

SHADES OF GREY

Aung Kyaw Htet



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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg
Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition **SHADES OF GREY** by the Burmese artist Aung Kyaw Htet (b. 1965). The exhibition takes place in Bangkok on 24 April – 16 May, 2010 and features a series of oil paintings on canvas. In this exhibition, he departs from his former paintings series in bright colours and explores shades of grey.

Aung Kyaw Htet has emerged to become one of Burma's most important contemporary painters. His detailed depictions of novice monks and nuns are both realistic and sensitive as he captures their expressions with humanity and dignity. His paired down compositions and use of color emphasise the serenity of his Buddhist faith - an important foundation to his Burmese culture despite the disparaging conditions and poverty that prevails in Burma.

The essay has been written by the art historian and independent curator Shireen Naziree.

I take this opportunity to thank Aung Kyaw Htet for his collaboration, and Shireen Naziree for her contribution.

SHADES OF GREY

Shireen Naziree

Over the past decade, Aung Kyaw Htet has quietly produced some of the most coherent, nuanced and resonant bodies of art works from Burma. While his depictions of novice monks and nuns may unleash questions about the slippery social environment of Burma and the role of romanticism under such conditions; he instead mobilises a reserved and ordered look into the inquiry of social isolation and spiritual identity with a contemporary emotional mannerism that represents these subjects as irredeemably human. Aung Kyaw Htet's aesthetic is reservedly authored as his work explores an artistic intellectualism where composition and narrative are pitched together.

Though the feel and focus of Aung Kyaw Htet's work has long been fully developed, the visual dialogues in ***Shades of Grey*** reveal a deeper register of meaning under the surface of smiles and longing gazes. This latest body of work exemplifies his practice of expanding on his compositions as well as offering insights into his personal spiritual growth, which he deems to be relative to his art. Identifying with no particular artistic school or movement, Aung Kyaw Htet has distanced himself from the notions of the autonomous artistic ego as well as to the concept of a unique artistic self. Aung Kyaw Htet is like his paintings – quiet, but with a presence that manages to be both understated and powerful. And importantly - he has remained true to the principles of his beliefs

and as such attained much peace and calmness through the process of painting. It is within this self reflection that he has found the lines for his deeply personal artistic communication.

Aung Kyaw Htet has once again placed his poetic tools to work, uncovering a new vein of contemporary sensibility. As one moves through ***Shades of Grey***, an accumulation of meaning occurs as he speaks of a familiar subject. Though the backbone of the Burmese tradition of the compulsory monkhood for boys and young men may continue to be the story, the heart of this ongoing thematic connection is fundamental to his social environment and ultimately his artistic practice. His continuous exploration into the disciplines of the system of monkhood as well as by avoiding any instrumental use of his subjects and without succumbing to the shortcomings of representation has inspired him to render these works essentially in sombre hues, making them starkly different to any of his past works.

Radiance (p. 14) is one of the many artworks that exemplify Aung Kyaw Htet's ability to approach the formal appearance of the physical with a fresh visual dimension - thus creating an exchange that foregrounds earlier works. At the same time a painting such as ***Radiance*** embraces romanticism as the young monks eclipsed in the softness of their robes move gracefully across the canvass. His deliberate and sophisticated use of quiet tones serves as a reminder of the rigid discipline and solace that are fundamental to the institution of monkhood.



Aung Kyaw Htet's marked out compositions, which compose of glimpses of the Buddhist disciplines that are vital to his being – reveal his ability to create works that are both meditative yet sensual. Working primarily in monotonous, his paintings are graceful and spacious. At the same time, the body of work embraces measured and strong composure which he explained is a result of the cultivation and the growth of his own spiritual self. The expressionism in *A Solemn Prayer* (p. 28) for instance, displays a resistance to any outside interaction. Such realization is recognition of his ability to connect the sensitivity of seeing with the act of experiencing.

