



Artists:  
San Minn  
Aye Ko  
Phyoe Kyi  
Nge Lay

Curator:  
Shireen Naziree



# TRADITION OR CHANGE

An Exhibition of Conceptual Art from Myanmar



# TRADITION OR CHANGE

An Exhibition of Conceptual Art from Myanmar

Thavibu Gallery

16 November – 14 December, 2013

Artists: San Minn, Aye Ko, Phyo Kyi, Nge Lay

Curator: Shireen Naziree



Published 2013 by  
Thavibu Gallery Co., Ltd  
Silom Galleria, Suite 308  
919/1 Silom Road, Bangkok 10500, Thailand  
Tel. 66 (0)2 266 5454, Fax. 66 (0)2 266 5455  
Email. [info@thavibu.com](mailto:info@thavibu.com), [www.thavibu.com](http://www.thavibu.com)

Layout by Wanee Tipchindaichai, Copydesk, Thailand

Copyright Thavibu Gallery  
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 in writing from the  
publisher

# FOREWORD

**Jørn Middelborg**

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery has the pleasure of presenting the current catalogue and exhibition, TRADITION OR CHANGE by four contemporary Myanmar artists: San Minn, Aye Ko, Phyoe Kyi and Nge Lay. The exhibition takes place in Bangkok, Thailand, on 16 November – 14 December, 2013.

Since 2010 the political situation in Myanmar has undergone changes in many areas, initiated by the current President Thein Sein. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, and there is cautious optimism – something that has not been seen in the country since the military takeover in 1962. The exhibition TRADITION OR CHANGE highlights the crossroads that the country and people face. Will it be a complete break with the old ways, or will the country follow the path of tradition? The whole country faces this dichotomy, though artists are often the first to most acutely sense a change of direction.

The general assumption and the hopes are that if Myanmar endorses the changes, it will benefit the country at large. However for the vast majority of Myanmar's citizens, unemployment and poverty continue to prevail.

San Minn is one of Myanmar's most noted senior artists. A founding member of the Gangaw Village Group, his eclectic paintings highlight the disparities within Myanmar's social structures.

Aye Ko is a mid-career artist who has made his impression through painting, performance, video art and photography. He is founder of the New Zero Art Space in Yangon and one of the most internationally recognized artists from Myanmar.

Phyoe Kyi is a conceptual artist, who is highly regarded for his video and animation films. He uses images of himself and his mother in the series The Saga to focus on challenges within his society.

Nge Lay is a young female artist who is apt at reading the developments in Myanmar. She works in several kinds of media, most often in conceptual photography and print, though also installation work and sculpture.

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.

# TRADITION OR CHANGE

**Shireen Naziree**

During the 1960s, when some of her neighbors were creating vibrant and relevant environments to serve their artistic and cultural needs, Myanmar's art was being condemned to a cult of expressionism, veiled by elements intrinsic to the politics of communication and thus unable to interact with any movements of international significance.

Consequently Myanmar artists and cultural practitioners became immersed in a debate over their national identity amidst military rule and perhaps most significantly the sometimes agonizing debate over the development of resurgent art movements. Artists were compelled to confront Myanmar's changing image of isolation wrought by the intrusiveness of politics and economics, but it was traditional values that sustained and became the coherent source of their cultural territory.

Despite the lack of contact with international artistic encounter and some weakening of the sense of cultural endeavor, leading artists and intellectuals were compelled to re-articulate cultural and artistic discourse along its own terms. And as the sense of national formation disintegrated, an uncomfortable relationship grew between public and private.

Yet the modern arts were energized by revolutionary struggle. There emerged artists who would globalize themselves, not because of their utopian sense of the international, but rather because of their own relationship with Myanmar's cultural tradition and its inherent potential that did not necessarily fit into the conventions of mainstream internationalism



**Phyo Kyi**

En Route, 2013

Video still, 8.09 minutes video

Artists started exploring the ideals of alternate forms of artistic expressionism and particularly conceptual art. This avant-garde stimulated by artists' inner visions actually shared common principles with Theravada Buddhism whereby traditional architects and artisans often executed their ideas beyond the realm of realism, as mythical topics were favored over historical ones. The concerns of these new modernists through the years leading to

the 70s and 80s remained linked to an ideology of plurality, and from their visions encapsulated a new freedom for individualism to the ideals and context of the existing socio-political equations.

