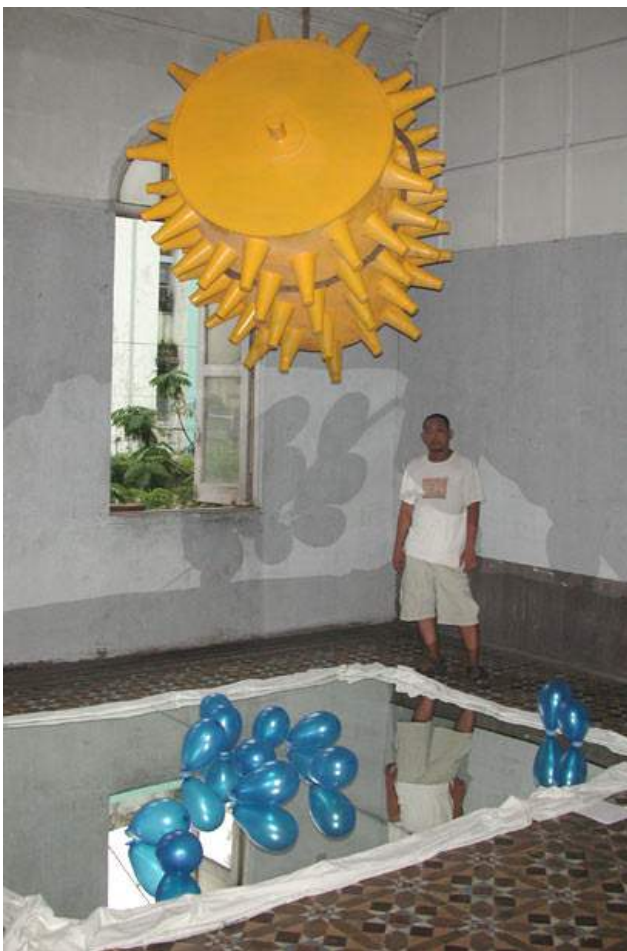
*Hope* is an ongoing series she has worked on for several years. Many of her digital works include a hand being stretched out, perhaps extending towards a better future, in particular for children and the younger generation.

## Nyein Chan Su (1973-2020)

Nyein Chan Su was born in 1973 and graduated from the Myanmar State School of Fine Arts, Yangon in 1994 and had his first solo exhibition at the Lokanat Art Gallery in 1997. His participation in the 1999 Fukuoka Art Triennale in Japan launched his international art career. He is equally renowned as a painter and performance artist and for his video installations. He was a founding member of Yangon's Studio Square Art Gallery.

Nyein Chan Su or NCS – as he was more popularly known – was recognised for his eclectic practices, often formally challenging the primacy of the painted surface. NCS reveled in the excess of meaning, which has reduced the gestures of his canvasses to a fluency that is a rarity in Myanmar art. NCS did not limit himself by the hierarchy of thought but instead strived to create a human intimacy whether in his paintings, installations or performance works. (Naziree, 2009)

Nyein Chan Su is best known for his vibrant artistic expression and free association performances.



Above is a photo from an art performance by Nyein Chan Su held in 1997 at [Lokanat Art Gallery](#) – founded in 1971 as a communal art space and the oldest gallery in Yangon still operating.

The exhibition was closed down by the censors even before it was officially opened. In the photograph, we can observe a heavy, spiny object that hangs threatening over the fragile balloons below which could easily be crushed. The political content may or may not have been obvious to the censor board, but in case they did not understand the art work, it was shut down anyway.





During the Saffron Revolution in 2007, many monks were killed by the army. For Thavibu Gallery's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary *Spiritual Spaces* in Bangkok in 2008, Nyein Chan Su did an art performance where he addressed the brutality towards and the killing of monks. Using his own body, red paint, flowers and shouts, he immersed himself fully in the art performance.



Nyein Chan Su, *Smile in the Pagoda - The Red Line Series*, 2012, Digitally manipulated photograph, 90 x 60 cm

The country had started to open up around 2011, but there was clearly an invisible red line you could not cross which is what Nyein Chan Su illustrated in this edited photo taken at the famed Shwedagon Pagoda.