Aung Kyaw Htet regards both reality and the mundane as extremely valid. His paintings clearly communicate humanist messages through visuals that incorporate layered sequences, rich textures and unexpected rhythms. The intricate draping of the monks robes and the translucency of the fabrics in his paintings is not only representations of authenticity but has become fundamental formalities of his painterly executions. Such layering and content enable an ongoing process of discovery for the viewer and, presumably for the artist. As the formal register of his paintings swing from meditative to the joyous with varying temporalities and dashes of colour, they evoke a curious eye – allowing his subjects in works such as *A Silent Smile* (p.29) and *To Smile Again* (p. 31) to give off impressions of transparency that hint at their boyish charm and the possibility of knowing them more intimately.



Aung Kyaw Htet has for many years explored the terrain where minimalist composition and the realist style of rendering overlap. However, while meeting any expectations of authenticity and with his theme clear, Aung Kyaw Htet has infused his personal narrative through the subjects in his paintings. Because he sees that art and life are never divisible, he has united art and functionality and that has led him to some interesting biases. He lights up his paintings as he makes a piece of fruit, a flower or the typical monk's utensils glow with rich colours. All this, Aung Kyaw Htet draws together with a light touch, often linking his thoughts with sharing good deeds which is one of the main tenets of his Buddhist philosophy.



Still his dialogue is not solely dependent on the figurative characters. As if to reinforce this, Aung Kyaw Htet presents a painting such as *Reading in the Monastery* (p. 24) alongside his main body of work. This work showcases the mark of his oeuvre precisely for its surprising deliberateness whereby its elements have been planned and foreseen. Against the backdrop of a centuries'old monastery, the introduction of scale and architecture as a major element brings about a different ambiance.

Though he puts forward an aesthetic of the picturesque, it is Aung Kyaw Htet's authenticity that makes his works timeless while keeping them outside of politics. He is clear about his ideas that are reflections of his own experiences, memory and influences. Tellingly he has arrived here with the individualist consciousness that fuels his work. This is also where Aung Kyaw Htet's loyalty to his points of origin activates his Burmese history from within the present, allowing us to move away from the unbounded mediations that cut through the many issues that diversely affect his own social environment.

It is also Aung Kyaw Htet's desire that each person's experience of his art will be a self-constructed one that generates new meanings and associations for themselves.



Living by Faith, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 125 x 182 cm



Shades of Grey (1), 2008 | Oil on canvas | 116 x 150 cm



Shades of Grey (2), 2009 | Oil on canvas | 117 x 167 cm



Cheerful Novices, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 116 x 152 cm



Lone Monk in Grey, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 89 x 169 cm



Radiance, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 180 cm



Lead of the Procession, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 89 x 179 cm



Morning Alms Round, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 116 x 151 cm



Lotuses, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 117 x 167 cm



A Prayer, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 125 x 183 cm



Reflections, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 116 x 168 cm



Breaking Dawn, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 117 x 152 cm



A Prayer and a Bird, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 124 x 183 cm



Solemn in Grey (1), 2009 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 170 cm