Contemporarily, the search for a transposition of the visual arts would delineate new artistic notions, which would provide fertile ground for cultural exchanges amongst a handful of innovative cultural practitioners whose outcomes remain tangible to this day.



**Aye Ko**

Floating Human, 2011  
Video Still, 15 minutes  
video

The lack of synthesis and the absence of cultural institutions fostered the birth of self-organized groups and spaces. These spaces did not come in opposition to a specific system because that system did not exist: they filled a void. This self-organization attitude realized the establishment of a few but very significant collectives that challenged the conservative boundaries of mainstream art.

The major shift in Myanmar's current political environment has been defining and artists now find themselves charged with a different position and function. It follows that in the relationship between art and politics – when the nature of politics changes, then art's identity and potential changes too. It is also readily apparent that the current political scene is in a sense a symptom of both a possible collapse of the old cultural structures, through which traditional values have been articulated socially, and the disappearance of cultural narratives that could offer clear alternatives for the future.

And while political activists are busy turning Myanmar's politics into something tantamount, art and culture are busy turning themselves into vehicles of communication. With Myanmar's current political analysis and a general lack of organizational coherence, it is not surprising that artists begin to question their society's cultural values and ask themselves how they might contribute to the political moment through what they do.

# ARTISTS

## SAN MINN

San Minn, an original member of the Gangaw Village Group, established in 1979, is one of Myanmar's most internationally recognized senior artists. 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.

San Minn treasures history and tradition, which he visually articulates through *Tradition or Change*. With firm regard for the notion of art as a means to establish dialogue and with traditional values being part of a distinguishing ingredient of Myanmar's social character, Sann Minn has sought to preserve the collective memory of these values. Through this process, he develops a dialogue with his community as he reacts to Myanmar's current ambivalence about their future.

As an artist whose practice matured in the late 1960s, he is conscious that the contrasts between the observed and the experienced space of popular painting genres of his time are being surpassed by the innovations of a new generation. Sann Minn thus questions the commodification of cultural values as well as current art practices that to an extent disregard their points of origin.



**Stream of Fashion, 2012** | Acrylic on canvas | 86 x 120 cm





**Culture Killers, 2012** | Acrylic on canvas | 86 x 147 cm

For *Tradition or Change* San Minn has built narratives by using the past as classical ephemera. The carefully positioned traditional nuances in his paintings are like fleeting thoughts made solid as his art engages in a feminist dialogue that stresses the centrality of contemporary Myanmar women. *Kiss Me Quick*, for example, communicates a distinctly feminine experience yet it is also charged with the emotional energy of the artist as he exposes the realms of the female body. The branches of the 'Kiss me quick' plant symbolize the hidden dangers of Myanmar woman's newfound freedom of expression.

Sann Minn expresses an equally tender relationship with the details of traditional costume and its modernization, which he has arranged as poignant contrasts in *Stream of Fashion*. The painting has a certain melancholy, though it is one of choice rather than sentiment as the subject holds up a defiant mirror to the artist's lament and the twisting contours of culture's social role. Myanmar's current social environment is ever more focused on new forms of organization. A broad overview of this is typified in *Culture Killer* through which he offers a critical gaze into foreign influences on the cultural circuits of his society. He regards this influence as leading to the ultimate collapse and disappearance of traditional values that will mostly impact the women of Myanmar.

The cultural explosion of the last two decades, as Myanmar artists move into the future from a more conservative past, has seen a new generation of artists emerge. They understand the need for structural loosening within the arts hierarchy, particularly in light of the pressing social and cultural changes caused by the inevitable march towards globalization, and their own desire to work beyond the complexities of their given socio-economic landscape.



