

**Nguyen Quang Huy**

Paintings from Sapa  
Vietnam



# A TALE OF TWO TRIBES



**Zaw Win Pe**

Paintings from Shan State, Myanmar



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# FOREWORD

**Jørn Middelborg**, Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, A TALE OF TWO TRIBES by one artist from Myanmar—Zaw Win Pe, and one artist from Vietnam—Nguyen Quang Huy. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 27 April – 25 May, 2013.

The countries in Southeast Asia have a multitude of ethnicities inhabiting their lands. Well known are the so-called 'highland' people, the ethnic minorities residing in mountainous areas. One such ethnic group is the Hmong who inhabit parts of the mountainous range in Northern Vietnam. Their population also stretches into neighbouring countries such as Laos and Thailand. A well-known area for the Hmong in Vietnam is Lao Cai with Sapa as its centre, which has a cool climate and is often shrouded in fog and mist. The artist Nguyen Quang Huy has traveled there many times over the years and become familiar with the landscape, the people and their way of life. A tangible result of this familiarity is the current exhibition of landscapes and portraits of people residing in the Sapa area. His paintings reflect the cultural aspects of the Hmong, the beauty of the girls, and the misty dreamlike coolness of the mountains where the Hmong reside.

The Myanmar artist Zaw Win Pe, on the other hand, often travels to the sunny areas of the Shan State and paints the undulating colourful landscapes as they appear in the autumn. The costumes of the Pa-O people and their local markets are a feast of colour as well. The artist revels in applying thick layers of bright paint to create a display of richness and certainly of enjoyment.

I am glad we have the chance to display the works of these two talented artists together and thus showcase some of the diversity and richness of the lands, cultures and ethnicities that can be found in Southeast Asia.

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.

# A TALE OF TWO TRIBES

Shireen Naziree

Few artists can escape the dramatic beauty of the landscapes of Myanmar and Vietnam. While luxuriant natural scenery has provided an almost endless and absorbing pageant for many artists, it has been the relatively unspoiled landscapes of the Shan State in Myanmar and Lao Cai province of North Vietnam that Zaw Win Pe from Myanmar and Nguyen Quang Huy from Vietnam have responded to respectively in their art. However, to identify Zaw Win Pe and Nguyen Quang Huy solely as landscape artists denies them their place within the larger history of Southeast Asian contemporary art. Although they work in different countries with widely different cultural nuances, their paintings are based on similar themes that resonate on national levels.

Though separated by thousands of miles, both artists have been drawn to locales of untainted natural beauty where man, animal and nature continue to exist in total harmony and where there has been little social and economic change. In their depictions, both artists capture a distinct sense of place and intrinsic identity. Through their very different visual commentaries, each artist presents a unique and intimate opportunity to explore some of the rich complexities of Southeast Asia's diverse socio-cultural environments—only accessible to foreign visitors in more recent decades.

Despite these obvious differences, Zaw Win Pe and Nguyen Quang Huy have a great deal in common. They both paint with oil on canvas, although their applications are vastly different. Both artists share an interest in the hill tribes who inhabit highland regions and whose social histories suggest they may once have had a common origin, that is (as with many Southeast Asian hill tribes) in Southern China.

Zaw Win Pe and Nguyen Quang Huy work in different countries and with different artistic styles, yet they have both found creative ground by choosing themes of people and place with similar cultural and social values, untainted by modernization. And while both artists have been drawn—for their own reasons—to pure nature and its association with the vitality of life, the landscape alone has not been their only artistic motivation. Nguyen Quang Huy is renowned for time devoted to recording the ethnic minorities of Northern Vietnam, while Zaw Win Pe's most ambitious sketchbooks are filled with scenes of daily life in villages and towns in Shan State as well as Myanmar's northern Kachin State.

In effect both Zaw Win Pe and Nguyen Quang Huy have produced images that present their landscapes as oases evoking historical connections to the past. Zaw Win Pe has long regarded Shan State, lush and verdant with natural beauty, as an Eden of perpetual light and colour. Nguyen Quang Huy, on the other hand, has found his Eden in Lao Cai province where rugged hills and rocky mountains are typically covered with morning mists of blue and grey.

