



OFF THE WALL

Thu Myat and Wunna Aung

LITTLE BROTHERS



R WATCHING U

An Exhibition of Urban Art
from Myanmar
15 November – 13 December, 2014

Curator: Shireen Nazire

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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, OFF THE WALL by two contemporary Myanmar artists: Thu Myat and Wunna Aung. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 15 November – 13 December, 2014.

Thavibu Gallery has over the years put on display a variety of artworks from Burma, a country more recently known as Myanmar. There have been Myanmar master painters, and there have been conceptual artists as well as political artists. In this exhibition we have put the spotlight on a new generation of artists, who produce what is often called *street art* or *urban art*. Wunna Aung and Thu Myat belong to the generation of 'street artists' who came to the fore during military rule and who used their ideas and skills to spray paint walls and buildings as well as create smaller urban art items.

Both artists are renowned for their interdisciplinary perspectives in music and literature and as such OFF THE WALL has been built around that relationship. While generally their gestures point to a world outside the gallery, their visual methodology – combining images and exploring Myanmar's past and present through traditional and popular iconography – offers a way to view the nature of their experiences and to discern forms that document the processes and formation of the shape and content of their expressions.

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 *The Rendezvous: South East Asia Urban Art Event* in 2012 and 2013. He is also an active member of OKP Crew.

Wunna Aung graduated from the National University of Art and Culture. Though he works as a graphic designer, he studied painting under some of Myanmar's most noted contemporary painters and is well established as a poet and writer. He also practices as an independent artist and is a member of ROAR Crew.

The essay has been written by the art historian and independent curator, Shireen Naziree. I take this opportunity to thank the artists for their collaboration, and Shireen Naziree for her contribution. I also thank Ralph Kiggell for language editing.

OFF THE WALL

Shireen Naziree

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 Daw 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

Further challenging the catch-all that art is purely commercial, urban art has become another important bridge between the exclusive interior world of the artist and the general public. But any similarity between new artistic disciplines and urban art ended there. While urban art may be associated with resistance, the very fact that it is executed in the open has labeled it a non-serious art form. And, unlike the often select audiences embracing art within a contained space, public urban expression is often layered with psychological projections: melancholy tempered with humor and color is meant to encourage a larger audience to step back and absorb the raw energy of the unnamed artist's text.

Myanmar has had an established modern art scene since the early 1900s, while its traditional arts, including mural paintings on the walls of pagodas, have a much longer history than modern painting practice. The painting of murals for pagodas often served as the first tutorial and inspiration for many of Myanmar's now renowned artists. Though the history of mural painting has been shrouded for many years and artists are no doubt part of that history, it has become important for Myanmar's urban artists to connect it to this current period where the materiality and pursuit of their art functions very democratically as outdoor galleries.



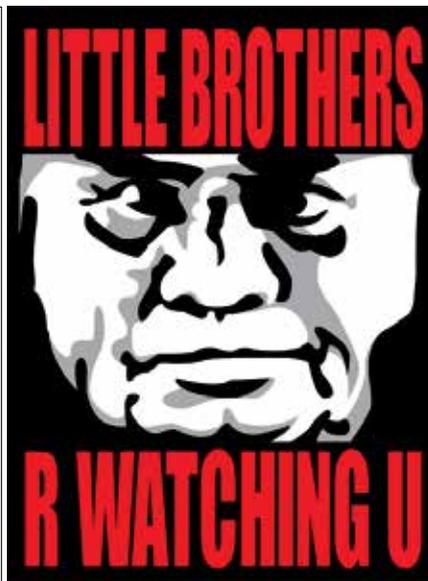
Street art by Wunna Aung

The global recognition and resurgence of painting on walls has certainly impacted Myanmar's cultural field, which is expanding as the enthusiasm for interdisciplinary perspectives in current art practice and academic debate grows. *The New Zero Graffiti Art Movement* exhibition at Yangon's New Zero Art Space in 2009 provided models for discursive boundaries within Myanmar's contemporary art history. It also demonstrated how, despite being cut off from the international arena, global trends were impacting more than Myanmar's politics. The exhibition was in fact reconfiguring the local art world and maybe to a small degree challenging Yangon's cultural boundaries. And yet artists proved that they were well positioned to embrace new articulations of visual culture.

In Myanmar, urban art was often mistaken for vandalism but in reality it was regarded as threatening despite its often playful expression. Reasons for censorship included the use of colors such as orange, with its potential reference to the 2007 Saffron Revolution.