## Sawangwongse Yawnghwe (b. 1971)

Sawangwongse Yawnghwe's family history is closely interwoven with the recent history of Myanmar. His grandfather Sao Shwe Thaik was the last Saopha (ruler) of the Yawnghwe in the Shan State and the first President of the Union of Burma (1948-1952) after the country gained independence from Britain in 1948. Shwe Thaik died in prison following the 1962 military coup by general Ne Win. And his uncle was murdered on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1962 as we can see from the painting illustrated at the beginning of this publication. Since then, the Yawnghwe family has been driven into exile.

Yawnghwe's painting and installation practice engages politics with reference to his family history as well as current and historical events in his country. Family photographs also provide the basis for a pictorial language through which he explores events in Myanmar, suggesting that existing and available archives cannot reveal a nation's entire truth. In addition, Yawnghwe's work of maps charts the conflicts involving drugs such as heroin and amphetamines, revolutionary armies, minority ethnicities, mining and gas pipelines, the armament of generals, as well as state genocide against its minorities. He intends to bring discernible order to a complex political situation. He now operates the Yawnghwe Office in Exile and did not return to Myanmar. ([TKG+](#))

### Burman vs Ethnic Groups and Muslims

Myanmar's full name is the Union of Myanmar as it consists of several states and more than 100 ethnic groups of which the largest is the Burman (not to be confused with Burmese, which are the general word for all the people of Myanmar). Yawnghwe is one of the few artists who addresses the suffering of the minorities, such as Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, etc, and the plight of the Rohingyas who were massacred in 2017. He is also one of the few artists who continued to produce political art works during the decade 2011-2021 when the NLD came to power and established a somewhat peaceful government. Many of the minority groups have not been satisfied with the NLD though, and various ethnic groups continue with armed conflicts against the (mostly Burman) state government.



Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, *Rohingya Portraits*, 2017, Sumi ink on rice paper, dimensions variable





Sawangwongse Yawngkhwe, *The Myanmar Peace Industrial Complex Map 3 People's Desire*, 2018, Asia Pacific Triennale, Brisbane, Australia

The art installation illustrated above from the Asia Pacific Triennale in Australia is interesting since it shows the many parties involved in the peace process and their many interactions and own areas of interests. It is an extremely complicated process, and could be viewed as fair to some parties but unfair to others. Some key elements in the labyrinthine process are: ethnic groups, minorities, smuggling, drugs, corruption, mining, China, India, army, and so on, in a continuous maze of interactions and conflicts.

“People’s Desire” in the title of this installation refers to the slogans put up by the previous army government (1962-2011), which would give Orwellian slogans and call them “People’s Desire”. As an example, seen on roadside signboards during the 2000s: *Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy*.

## Phyoe Kyi (1977-2018)

*"I attempt to put all my feelings into my art"* is the artist's statement. Phyoe Kyi was born in Taunggyi, Shan State, in 1977 and graduated with a BA (Painting) in 1998. He is well known for his candid expressions and views, artistically articulated through video, film and installations. Phyoe Kyi has also been a performance artist. He may be most renowned for his computer animations, some of which can be viewed online on YouTube.



Phyoe Kyi, *Beyond Burma or Inside Fire*, 2012, 14 Giclée prints, sizes variable



Above is a series of fourteen prints in the series *Beyond Burma or Inside Fire*, 2012. They should be viewed from left to right and ideally should be displayed at one level. Here we need to divide the series in two parts due to restrictions of space; the upper part equals the left part and the lower part equals the right part.

The first five images display General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi. He was one of the founders of the *Tatmadaw* and often regarded as the “Father of the Nation” since he was able to fight the British and secure independence in 1948. In the next six images, Aung San can be seen as a family man with his wife and three children, including their daughter Suu Kyi. Then follows two images when he was assassinated, and the series finally ends with a composite portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi, her face composed of images of Myanmar people. The series was produced by Phyo Kyi for the exhibition *Beyond Burma* (Naziree, 2012), though he cleverly added “..or Inside Fire” to the title of his art work. This addition has unfortunately turned out to be correct.