## ZAW WIN PE

Though Zaw Win Pe's early genre paintings emphasized the human dignity of his subjects, they were realistic representations. His compositions most often were strong but literal depictions of scenes, which he captured through impressions that referenced the academic principles of the earlier Myanmar master painters. However, his love of the landscape and his keen interest in observing the changing moods of nature inspired him to develop his own style of expressionism. At the same time, he continued to explore the colourful life of his native landscape, especially along the Yangon River and later along the Irrawaddy River that runs from the northern hills of Kachin State through Shan State to the coastal villages in the south.

Bordering China to the North, Laos to the East and Thailand to the South, Shan State is the largest state in Myanmar and home to diverse landscapes and people that include various ethnic minorities. Zaw Win Pe first visited Shan State in the late 1990s and was awed by the splendour of the landscape. Responding to both academic art concepts as well as personal initiatives, he blended a European style with his own Oriental sensibilities to define a form of landscape painting with unique qualities that mirrored his deepest emotions.

Inspired by the vibrant, unspoiled beauty of Shan State, he developed an artistic vocabulary that he has ever since used to articulate brilliantly coloured and dynamically expressive paintings—testaments to his individuality and creative energy. His use of bold colour and gesture not only define his approach to painting but also importantly relate to his uninhibited views of the landscape and the world around him.

Colour has long been the presiding muse for Zaw Win Pe, its force abundantly evident in his radiant paintings from the past several decades. And notably, his well-known works are firmly grounded with layered and broad, flat planes of effervescent colour. In effect, such expressionism is synonymous with the cultural psyche of Myanmar, where the vibrancy of colour is an integral part of everyday life.

Zaw Win Pe's artistic practice has always been qualified by the illusion that creates it and that it serves to create. Seen within a wider context, his luminous landscapes are based equally on fidelity to perception (the way it may look in a certain light) and on his own aesthetic experience, prompted by the harmonies of colour and form. Though his works allude to organic environments, the meditative aspect that each plane of colour commands almost immediately negates such associations. Shades of colour and density of paint application vary as the viewer shifts position and, with the mix of light over the canvas surfaces, undermine any sense of repetition or minimalist intention.

At the turn of the millennium, by which time he was focussing almost entirely on Shan State, Zaw Win Pe had already explored the orchestration of the elements of nature and how they affected his intimate feelings and ultimately his art.

This shift in Zaw's practice was perhaps more an acknowledgement of the inevitably personal and meaningful nature of selection as it changed the character of his work. Within this context, the literary aspect of his paintings constitutes an elegant but secondary element. Though the more fundamental, determining force in his paintings has not compromised the acts of seeing and painting, it is the celebration of life, without any sentimentality, that seems to preside.

Zaw Win Pe has always been on close terms with Myanmar's natural beauty and her people. Though Shan State has had a long and illustrious cultural history, it has few man-made structures to remind the viewer of a bygone history. Rather Shan State's history is its natural history. The region's glorious mountains and hills, aged forests, broad lakes and wide rivers speak of pristine nature and pastoral settings.

Zaw regards landscape through its own sense of reverie, and rarely integrates it with figures. While he explores panoramas of rolling hills, their inherent drama is mitigated both by the artist's varied and vibrant palette and his vigorous brushwork—qualities well suited to capturing the seasons and the effects of changing light, vital and salient characteristics of his landscapes. His canvasses reduce trees, fields, mountains and clouds to modeled forms, and layer these forms into distinct, overlapping planes that recede into the horizon. It is as if Zaw Win Pe is finding a truth in light both as a technical and personal quest. While the glowing colours and patterned shapes of natural forms, light and shadow give Zaw Win Pe palpable joy in the paintings he makes, it is clear that he has also created a personal and peaceful psychological kingdom for himself.

But it has not only been the landscape that has been Zaw's primary motivation, he has also devoted time to record ethnic communities. His current body of work consists of portraits of the Pa-O tribe, a branch of the Karen and the second largest ethnic group native to Shan State, who are distinguished by their clothing. Both men and women wear loose clothing of dark indigo or black with bright, colourful turbans of striped or checked fabric that is typical of Shan woven bags.