Thu Myat | Printed poster, 2014



Wunna Aung | Printed poster, 2014

OFF THE WALL frames the energetic and prolific output of Thu Myat and Wunna Aung, two of Myanmar's most recognized urban artists. Furthermore, the exhibition questions issues such as the impact of globalization and the 'concept' of cultural borders within Myanmar's fast-changing socio-political and economic environment. Art – the sphere where mental and physical intersect – sheds new light on ideas of reality. And, both Thu Myat and Wunna Aung are perfectly placed to reflect upon these new and changing paradigms of human 'reality'.

Thu Myat and Wunna Aung have been creating art for almost a decade. Working individually and as members of 'crews', they began as urban artists in the first decade of the new millennium. While they produced artworks on the streets, like many others, they focused primarily on legal commissions such as murals. Though both artists come from a background of street art, their real talent lies in the way they have absorbed and synthesized Myanmar culture to show how broad the world they draw upon is.

THU MYAT



YGN THINKER, 2014
Spray paint on canvas
76 x 116 cm



King MICKEY, 2014
Spray paint on canvas
80 x 120 cm

Both Thu Myat and Wunna Aung were considerably experienced artists before they met in 2012. Though they belonged to different crews – Thu was a member of OKP and Wunna was with ROAR – they first collaborated when Thu invited Wunna to participate in *Rendezvous II: South East Asia Urban Art Event*, a gathering of young graffiti artists from around the region and Myanmar. When Thu first initiated *Rendezvous* in 2012, he was not only creating a space for Southeast Asian artists to share common interests, but establishing an important venue for exposing the work of Myanmar’s urban artists to a larger audience.



Untitled, 2014 | Spray paint on canvas
75 x 116 cm



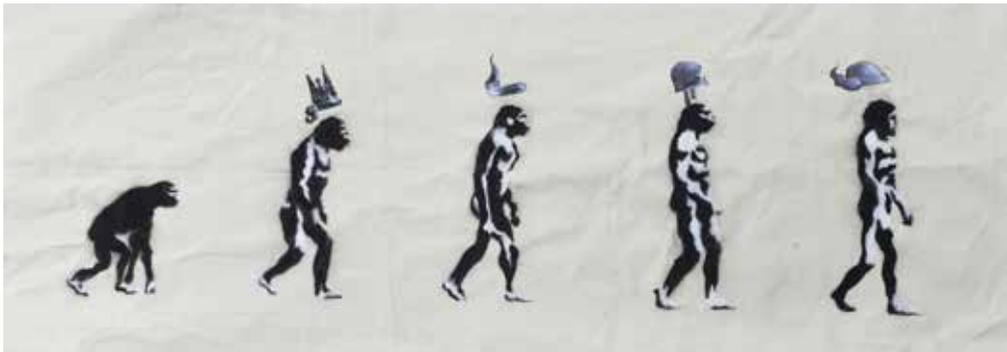
Than Taw Sint, 2014 | Spray paint on canvas
80 x 104 cm



Rolling, 2014 | Spray paint on canvas | 74 x 80 cm

Thu Myat graduated with a B.A. in Business Management and a Diploma in Multimedia. 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 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 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 colors.



Evolution Theory, 2014 | Spray paint on canvas | 110 x 37 cm



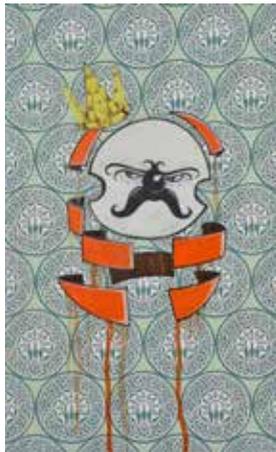
Untitled (2), 2014 | Spray paint on canvas | 83 x 30 cm

For **OFF THE WALL** Thu Myat has created a body of work that is playful, yet bears potent messages. He engages popular modern icons with personal embellishments, avoiding the literal to maintain the integrity of the art. The artworks are titled simply as 'IDs', freeing the audience to draw their own conclusions. *ID1* (p.10), for example, is a depiction of a traditional Myanmar man from a more feudal century, who holds a spray can and paint brush, and overlays any purity of past history. Similarly anarchic, *ID2* (p.10) draws attention to the traditional dress, or *phi thu hlut taw*, generally worn by parliamentarians. This image is juxtaposed with the words 'Yes I am Conservative'. Its 'flatness' or material integrity deliberately mimics traditional stenciling.

Pyit Taing Htaung (1),
2014 | Ink on paper
21 x 35 cm



Pyit Taing Htaung (2),
2014 | Ink on paper
21 x 34



Senator Technology, 2014 | Ink on newspaper | 28 x 38 cm

As an artist with a keen interest in music and poetry, Thu creates a diverse portfolio that reflects his attitude to life: vibrant and often quietly humorous. One of Thu's favorite characters is Mickey Mouse. In *ID3* Mickey Mouse is dressed as King Anawrtha, the first king of Burma. With his traditional *Areinama* weaponry, iconic in Myanmar's history, Thu honors Mickey Mouse as the pioneer of Pop culture and a super hero!