## POLITICAL REFORMS 2011-2021

After the country started to open up in 2011, a younger generation came to fore. They became more cosmopolitan by using the internet extensively, some were studying abroad such as in Singapore at the Lasalle College, and their medium often included stencils and spray paint in addition to more traditional media. Video art and performance art continued to flourish.

This generation is different from the previous generations in the sense that the artists would no longer face jail or torture over their protests and art production as the earlier generations often did. Political art continued to be produced, and portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi flourished and were seen everywhere. There were genuine political reforms, but as Nyein Chan Su showed above, there was still a Red Line that could not be crossed. The consequences though, were not so severe as earlier.

Shireen Naziree writes: “Myanmar under the military junta was a place of secrets, disinformation and censorship, along with pervasive physical and psychological trauma. The easing of military rule and the subsequent release of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010 have spawned hopes of democracy and the desire for greater freedom of expression, especially amongst artists and cultural practitioners. On the artistic front this means enlarging the understanding of contemporaneous creative expressions and crediting those whose artistic contributions have been overlooked, as well as enabling a new generation of Myanmar artists to establish their own legacy for the future. Though Myanmar’s traditional and conservative mainstream art disciplines have been challenged by multiple forms of artistic expression – installation, video, digital art and performance art, as well as urban art – they have captured meaningful creations and narratives that quietly voiced the views and often discontent of these artists.

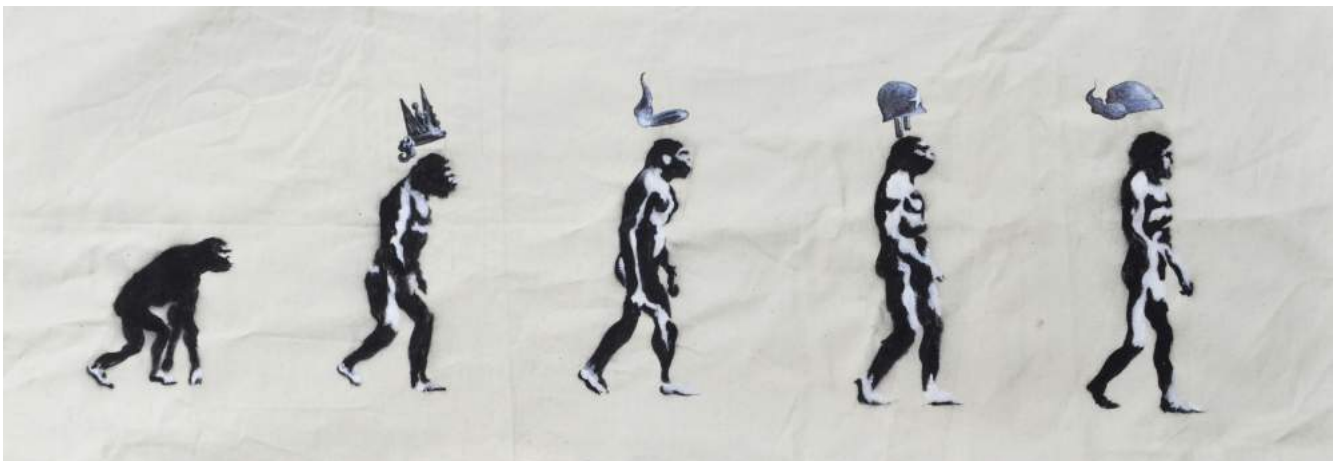
By the end of the last millennium, performance art and a little later urban art had become less peripheral and fully emerged into a very meaningful discipline. Frequently hosted in clandestine locations and contained spaces due to its often political content, performance art became an important medium of symbolic narratives that evolved from Myanmar’s harsh social landscape. While performance art with its integrity of purpose invoked urgent contemporary issues, its temporal nature meant that there was no continuity; on the other hand, the nature of street or urban art ensures its continued visibility to a wider audience.” (Naziree, 2014)

## MILLENNIALS

### Thu Myat (b. 1986)

Thu Myat was born in 1986 in Yangon and has a B.A. in Business Management as well as a Diploma in Multimedia. He is the co-founder of *Plus Ka Gyi* – a company that specializes in graphic design. A member of the OKP Crew, Thu Myat has been actively involved in projecting urban art since 2009 when he participated in an exhibition organized by New Zero Art Space in Yangon and notably as the organizer of *Rendezvous: South East Asia Urban Art Event* in 2012 and 2013.