Mainly engaged in farming the *thanapet* leaf, which is used for rolling Myanmar's traditional cheroot, the Pa-O are most often seen trading their goods at floating markets on Inle Lake or market towns. With the same vibrant palette and technique as his landscape paintings, Zaw Win Pe's nonspecific portraits of the Pa-O are depicted with an ardent humanism that emphasizes their dignity. They resonate with a sense of identity that carries them beyond the pure objectivity of any realist observation, and the distinctive character of these works is that the artist has composed and illuminated his figures with a powerful simplicity that defines the strength and essence of the Pa-O. The patterns of colour, mass and light reflected on their faces demonstrate Zaw Win Pe's ability to capture the enduring spirit of community, underlined by a sense of quiet beauty and dignity. These compositions are not merely figurative arrangements but also share an idyllic mood and reverie that reflect the actual daily life of the Pa-O. Zaw Win Pe is, of course, associating himself with the vitality of life in Shan State, as these figurative works are associated with the activities of his subjects.

These depictions present viewers with Zaw Win Pe's unique perception of the landscape and people of Myanmar's Shan State. His paintings are not merely a chronicle of the Shan landscape, but fresh, spontaneous views of nature captured in paint by a dedicated artist.



**Orchestra Of Colours, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 183 x 153 cm



**Cheerot, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 153 x 76 cm



**Stark White, 2012** | Oil on canvas | 183 x 122 cm



**Market Day, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 153 x 76 cm



Ringing With Colours, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 183 x 122 cm



**Corner Of The Day, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 153 x 76 cm



The Grove, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 122 x 92 cm



**Evening Approaches**, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 122 x 92 cm



**Shadows**, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 122 x 92 cm



**Sunshine Fields**, 2013 | Oil on canvas | 122 x 92 cm

## NGUYEN QUANG HUY

In contrast to the vibrant palette of Zaw Win Pe, a composed stillness permeates the landscapes of Nguyen Huy. In his present body of work he images the landscapes of Lao Cai province, around its main town of Sapa and neighboring Bac Ha and Ma Cai districts, and its Hmong inhabitants.

A refined and quiet beauty has always underlined Nguyen Quang Huy's careful cataloguing of Vietnamese women and their position in his world. His earlier intermingling of feminist imagery conveys Huy's efforts to make a cultural, historical and aesthetic place for himself. To distance himself from the constructed Vietnamese romanticist label along with themes commonly associated with Vietnamese contemporary painting, Nguyen Quang Huy has focussed on exemplifying the diversity of Vietnam's cultural identity.

His fascination with the mountainous northern region of Vietnam and its women began actively in 2008 and he has since made regular sojourns to villages in Dong Van Meo Vac district, Ha Giang province. Worlds away from cosmopolitan Hanoi, where Huy lives, the region has the specific redolence of a little-changed past.

In principle, Nguyen Quang Huy's art bears the footprints of a physical and metaphorical journey that he has undertaken in the past few years to unravel the imperatives of his creativity and to evolve a landscape of gesture that aptly reflects his own human values. Huy has built this dynamic through a very disciplined mindset and artistic language that displays an articulate and unified discernment.

Where much of Vietnam's painted allegories are associated with Romanticism, Huy's pictures instead combine the sense of awe, fundamental to the sublime, with a more critical contemporary attitude towards place and people and our mediated relationship to the Vietnamese aesthetic.

Nguyen Quang Huy's series of paintings invite a contemplation of the ecological future of one of Vietnam's most historical human legacies. With an Orientalist eye and discipline together with controlled brushstrokes, his mostly monochromatic canvases effectively reflect a painting practice that combines traditional academic principles with contemporary strategies. Fully committed to these principles, his gift for mark-making and curiosity about the material possibilities of paint are clear echoes of his intellectual gestures. If through these gestures he seeks to break existing and perhaps unspoken contracts with painting, it is only in order to draw up other protocols that renew the medium. Nguyen Quang Huy's art seems more than part of a painter's necessary process.

His limited palette suggests not any reductive strategy, but one of a dedicated and adept painter who has invested in creating paintings free of weighty cultural expectations. His manner and use of oils on brown canvas is unconventional and the skillfully rendered blurring using diluted pigments has become a vital component of his painting practice. Each work is carefully constructed and the built-up painterly layers have been masterfully planned giving his structures an appearance of floating effortlessly. The formal exuberance of the paintings elevates them beyond mere critique. Instead they function as metaphysical explorations as we are drawn into discovery of the intricacy of his painting process.

In effect, Nguyen Quang Huy has channeled his creative energy into serene rhythms that are both powerful and delicate at the same time. Generally painting with hues of blue, the artist has made the traditional indigo of the Hmong a vital element of his personal visual vocabulary as much as he has made the lifestyle of the Hmong women of the mountains of North Vietnam his reigning subject.