**Kiss Me Quick, 2011**

Acrylic on canvas

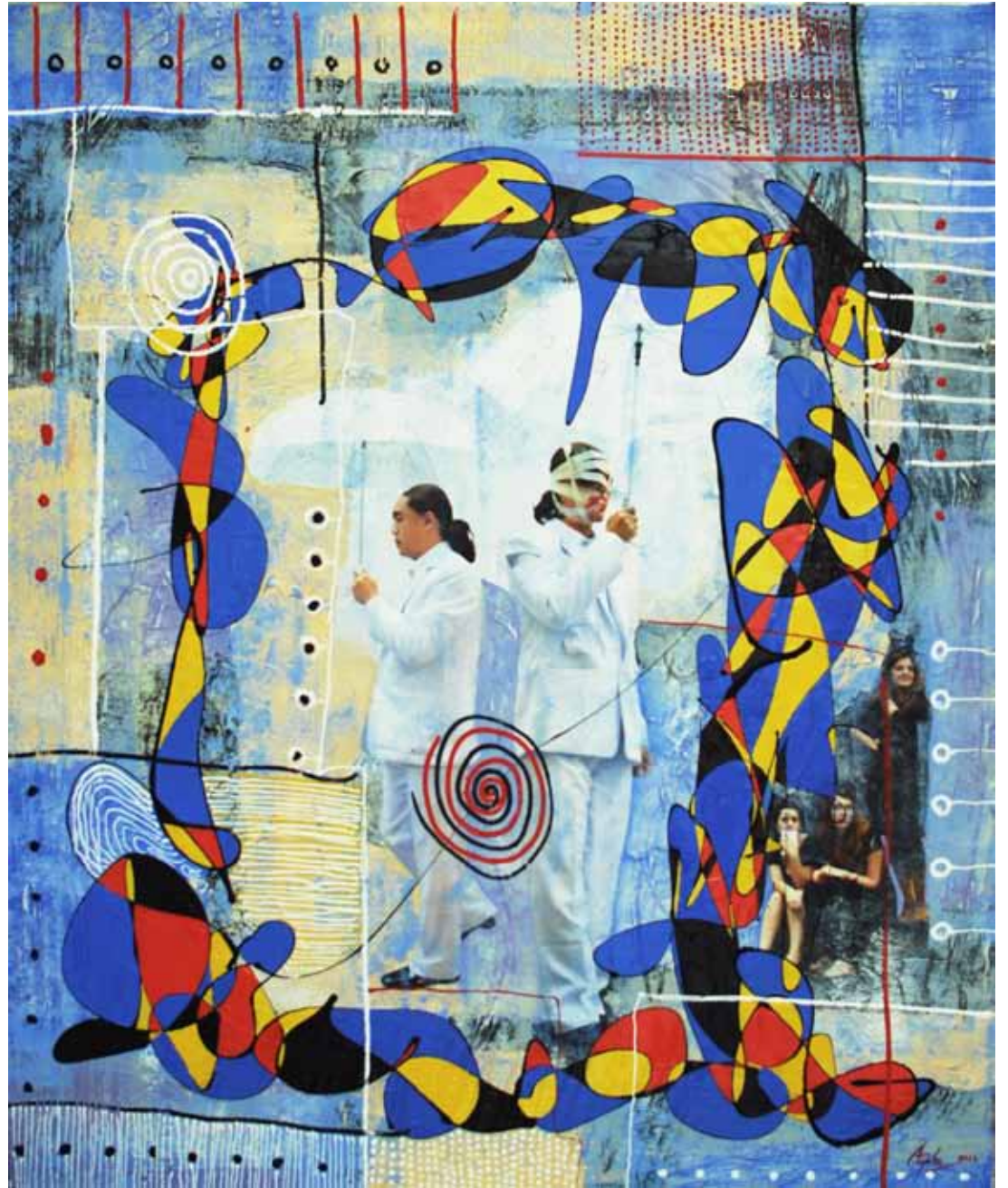
86 x 120 cm

## AYE KO

Faced with an arts system saturated with cultural commentators, Myanmar artists look beyond traditional institutions for their own opportunities. And despite the once limited access to the outside world, artists such as Aye Ko now incorporate within their work wide-ranging references, no longer seen by the establishment as a threat to Myanmar's cultural integrity.