Untitled, 2014 | Ink on handmade paper | 55 x 55 cm

Thu Myat grew up in Yangon and has rich experience in art and culture. In some ways, his art is a framework of a new generation of urban life. And, as popular global culture and Western-style fast food are being more overtly embraced by Myanmar's younger generation, Thu Myat remains ever conscious of the intrinsic values of his culture. Traditional papier-mâché toys, such as the character Pyit Taing Htaung, have been refashioned to interest the current generation (ID4 & 5), and in a limited edition of posters (ID6) (p.8) the doughnut is king!



Untitled, 2014 | Ink on handmade paper | 55 x 55 cm

WUNNA AUNG

Like Thu Myat with multimedia, Wunna Aung's relationship with sound – as well as his own relationship with musicians – has always informed his knowledge of popular culture and fueled his interest in urban art. Quiet, but with an understated yet powerful presence, Wunna Aung has participated in numerous exhibitions since he was young; he also won a number of art awards as a student.

Though he studied painting under some of Myanmar's most noted contemporary artists, Wunna's approach to urban art as part of ROAR is obviously part of a specific package of practice that is judged as an aesthetic totality. By contrast, the aesthetic neutrality of materials for his work in **OFF THE WALL** brings a visual and spatial harmony usually reserved for a singular piece of work. But his series of portraits provides plenty of narrative.

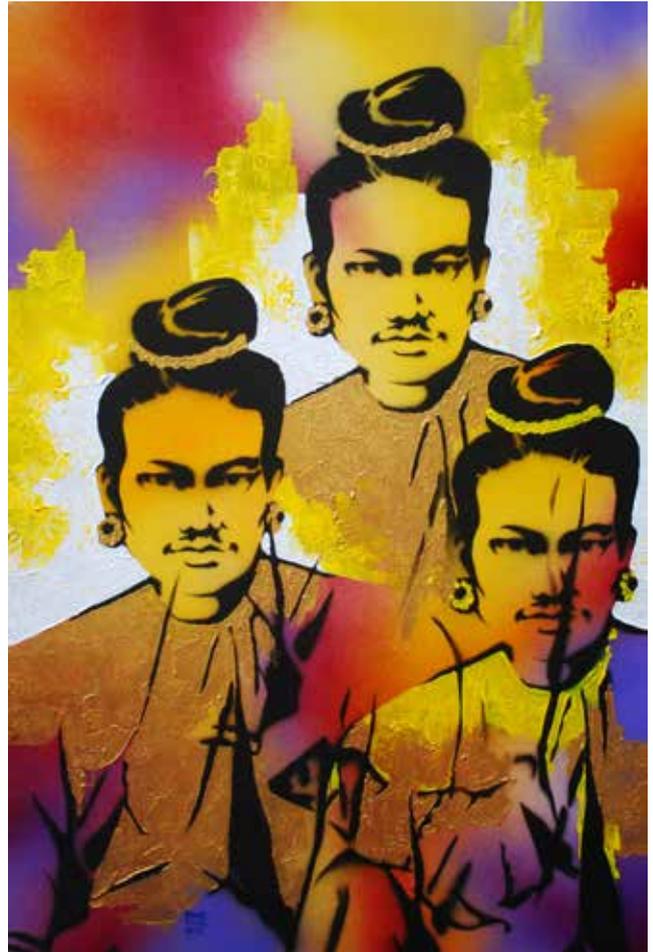
Creativity for Wunna is an act of crossing aesthetic and cultural frontiers and genres. In other words, his multifaceted oeuvre has consistently shown his ability to trespass cultures, notably by crisscrossing the ancient culture of Myanmar with his iconic Pop paintings. An examination of such a concept leads fairly directly to the relationship between contemporary art and material culture.

As much as Wunna 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. The dynamics of such representations lie in the paintings' potential, where his working process is more like a painted collage. Instead of incorporating external elements into the picture, however, he creates layers for visual textures.

Wunna draws on a very important period of Myanmar's history under British Colonial rule when the royal court under King Thibaw was abolished and exiled to India in 1885. This resulted in the fall of the capital, Mandalay, and the disappearance of many precious artifacts. Though it saw the end of the monarchy, the significance of the period has remained very vivid within Myanmar's cultural history.