Nguyen Quang Huy's paintings appear to inhabit a world where it seems natural to encounter demure Hmong women and find sceneries that delineate meditative equilibrium—yet he makes these seem perfectly suited to our time. The renowned scenic beauty of Lao Cai, graced with beautiful mountains, rice terraces and picturesque villages as well as a cool temperate climate, reflects the relationship of the minority people and nature. Bordering China, this province was largely undiscovered until the French arrived in the highlands in the late 1880s and colonized the region.

Huy applies his palette in a complex grid of layers as his Expressionist and Romanticist gestures bring a lightness of being to his landscapes. In his picturing of rice terraces, for example, he has created under-layers that swirl and meander with a gentle pulse to the planes and contours of the fields. The subdued and controlled palette intertwines the duality of creation and being.

Similarly, in capturing the stillness of hamlets that dot the landscape, drips and smudges run freely to emphasize the shadows and vital forms that are echoes of a silent past. On bands of land, his notation of markings gathers strength as he flattens and layers the landscape. Subtle densities and opacities delineate the strengths and shadows of the land.

The silence of his paintings gives eloquence to their intellect and perception, while the language contained within them dictates their sensibility as well as a framework for the renowned beauty of the area. The silence may also be read as a metaphor for his very personal artistic journey. Nguyen Quang Huy's aim, however, has been to inhabit and share with the viewer a pictorial space—an ever-renewed presence—that does not have to be recalled but presents itself to a sensuous intelligence.

In 2008, as Nguyen Quang Huy found himself drawn to the rural life of Lao Cai, many aspects of his creative and artistic talents began to develop. He was not merely influenced by the legends of the land, but began to cultivate much stronger and deeper relationships with the innate beauty of the Hmong women. Women are a favourite subject for artists, and Nguyen Quang Huy has represented them in his own style. There is obvious relish as he portrays them with a delicateness that has become his hallmark. And despite the marginalization and poverty of these women, there is no sense of decay in his depictions, instead there is freshness, vibrancy and a sense of strength.

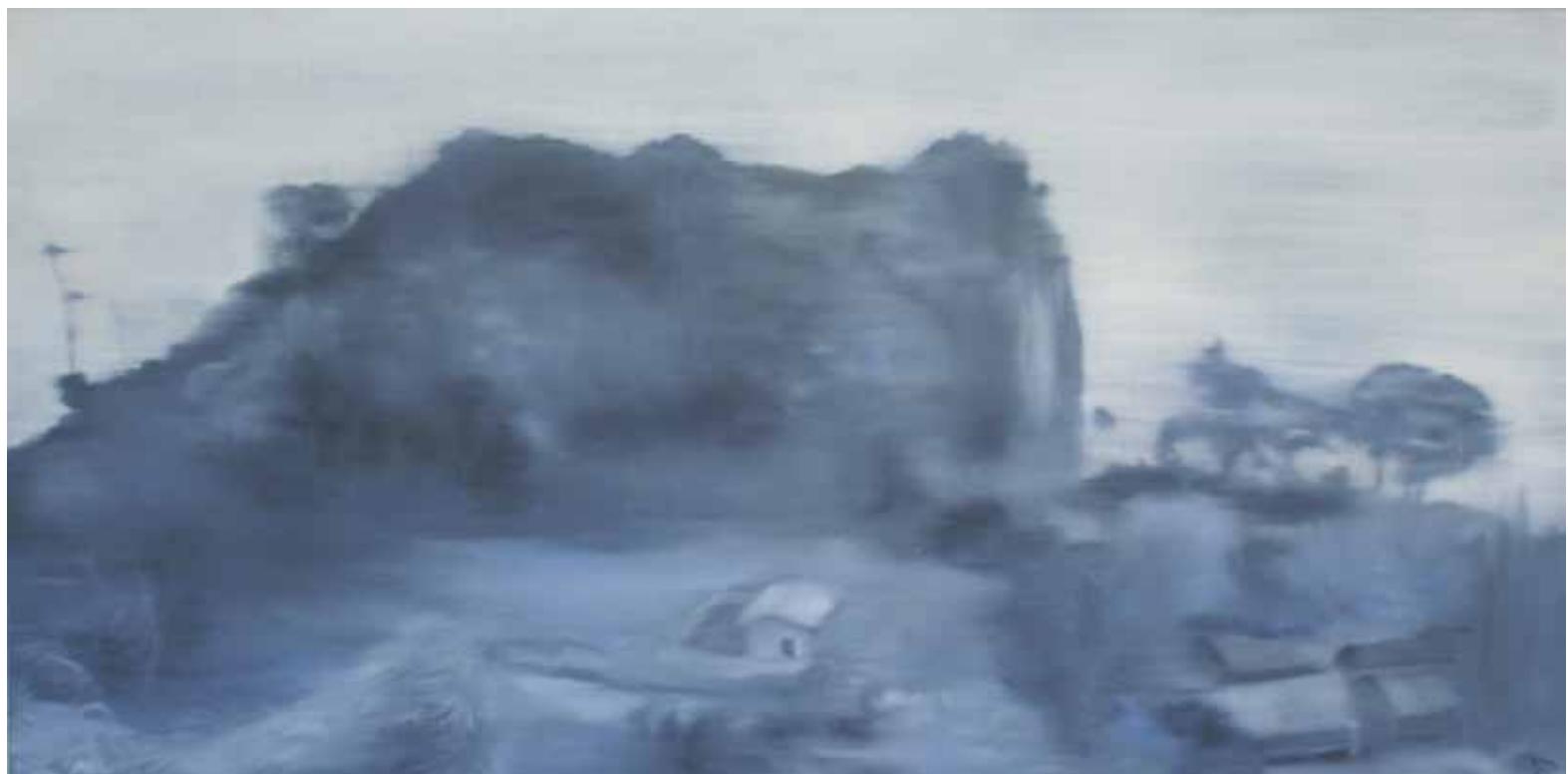
At an obvious level, he has selected his pictorial references broadly. In tracing Nguyen Quang Huy's artistic strategies of disclosing past and present and interweaving art and life, he pays particular attention to aesthetic values and how they may augment Vietnam's cultural identity.