As a designer with a strong interest in developing consumer concepts, he has long recognized the changing nature of urban art and the part it can play in raising awareness and social consciousness amongst the public. Thu Myat also infers that urban art in Yangon could be better defined as public art in that its intention is to enhance and transform the visual amenity of sites that if left alone would be dull, if not actually ugly. At the same time, through his staging of *Rendezvous*, he has demonstrated that art can be a means to develop skills and improve the quality of life. Thu Myat's visuals are simple, yet extraordinary for their resonance and resilience. There is none of the expected upbeat imagery of street art, nor any reminiscence of murals or forced celebration of colours. (Naziree, 2014)



Thu Myat, *Evolution Theory*, 2014, Spray paint on canvas, 110 x 37 cm

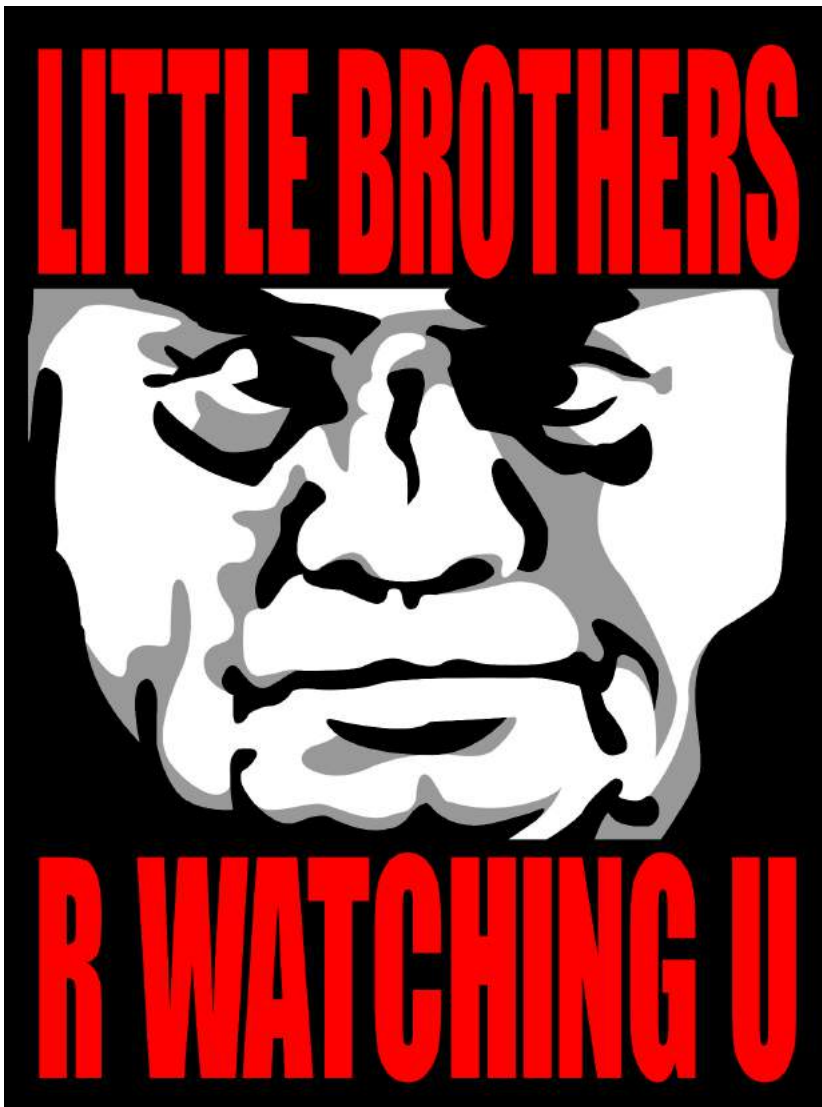
This painting points at the *Evolution of Democracy* in Myanmar, based on the *Evolution of Man*. Thu Myat indicates the stages as: 1. Humanity, 2. Civilization, 3. Monarchy, 4. Military Government, 5. Democracy in the Myanmar context.

As we now know in 2021, the country has moved one step backward.