King Mindon, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint on canvas
61 x 91 cm



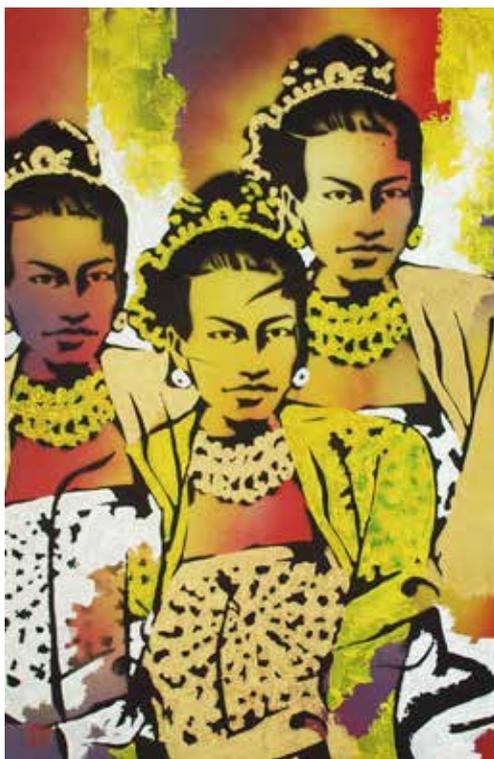
King Thibaw, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint on canvas
61 x 91 cm

King Mindon was the father of King Thibaw, the last king of Burma. King Mindon was the founder of Mandalay (Ya Da Na Pon).

For **OFF THE WALL**, Wunna has created a series of portraits of the royal family. Though untitled, the works each carry a story of their own. King Mindon, who reigned during the Kong Baung Dynasty, founded the capital city Ya Da Na Pon, which later became known as Mandalay. Complimenting this portrait is that of his son, King Thibaw, the last king of Burma, whose reign witnessed the fall of the country to the British. Another portrait is of U Myuu, who was a diplomat during the reign of King Mindon. Wunna's constant theme here is a result of the possible fragmenting of Myanmar's culture and history as well as an emphasis on the importance of history to art, especially when married to contemporary narratives that form and modify urban mass culture. Queen Supayalat was the daughter of King Mindon and wife of King Thibaw.



U Myuu, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint
on canvas | 61 x 91 cm



Queen Supayalat, 2014 | Acrylic and
spray paint on canvas | 61 x 91 cm

But Wunna's portraits are not simply disquisitions on the royalty and noblemen of Myanmar; rather they quietly comment on the apathy of his country's history, providing an uncomfortable yet engaging subject. That a subject from the past can gaze back is a fascinating conundrum for the artist.

The world that Thu Myat and Wunna Aung draw from is certainly broad. Whether their iconography is filled with cartoonish whimsy or historical rhetoric, it also channels a sense of surrealism as figures dissolve and slip into otherworldly dimensions. Urban art has allowed them a sense of escape with a little bit of worldliness such as hip-hop and heavy metal thrown in.



Pa Khan Gyi Su Pa Yarr, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint on canvas | 61 x 91 cm



Myin Kunn, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint on canvas | 61 x 91 cm

Pa Khan Gyi Su Pa Yarr was a royal princess, older sister to King Thibaw and daughter of King Mindon. Myin Kunn was an elder son of crown prince Ka Naung and nephew of King Mindon. After a failed rebellion, he spent his last years in exile in Saigon, Vietnam.



U Shwe Maung, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint on canvas | 61 x 91 cm



U Pae Si, 2014 | Acrylic and spray paint on canvas | 61 x 91 cm

U Shwe Maung, also known as Hlay Thin Ah Twin Wun, was the Minister of the Burmese Navy during the Burmese-British war in 1885. U Pae Si was the last mayor of Mandalay during the Kong Baung period.

CHRONOLOGY



THU MYAT

Born in 1986 in Yangon, Thu Myat 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, he has been at the forefront of Myanmar's urban and street art – especially as the organizer of *Rendezvous: South East Asia Urban Art Event*. He has participated in numerous exhibitions, including several group shows at New Zero Art Space and Lawkanat Gallery in Yangon. He also participated in the exhibition *Urbane* at Folklore-Kunstraum in Innsbruck, Austria, 2013.

WUNNA AUNG

Born in 1978 in Yangon, Wunna Aun has lived all his life in the capital. Since high school, Wunna has studied painting under artists U Aye Htun, U Win Htein, U S-Tin Shwe and U Aye Myint (TTC). 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 group, Wunna Aung is a regular participant in urban art activities in Yangon. Amongst notable exhibitions he has participated in recently are: *Art + Plug Season One Exhibition*, *Rendezvous II: South East Asia Urban Art Event* (2013), and *Art + Plug Two (Avant Garde) Art Exhibition* (2014).





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