**The Road To Meo Vac, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 158 x 89 cm



**Young Hmong Girl, 2012** | Oil on canvas | 88 x 88 cm



**Meo Vac Blue Mountains, 2011** | Oil on canvas | 199 x 98 cm



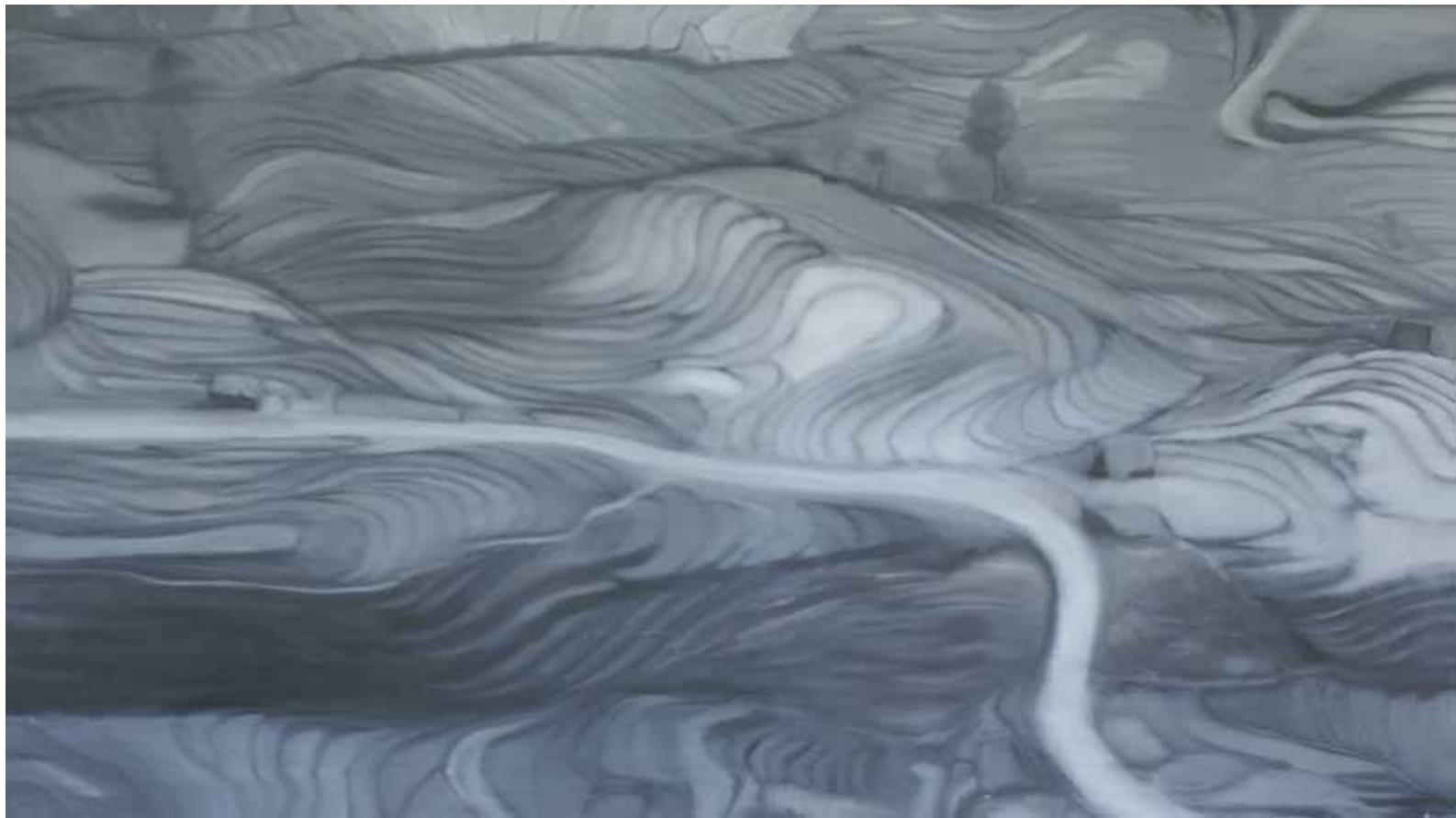
Hmong Girl At Meo Vac, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 98 x 98cm



