



CHAW EI THEIN and HTEIN LIN

STORIES OUT OF BURMA

Thavibu Gallery, 13 November – 4 December, 2010
Curator: Shireen Naziree



WET PAINT



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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, www.thavibu.com

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STORIES OUT OF BURMA

Shireen Naziree

The identification of artists with exalted yearnings is typically associated with freedom of speech and place. Their visual dialogues are abound with sensory journeys where geographical place is intertwined with meta-physical space – often the silent and contemplative arena that allows for their narratives to be read with all the sensibilities that have been applied to their art. Many contemporary artists, mobilized by the art world's globalization, often unknowingly enlist the nomadic in their work. In contrast, how precisely does an exiled artist encode this position?

Stories Out Of Burma provokes the geographical distance as well as the space between the hidden and the visible through the art of Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein – Burma's most profiled exiled artists. With Htein Lin in London and Chaw Ei Thein in New York, the artists live and work at the crossroads of the global art arena. Discounting their vantage points, both their artistic exchanges remain deeply intertwined with their individual and social relationship with their native Burma. Through their individual and personal introspective to the literal and equating social environment of their homeland, *Stories Out Of Burma* invokes a consideration of how history and place can control and limit the experience of freedom as much as physical barriers.

For questions of emotion - human experiences and authenticity are integral to the framing of art practice in order to communicate meaning. Inscribed within the

personal histories of Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein are their own nostalgia which they give meaning to through the pursuit of visual culture that has variously annexed painting and conceptual art practices. For both artists the use of specific media at certain points of their careers signified their realism of human experience and at times emotions they had to negotiate. As the obscurity and the fragile nature of their traditional socio-political environment is called into question – the conditions of their artistic practices tell us a great deal about their dialogue and their relationship with other cultures. But more importantly, together with forces from within, they create a very individual third space that allows for glimpses of situations – rarely accessible otherwise. As such, both their artistic practices from the periphery are drawn into the closely knit Burmese Diaspora while steering a careful course between the foreign and the familiar; producing transcultural hybrids that are engaging on varied levels, reminding us of the hardship of human existence.

Stories Out Of Burma presents various sites of contention in terms of identity, geography and social history as both Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein find refuge in art as well as enriching the experience of art - by making it more responsive through the issues they raise from their perspectives. Beyond art, they are bound together by a social history and common currency that makes their aesthetic expressions unique in the broader considerations of Burmese contemporary art practice. They both

view Burma with endless reflection about life experience as crucial for understanding the nature of their artistic debates due to the connection between cultural and ideological positions.

Contemporaries at the University of Rangoon, both Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein graduated in law in 1994. In principle a law degree should have offered them a firm foundation for prospective careers; however they were both grounded in more artistic and culturally configured spaces. Chaw Ei Thein did explore the possibilities of practicing as a lawyer while Htein Lin realized from the outset that the defining temperament of the practice of law corresponded best to the rhetoric of performance art.

Though both artists' engagement with more traditional artistic concerns were present since early in their childhood, their socio-political mindfulness set them apart from the mainstream and the art scene in general, especially at a time when Burma's social history was being called into question. They openly voiced concerns over the political imbalances that have resulted in the

endless injustices to the Burmese people. With these visions and imperatives, as artists they were able to rewrite their expressionism from a more hybrid perspective that would ultimately see them both being exiled from Burma.

Both artists had been regular participants in group art exhibitions in and around Rangoon with art collectives such as the Gangaw Village Art group and on university campus in 1994 and 1995. However their first combined artistic collaboration and one of their most notable would be ten years later in May 2005. Their street performance *Mobile Art Gallery and Mobile Market* in Rangoon resulted in their detention by the authorities for five days. Together and individually their performance art has been regarded as provocative and telling; earning them sound recognition in Burma and abroad. Probably their most notable piece has been *On the Table*, performed to an international audience in Rangoon later that year. Chaw has described *On the Table* as being one of their most significant pieces of performance art.