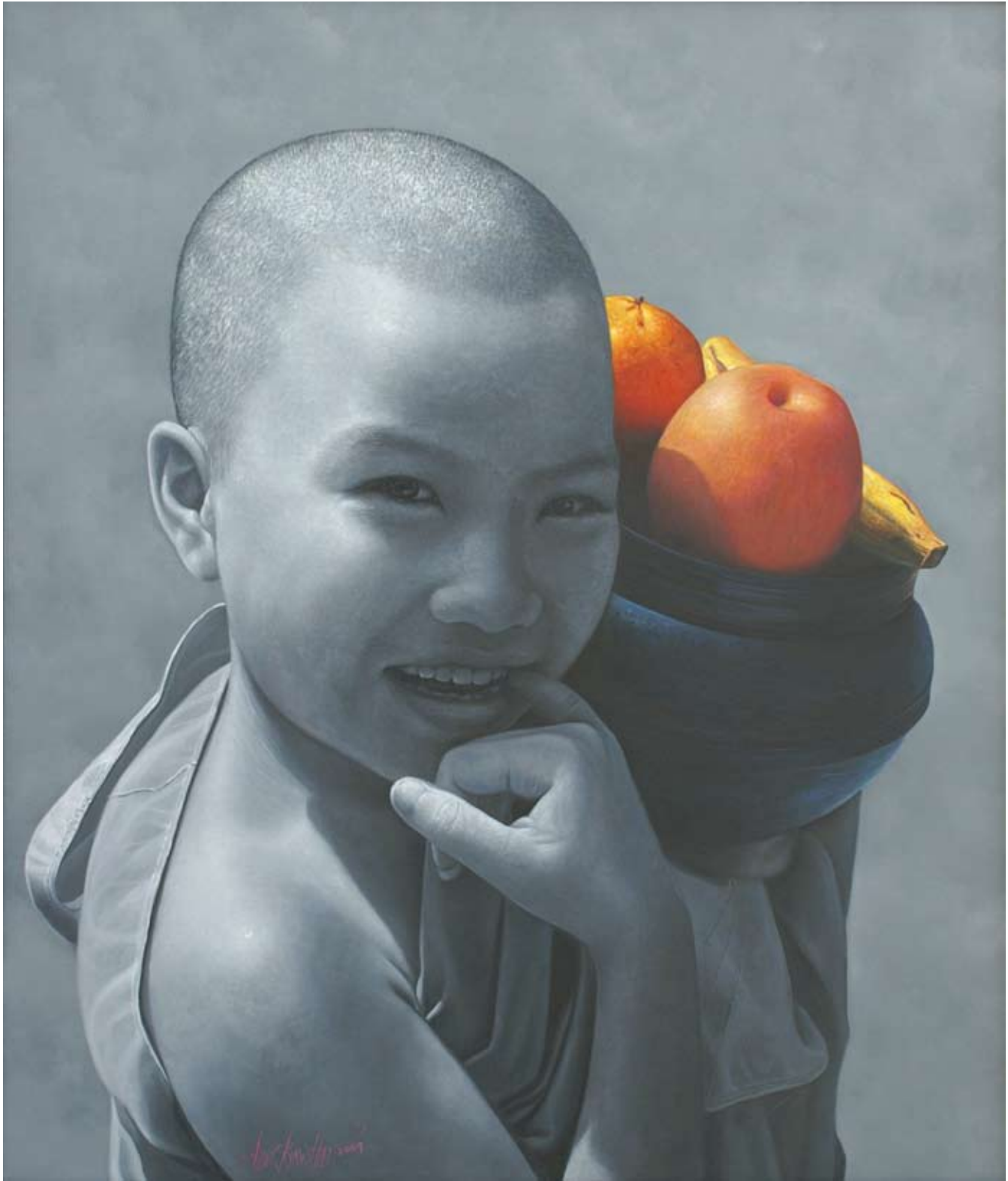
Solemn in Grey (2), 2009 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 170 cm



Reading in the Monastery, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 117 x 168 cm



Solemn in Grey (3), 2010 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 170 cm



A Shy Smile, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 86 x 101 cm



A Reserved Smile, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 86 x 114 cm



A Solemn Prayer, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 86 x 114 cm



Silent Smile, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 86 x 114 cm



Stillness, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 86 x 114 cm



To Smile Again, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 86 x 114 cm



Yellow in the Midst, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 110 x 223 cm



Sunbeam, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 110 x 224 cm



A Ray of Sunlight, 2009 | Oil on canvas | 110 x 224 cm



Pink in Grey, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 117 x 168 cm



Aung Kyaw Htet

Born 1965 in Myaungmya

Studies at the State School of Fine arts, Rangoon
and with art masters U Thukha and U Aung Moe

Selected Art Exhibitions

- 2002 – *Burmese Days* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok

- 2003 – Group exhibition - **Singapore**
 - *Shades of Asia* at HKFinearts - **Hong Kong**

- 2004 – *Burmese Master Paintings*, with U Lun Gywe at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok

- 2006 – Art Taipei – **Taiwan**
 - *Spirit of Burma* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok

- 2008 – Art Singapore 2008 – **Singapore**
 - Solo show: *Burmese Inspirations* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok
 - *Spiritual Spaces* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok

- 2009 – The India Art Summit – New Delhi, **India**
 - Solo show: *The Silent Journey* at the Red Gallery – **Dubai, UAE**
- 2010 – Solo show: *Shades of Grey* at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok
 - Art Monaco'10 – Special Edition – **Monaco**

Museum Collections

The National Museum of Burma

The National Art Gallery of Malaysia



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