## Wunna Aung (b. 1978)

Born in 1978 in Yangon, Wunna Aung has lived all his life in the capital. He graduated from the National University of Art and Culture with a B.A. in Music, and also has a B.A. in Creative Writing from Dagon University in Yangon. A member of ROAR (Release Of Artistic Rage) Crew, Wunna Aung is a regular participant in urban art activities in Yangon. Creativity for Wunna Aung is an act of crossing aesthetic and cultural frontiers and genres. In other words, his multifaceted oeuvre has consistently shown his ability to trespass cultures, notably by interweaving the ancient culture of Myanmar with his iconic Pop paintings. An examination of such a concept leads fairly directly to the relationship between contemporary art and material culture. As much as Wunna Aung is engrossed in popular culture, he is equally fascinated by personalities that have shaped Myanmar's history – both by their symbolic nature and their vestiges of human existence. (Naziree, 2014)



Wunna Aung, *Little Brothers*, 2014, Printed Poster, 61 x 82 cm

The poster is Wunna Aung's take on the Orwellian concept of *Big Brother Is Watching You*, with a depiction of General Than Shwe, who is widely despised.

## **Moe Satt (b. 1983)**

Moe Satt is one of the founders of the Performance Festival *Beyond Pressure* which was established in Yangon in 2008 and supported by the Heinrich-Böll Foundation. He is first of all a performance artist and has done several performances and installations related to socio-political issues. He is known to use his body and hand gestures extensively and in innovative ways to get his message across. He has also worked as a curator both in Myanmar and internationally.



[Moe Satt, \*History at Play: Is the Revolution Over?\*, 2019, Nova Contemporary at Art Basel Hong Kong](#)

After the introduction of political reforms in 2011, making political art about current events did not carry the risks it did earlier. Moe Satt took another approach by looking back at the events that unfolded after 8888. He presented an exhibition titled *History at Play: Is the revolution over?* which was exhibited at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2019 with Nova Contemporary. The answer to the question the artist poses is obviously No – considering the events that have taken place in 2021.

2021

1<sup>st</sup> February 2021 is yet another tragic date in the Myanmar calendar - which will no doubt be added to the Wikipedia page [List of Massacres in Myanmar](#). Many of the artists mentioned earlier in this publication are again ready to fight for democracy using their art as weapon. The main feature of the current resistance in 2021 is the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) which is a peaceful resistance against the army's abuse of power and the atrocities they commit. In fact, the *Tatmadaw* could now be called a "terrorist army" as it is terrorizing the civilian population. In addition to artists already featured, there are others who must be mentioned here that have produced art works in the last few weeks to directly address the coup d'état.

### **Bart Was Not Here (b. 1996)**

Bart Was Not Here (aka Kyaw Moe Khine) has been closely affiliated with the urban art movement in Yangon for some time and is one of the founding members of ROAR (Release Of Artistic Rage). He is a graduate of the Lasalle College in Singapore.



Bart Was Not Here, *We Don't Bend. We Don't Break*, 2021, digital painting, 7776 x 4963 pixels

In the centre of the art work is a traditional *Pyit Taing Daung* doll normally made from papier mâché. Even if you push it or hit it - it will always roll back and stand firmly on the ground. It is thus a symbol of resilience. This art piece also contains the *Three Finger Salute* and *Everything Will Be Ok* – the text on the T-shirt of the 19-year old girl who was shot dead. The letters CDM – Civil Disobedience Movement can also be seen.