◀
On the Table, 2005
Chaw Ei Thein and
Htein Lin
Rangoon

Htein Lin had developed *On the Table* much earlier – having performed it for the entertainment of his peers during his years as a political exile in the jungles of Burma and while in prison – 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; her attempts to cooperate with the ruling junta, the fear of her supporters that such actions would damage her reputation and the ultimate dissatisfaction of the government by Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi's refusal of their offers that finally led to a mistrust between the two opposing factions. They would later in 2007 perform *On the Table* in London during the opening of Htein Lin's

exhibition of his prison series at Asia House.

Amassed and collated, both their artistic practices take on strong meaning here as the central position of performance art is emotionally moving and offers aesthetic qualities that commensurate the relationship between experience and representation. The immediacy of performance art has allowed both Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein to reveal hidden truths and reach a wider audience. Another element most apparent in their artistic vocabulary is the fluid status with which they are able to reconfigure their representations. *Stories Out Of Burma* makes tangible the shape of some of these experiences and holds a mirror up to the complexities and contradictions that they encompass.



◀
Htein Lin
Scale of Justice, 2009
Singapore



◀
Htein Lin
Biology of Art, 2007
000235 Series

Htein Lin states that art and creativity was something he was born with and as such has been an integral part of his world. Very much a self taught artist, he is well known for his iconic painterly style and his use of unconventional materials and methods. While in a refugee camp in the jungle, Htein Lin met the Mandalay artist, Sit Nyein Aye who taught him the formal aspects of painting. Besides teaching him the fundamentals of drawing, Sit Nyein Aye also exposed Htein Lin to the artworks of foreign artists, such as "The Sunflowers" by Vincent van Gogh, which he would verbally describe as they had no reading materials.

Even then, the politics of Htein Lin's work was of a

different order altogether. His work explored the subtle densities and surfaces of his manifest world, investing in every detail with his full attention. The numerous paintings that he executed during the period he termed as "Biology of Art" were his years as a political refugee and prisoner. At the time, Htein Lin's work investigated the potential to extend the body's senses by subverting or transforming their functions. While in the prison ward of a hospital in Mandalay, his cellmate Soe Moe Naing, who was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, gave him his shirt which would serve as his canvas. Another cellmate, the poet Maung Tin Thit who had trained as a doctor taught Htein Lin basic anatomy. In this series, paintings map the route of food through tortured passages into a stomach filled with thorns and razor blades. But the heart is full of flowers.

Such richness in the choice of his materials and the atricality of his approach continues to come together in a body of work that conveys both enormous self-confidence and the need to question. His diverse pictorials continue to lend themselves to the complexities and the transposition of cultural values though Htein Lin has never been overly concerned about



▲
People's Desire (1), 2010
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas
91 x 91 cm

▶
People's Desire (2), 2010
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 61 cm

being pretentious about being an artist; he maintains an unnostalgic erasure of the hierarchy of art. This erasure became fundamental to the shift in perception Htein Lin's art has opened up so many years later. He observes everything, especially intentional human activity which often anchors his diverse subjects. The monoprint painting style, using his fingers, that he developed during this period recurs in paintings such as in *People's Desire* and in *How do you Find London*.

Htein Lin's experiences allow him to construct contemporary versions of a parallel world with his own language that remakes itself as flexible and knowing to his viewers. *How do you Find London* is testament to that as he recasts his pictorial with the pace and proximity of his lived experience. The title of the painting is telling in itself as the common question "How do you find London?" was one that Htein Lin constantly encountered when he first moved to the city in 2006. A topography of London's iconic landmarks that evokes





▲ How do you Find London (in the snow)?, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 91 cm

an interesting negotiation across the city, a mapping punctuated and anchored traces his own involvement with the city. For example, he has replaced the statue of Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square with that of Lord Buddha, indicating his preference for a representation of peace over that of war. Thus the object of Htein Lin's expressionism becomes the screen enabling the emergence and negotiations of an otherness.