Though Aye Ko's work is not rooted in traditional history but rather in social circumstances, it is about the assertion of his persona in relationship to a changing society. His earlier works were often site specific and political. The actions he chose boldly defined his position as a citizen of Myanmar at a painful time of oppression – now peppered over by promises of democracy.

For the past two decades, Aye Ko's practice has interrogated the meeting of politics and nature in the broadest sense. Generally viewed as a performance artist, Aye Ko has sought to stimulate the viewer to cross the line into his personal realm. In *Tradition or Change*, Aye Ko investigates the potential to extend the body as a catalyst as he thinks his culture through. His body of work here comprises two mixed-media works, a video and a performance. The work was produced over a period of two years in Myanmar and France where Aye Ko performed in Lyon.



**What is Peace?, 2013** | Photo print and mixed media on canvas | 152 x 183 cm

While it contains footprints of the past and makes tangible the amorphous shape of that experience in the structure of his works, it is also a representation of an environment shaped by traces of human action and layers of intervention. The work condenses references to the complexities of Myanmar's political and economic histories. 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.

Perhaps more interesting is the way he has repositioned his work and practice to reveal his past experience as a painter and by doing so established a new paradigm for Myanmar contemporary art. In fact, in *Restrict* he holds a mirror up to society to suggest that, regardless of the values of tradition, very little has changed in Myanmar but that change is inevitable.

There is no doubt that many artists find refuge in the idea of beauty. However, despite the fact that most artists in Myanmar stick faithfully to a literary model of artwork, in recent years, art as an open-ended concept has been galvanized – an indication of the enthusiasm and awareness of art as a generative force.



**Restriction, 2013** | Photo print and mixed media on canvas | 183 x 152 cm

## PHYOE KYI

Phyoe Kyi has always felt free to create his own contexts, a fact that illustrates how he brings to the center what was previously outside. Phyoe Kyi is renowned for the proliferation of the non-formal artistic mode of animation and for his ability to create his own contexts and nuances of meaning.



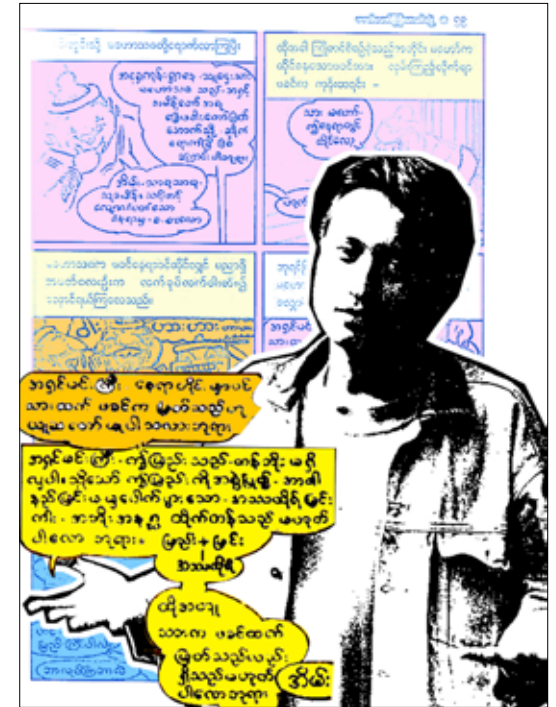
**The Saga (1), 2013**

Acrylic silk screen print on canvas  
91 x 122 cm



**The Saga (2), 2013**

Acrylic silk screen print on canvas  
91 x 122 cm



**The Saga (3), 2013**

Acrylic silk screen print on canvas  
91 x 122 cm

For *Tradition or Change* the physical artwork takes its place besides Phyoe Kyi's personal biography, Myanmar's political history and the tradition of comic books. Known for his animation, through his series *The Saga*, Phyoe Kyi's discursive context reconstructs a narrative that gives form to both his personal history and that of tradition. *The Saga* is inspired by the comic books of the late master painter, U Ba Kyi, which Phyoe Kyi's widowed mother would buy for her son as they came out each week.