**The Road To Lao Cai, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 158 x 89 cm



**Hmong Girl In The Market, 2010** | Oil on canvas | 98 x 98 cm



**The Road To Y Ty, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 158 x 89 cm



**Flower Girl in Bac Ha, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 88 x 88 cm



**The Road Home, 2013** | Oil on canvas | 158 x 89 cm



**Hmong Girl At Home, 2012** | Oil on canvas | 88 x 88 cm

As with Zaw Win Pe's practise in Myanmar, Nguyen Quang Huy's work has given rise to new techniques, discipline, shape, form and meaning in painting together with a school of thought that differs widely from mainstream art practices. Both artists understand that without the interrelationship of imagery, creativity and reality, there will be no individual and distinct styles. Faced with painting's imposing history within their own respective art histories and the diminishment of the medium by newer art forms, both artists have found themselves in positions where the provisionality of their work is an index of the numerous possibilities of painting.

Similarly, their art is testimony that a true artist is an inheritor of human values and that colour and line have a vernacular of their own; and, while bringing a contemporary sensibility to bear on socio-historical references, they do not attempt to create convincing references of an existing reality. Rather their pictures combine the sense of awe fundamental to the sublime with a more critical contemporary attitude towards place and people and our mediated relationship with the cultural nature of a nation.

As Zaw Win Pe and Nguyen Quang Huy rework the past into the present, their paintings become un-sentimentalized celebrations of life, however fleeting. It is the true individuality, utility and rhythm of their art that impart luster and polish to their subjects before they vanish into obscurity.

# ARTISTS' BIODATA

## ZAW WIN PE

Zaw Win Pe was born in 1960 in Le Gaing, Mague Division, and had his formal art education at the State School of Fine Arts, graduating in 1984. His international exhibitions include venues in Hong Kong, Singapore, New Zealand, India, Thailand, Canada, France, USA and Myanmar. He has participated in a residency program in Malaysia. Besides private collections, his work is in the permanent collection of the Singapore Art Museum