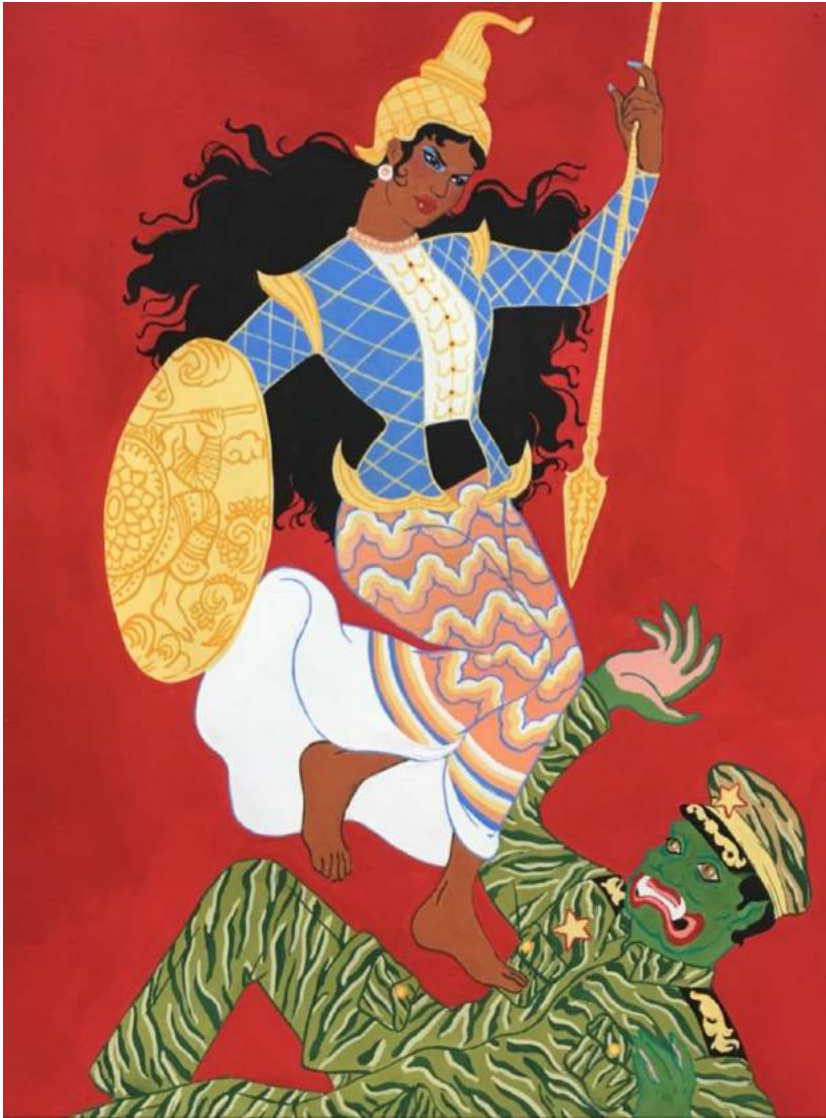


Traditional doll



## Richie Htet (b. 1995)

Richie Htet is a graduate from the London College of Fashion in Fashion Illustration, 2017. He was born in Myanmar and spent a large part of his adult life studying in London. He is one of the few queer Myanmar artists and his art often deals with queerness, sexuality and identity. He has recently taken part in exhibitions in Myanmar.



Richie Htet, *Bitch Better Have My Democracy*, 2021, Gouache on paper, 31 x 41 cm

The artist says: “The concept is based on two imageries, the first is the Hindu Goddess *Durga* [In destroying evil, Durga transforms into the Goddess Kali, who is regarded as her most ferocious avatar], slaying the demon Manisura; and the second is St Michael defeating Satan. The lady represents the national personification of Burma and the *ogre* is the personification of the *Tatmadaw*. The idea is the unified Burma slaying the military. The composition is triangular and the lady is shaped like the map of Burma.”

The picture is taken from Facebook in 2021, which shows the power of the new social media and how the younger generation has taken a different approach from the older generations. One of the slogans in the 2021 Uprising is “Don’t mess with Generation Z!”.

## Sandar Khine [or Khaing] (b. 1971)

Sandar Khine is a female artist who started her career in 1996 and is well known for her depiction of large female bodies. The size appears to be a reference to the power of women – a large body equals large power - though normally her figures are depicted as rather docile from what we can see during her long career. However, painting *nudes* was frowned upon by the censors, and her paintings were often removed from exhibitions. At the 2021 Uprising, she has proven to be a fierce fighter, which comes across in her recent paintings from 2021.