Consisting of six animated works and a video installation, *The Saga* relates to the challenging social attitudes Phyoe Kyi and his mother faced and which he parallels both with Myanmar's ancient parliamentary system and its current political situation. Ironically this opened up an acute awareness of his socio-political environment, which is indicative of the generative power of the individualistic artistic models that he has embraced.



**The Saga (4), 2013**

Acrylic silk screen print on canvas  
91 x 122 cm



**The Saga (5), 2013**

Acrylic silk screen print on canvas  
91 x 122 cm



**The Saga (6), 2013**

Acrylic silk screen print on canvas  
91 x 122 cm

## NGE LAY

Like Phyo Kyi, Nge Lay is one of a younger generation of artists whose cultural manifestations are key to the reading of Myanmar's social territory. With the advent of digital technology, they investigate the consequences of traditional values by creating art within very contemporary processes. Nge Lay has created a body of work titled *The Past and The Present: From Either Side of the Wall – Existence and Non Existence*. *Endless Story* consists of photocolled portraits dating between the 1930s and 1970s and photographed in Thuyeddan, Panduan Township in Bago Division. These portraits are based on her research of the unresolved relationship between traditional lifestyles and modernity articulated through original photographic shots, and juxtaposed with the freedom of form that also suggests how life in rural Myanmar is changing. Nge Lay's photographs emphasize the intensity of her subjects in a precise fragment of time and space.



**Endless Story (1), 2013**

Photographic print on archival paper, edition of 5  
61.0 x 91.4 cm



**Endless Story (2), 2013**

Photographic print on archival paper, edition of 5  
61.0 x 83.0 cm

**Endless Story (3), 2013**

Photographic print  
on archival paper,  
edition of 5  
61.0 x 91.4 cm



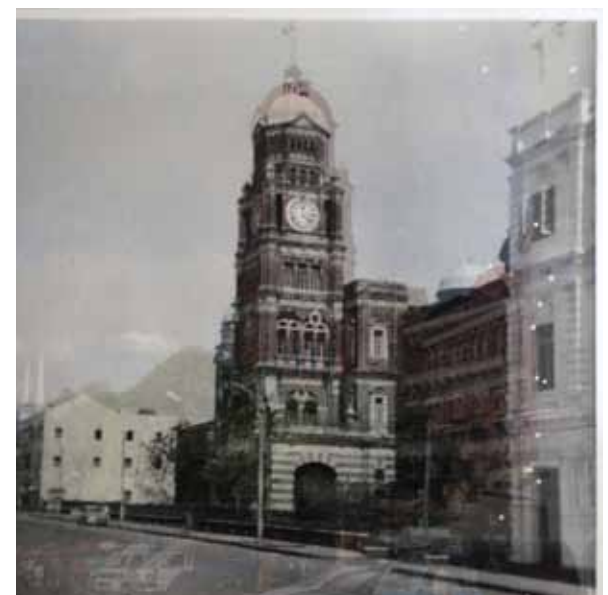
**Endless Story (4), 2013**

Photographic print  
on archival paper,  
edition of 5  
61.0 x 91.4 cm

Through her second photo essay titled Urban Story Nge Lay's focus is on iconic Colonial buildings in Yangon, such as the High Court, the Custom's Office and the City Hall – all constructed in the early 20th century. Though these buildings still stand, she has sieved temporary interactions with the current landscape so that the buildings surface as shadows. The weight of their concomitant association with the present is acknowledged only in the ability of tradition to survive time and space.

**Urban Story (1), 2013**

Photographic print  
on archival paper,  
edition of 5  
76.2 x 61.0 cm



**Urban Story (2), 2013**

Photographic print  
on archival paper,  
edition of 5  
61.0 x 61.0 cm



At the same time, Nge Lay's art further questions the codes of photographic practice as she initiates an interest in the relationship between the physically limited process of a photographic print and tactile experience; in doing so, she stretches the boundaries between tradition and change. The etiolated nostalgia of Nge Lay's photographs has a robust counterpart in the accompanying sculptures of school-children. The carved figurines may appear as ironical kitsch – however aesthetically they refer to traditional village craftsmanship. Such notions of art as a new dialogue between artists and the public have become a distinguishing ingredient of Nge Lay's art.