### Selected International Art Exhibitions

- 2004 Two man exhibition with Ba Khine, **Singapore**
- 2005 *Searching the Colour with Knife Strokes*, Solo exhibition, Chiang Mai, Thailand
- 2005 Burma Stars, Three-man exhibition, **Hong Kong**
- 2006 *Quiet Wind*, Exhibition of five Myanmar artists, San Francisco, **USA**
- 2007 *Burma Phoenix*, Group show of Myanmar artists, New York, **USA**
- 2007 *Contemporary Art from Myanmar*, Group show of Myanmar artists, Washington, **USA**
- 2007 *Art from Myanmar*, Group show of Myanmar artists, Princeton, New York, **USA**
- 2007 *Planet Earth Exhibition*, Tian Mangzi & Zaw Win Pe, **Hong Kong**
- 2007 *Myanmar Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Group Show, Chiang Mai, Thailand
- 2008 *Serenity*, Solo Exhibition, Ernst & Young Solution LLP, **Singapore**
- 2009 "SPIRITUAL"—Two Myanmar Art Exhibition, The Arts House, **Singapore**
- 2010 *Malaysia's Art of Nature 2010*, Group Show, **Malaysia**
- 2010 *New Beginnings*, Group show, Princeton, **USA**
- 2010 *Myanmar Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Group Show, Chiang Mai University Art Center, Thailand
- 2013 *A Tale Of Two Tribes* with Nguyen Quang Huy at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand

## NGUYEN QUANG HUY

Nguyen Quang Huy was born in 1971 in Ha Tay and graduated from the Hanoi Fine Art University in 1996. He has participated in numerous exhibitions both in Vietnam and abroad as well as residencies in Germany, Australia and the USA. His artworks are included in the permanent collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan and the World Bank Art Program, USA.

### Selected International Art Exhibitions

- 1995 Substation Singapore, **Singapore**
- 1995 Kunsthalle Bielefeld, **Germany**
- 1995 Espace Paul Ricard, Paris, **France**
- 1996 Solo Show at Gallery Artist Unlimited, Bielefeld, **Germany**
- 1997 *Go to Japan for Touring* at Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- 1998 *Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, Vietnam Today* at Pacific Bridge, San Francisco, **USA**
- 1998 *Installation Salon Natasha* at Bau-Gallery, Helsinki, **Finland**
- 1998 *Plastic (& Other) Waste* at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
- 1998 *Paris Hanoi Saigon* at Pavillon des Arts Paris Musée, Paris, **France**
- 1998 *Made In Viet Nam* at Area Gallery, Paris, **France**
- 1998 Solo Show at Galerie Véronique Smagghe, Paris, **France**
- 1998 *3 Aus Hanoi* at Ludwig Forum Aachen, Aachen, **Germany**
- 1999 *Gap Viet Nam* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, **Germany**
- 1999 *Memory—Spirit—Pollution* at Mizuma Art Gallery, **Japan**
- 1999 *Nine Lives* at Casula Power House, Sydney, **Australia**
- 1999 *Authentic* at Digiframe, Cologne, **Germany**
- 2000 *Nguyen Quang Huy*—Solo Show at Galerie am Grossneumarkt, Hamburg, **Germany**
- 2000 *Mr. Nguyen* at Pacific Bridge, San Francisco, **USA**
- 2001 Solo Show at Gallery Frank & Lee, **Singapore**



- 2002 *Images Vietnam* at Landon Gallery, New York, **USA**
- 2004 *Vietnam Vandaag—Vietnam Today* at Art Gallery Caro and Gallery Amber, Leiden, **the Netherlands**
- 2004 *The New Spectrum: Paintings By Young Vietnamese Artists* at Gelabert Studios Gallery, New York, **USA**
- 2005 *Lotus Flower* at Hämeenlinna Art Museum, Wäinö Aaltonen Museum, Sinebrychoff Art Museum, **Finland**
- 2005 *Out Of Context* at Huntington Beach Art Center, California, **USA**
- 2005 *Access Hanoi* at Block 43 Studio, **Singapore**
- 2006 *Buddha's Hands: Buddhism In Contemporary Vietnamese Art* at Denise Bibro Fine Art, New York, **USA**
- 2007 *Art from Vietnam* at Gallery Clemens Thimme, Karlsruhe, **Germany**
- 2007 *Contemporary Art Exhibition of Nguyen Quang Huy and Nguyen Minh Thanh* at Gallery Maya, London, **England**
- 2008 *Women Temple* at the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (performance art project)
- 2009 *Lim Dim* at the Stenersen Museum, Oslo **Norway**
- 2010 *Connect: Vietnam at Ifa* Gallery, Berlin, Stuttgart, **Germany**
- 2012 *Vietnam and Korea Art World* at Eunam Museum of Art, Gwangju, **Korea**
- 2013 *A Tale Of Two Tribes* with Zaw Win Pe at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand



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