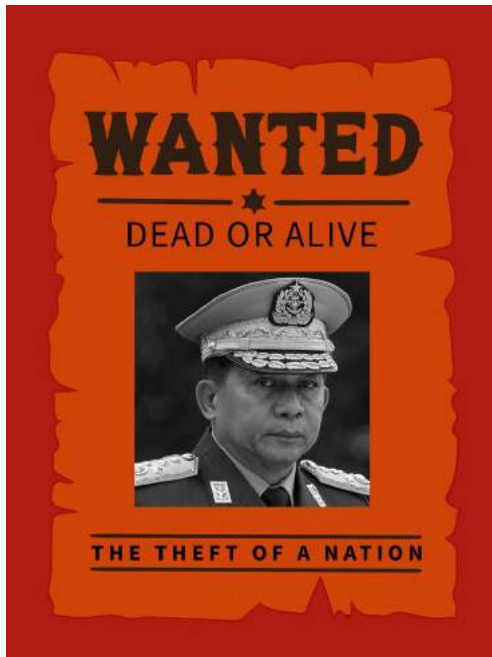
Seen above are two very powerful paintings she has produced in 2021. To the left is obviously a powerful female providing resistance and fighting the army on their own terms, with guns. On the right is a depiction of the Hindu Goddess [\*Kali\*](#). She is the Goddess of Time, Creation, Destruction and Power. She is also bloodthirsty and the destroyer of evil forces. She destroys the evil in order to protect the innocent. It is also interesting to note that she carries a paint brush rather than a sword in her hand.

Melissa Carlson writes: “Sandar Khine’s nudes, which she has painted for more than two decades under military rule, were so often removed from exhibitions that she had to paint other subject matter to earn an income. She sometimes draped actual black cloth across paintings to ensure they could be displayed, a move that acquiesced to the censors’ request that she cover her figures for a more demure pose but also commented on the censorship itself.” (Carlson, 2014)



## PROTEST ART AND COMMUNITY ART

Protest art responds to immediate events, and we can see two examples below. To the left is a digital poster of the coup maker, General Min Aung Hlaing, and to the right is a digital poster of the Three Finger Salute for democracy based on [The Hunger Games](#).



The archeological zone of Bagan:  
SAVE MYANMAR



An ingenious way of using women's underwear  
and bras to "steal men's power"

Community art or community-based resistance has happened spontaneously during the coup. To the left, we can see how people in the ancient city of Bagan line up to form the letters SAVE MYANMAR. To the right are women holding up bras and underwear to protect themselves. It is a belief among men in Myanmar that they will lose their "male power" if they come in contact with or pass underneath female underwear. All four pictures above were taken from Facebook, 2021.



## CONCLUSION

Consider the two images below. The first image is a photo of Yangon taken on 17 March 2021, from Facebook. The second image is a painting by Myint Swe in 2002. There are striking similarities.



Photo of Yangon burning, 17 March 2021. From Facebook



Myint Swe, *Conflagration*, 2002, by Myint Swe. Oil on canvas, 185 x 105 cm

There was no major uprising in 2002, so Myint Swe's painting is based on events in 1988. What we can see is that history repeats itself. Yangon burns, and people suffer. As has been shown in this publication, there is a long line of important artists in Myanmar who have addressed the repression during military rules. Their approaches have been different, based on the situation and media of expression, but they all have in common that **"We suffer – and we want this to end!"**. Myanmar with the support of the international community, desperately needs the restoration of democracy sooner rather than later.

[This publication was finalised on 1 May 2021.]

## REFERENCES

- [Carlson, M. \(2014\): Painting Between the Lines. ArtAsiaPacific Magazine no.91](#)
- [Carlson, M. \(2016\): Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar. SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia. Vol. 31, No. 1](#)
- Ranard, A. (2009): Burmese Painting. A Linear and Lateral History. Silkworm Books.
- [Naziree, S. \(2009a\): Speaking Alone, exhibition catalogue. Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok](#)
- [Naziree, S. \(2009b\): Burma: The Quiet Violence. Political Paintings by Myint Swe. Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok](#)
- [Naziree, S. \(2010\): Stories Out Of Burma, exhibition catalogue. Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok](#)
- [Naziree, S. \(2012\): Beyond Burma, exhibition catalogue. Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok](#)
- [Naziree, S. \(2013\): Tradition Or Change, exhibition catalogue. Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok](#)
- [Naziree, S. \(2014\): Off the Wall, exhibition catalogue. Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok](#)