**Urban Story (3), 2013**

Photographic print on archival paper,  
edition of 5  
61.0 x 55.9 cm

---

The exaggeration of both Phyo Kyi and Nge Lay's artistic gestures are in proportion to the delicate nature and uncertainty of Myanmar's changing horizons.

During the past few years, a burgeoning group of artists have started to relate to the present more confidently. They have mastered all the concepts that used to be a novelty of the past, namely relational art, political art, social and site-specific art. When once their 'paralysis' would have left them ambivalent towards their socio-political culture, increasingly open communication is allowing a rediscovery of their roots. In today's Myanmar, artists observe reality from a physical as well as a mental point of view. While the past generation's innovations are not to be neglected, they use collective memory as a starting point to more pragmatically understand the collective territory.

## ARTISTS' BIODATA



### **SAN MINN**

*'An Artist must have loyalty, sincerity and confidence in his Art.'*

Renowned for his eclectic art, San Minn (1951) 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. A founding member of the Gangaw Village Group and the Inya Gallery of Art, San Minn is one of Myanmar's most important painters to emerge in the 1960s. He has been actively involved in nurturing art and literature since the late 1960s. San Minn has participated in numerous exhibitions in Myanmar and abroad. His art has been widely collected and is included in the permanent collection of the Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan.



### **AYE KO**

Aye Ko was born in 1963. Although trained in classical and traditional painting under the master artist U Min Soe, Aye Ko has established his international reputation through contemporary forms of expression that have become his hallmark. The artist has exhibited extensively, his notable shows include a solo exhibition in New York in 2002. A renowned performance artist, Aye Ko has participated almost annually in performance art festivals in Asia, the United States and Europe. His work is in numerous private collections internationally as well as in the private ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, Germany.

## PHYOE KYI

*'I attempt to put all my feelings into my art.'*

Phyoe Kyi was born in Taunggyi, Shan State, in 1977 and graduated with a BA (Painting) in 1998. Well known for his candid expressions and views, artistically articulated through video, film and installation, Phyoe Kyi is also a performance artist. Most renowned for his computer animation, Phyoe Kyi has participated in numerous art exhibitions in Myanmar and abroad, including the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial in 2005 as well as the 11<sup>th</sup> Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh in 2004. He was also a participant at the 2012 Radius of Art in Berlin where he performed his work *Once Upon a Time There Was Nothing*.



## NGE LAY

Born 1979 in Pyin Oo Lwin, Myanmar, Nge Lay holds a BA in Fine Art, having graduated from the National University of Art and Culture in 2003, and a BA in Economics from the Yangon East University in 2004. Nge Lay has been an active participant in numerous exhibitions in Myanmar since 2002 and since 2009 her photographic works have been included in several notable art projects in Singapore, Korea and Vietnam. In 2011 she had her first solo show in Tokyo, Japan, and in January 2012 she was a finalist in the Sovereign Art Asian Prize in Singapore. Nge Lay is amongst the most promising Southeast Asian conceptual artists and is a participant in the current Singapore Biennale, 2013.





B1G1 - Thavibu Gallery has partnered with Buy 1 Give 1 Free, which implies that when you buy an artwork from Thavibu Gallery you will automatically give a donation to a charity in the B1G1 network. Donation from one painting purchased provides one blind person with accommodation and shelter for one month. [www.b1g1.com](http://www.b1g1.com)



[www.thavibu.com](http://www.thavibu.com)

Thavibu Gallery

Silom Galleria, # 433

919/1 Silom rd, Bangkok 10500

Tel +662 266 5454

Fax +662 266 5455

Email: [info@thavibu.com](mailto:info@thavibu.com)

[Facebook.com/thavibu.gallery](https://www.facebook.com/thavibu.gallery)

Twitter: [@thavibu](https://twitter.com/thavibu)

Free iPad and iPhone App