This type of emergence is precisely what recurs in *How do you Find Bangkok*. Rather than a survey of sites, Htein Lin's works are often an index of encounters and events that he juxtaposes with his own cultural



▲ How do you Find Bangkok?, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
101 x 101 cm

encodings of vision. In this context, he felt himself emotionally stranded within Bangkok's telescopic landscapes and diminished cultural landmarks. As he draws comparisons with the flat and placid pace of Rangoon, the imagery in the artwork compress and distribute various layering, as he acknowledges his interest in the political turmoil between the Thai government and the Red Shirt protestors. He equally recognizes the negative impact that the amplifying of such events may have on Burma's own fragile political climate as the two countries share common spiritual values.

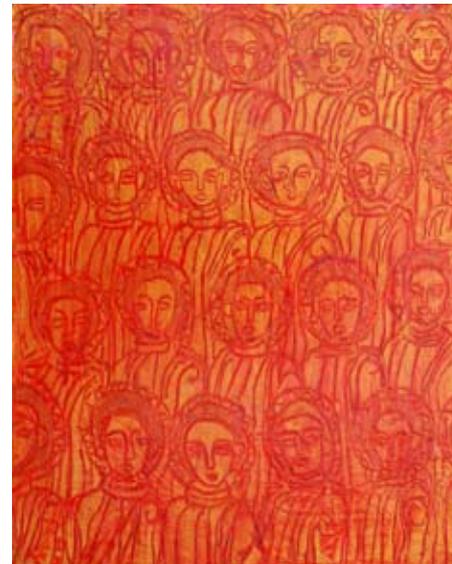


▲
**Homage to the Monks
of Burma (1), 2010**
 Acrylic and gold leaf
 on canvas
 91 x 91 cm

More on point is knowing Htein Lin's resourcefulness in conceiving and executing alternatives in both de- and re-construction such as old prison uniforms as canvasses and using his body parts to apply pigments. But despite such juxtapositioning of ideas and material he is able to accommodate unallied approaches such as the cross circuiting of the conventional identity of painting practices as in *People's Desire*. Here, imprints of his hands are stamped with symbols of Buddhism

and Burma; the bodhi leaf, the wheel of dharma, peacock feathers, coconut fronds and decorative awnings of old palaces - all symbols of peace, yet paradoxes to the negative propaganda of the current Burmese government. Similarly, he further punctuates the connectedness between his body and his art in his performance piece *Homage to the Monks of Burma*, whereby he traces the silhouettes of monks by outlining his body in a linear plane on a black wall while recording the performance through time lapsed photography. Htein Lin sees such expressionism as crucial for understanding the nature of his artistic debates due to the connection between cultural and political positions, which many would wish to remain out of sight. While he does not regard himself as a political activist, politics has provided a voice for his art.

▼ **Saffron Revolution, 2009**
 Acrylic on canvas
 24 x 30 cm



Looking at Htein Lin's work, what comes to the fore is his discourse that centers on belief and experience often defining an underlying and constant theme of his oeuvre. The monk led protest marches against Burma's brutal military regime in September 2007 dubbed the Saffron Revolution represented an instinctive aversion of Burma's brutal military regime. His piece *Saffron Revolution* is a result of such reflection because as Htein Lin explains, "I paint from my experience – I experience politics, I live in a real world and it interests me. I experience Buddhism. I experience new places and I create images from them. The Saffron Revolution is such an example. The image of monks coming together is a very strong one. Respect for them is part of my personal culture." The depiction of monks may seem as an obvious connection to make between Burma and its contemporary painting practices. However as a continuous subject what Htein Lin brings out is a distinction between a culturally given subject and the achievement of deep content.

Htein Lin is ever conscious of the ways in which art responds to the world as an invaluable tool for locating ourselves in the ever shifting now, so as to not lose track of current events. By resisting the typical unified narrative of monks, he instead offers a cultural parity with contemporary modern art movements by allowing it the same degree of multiplicity and the right to own its own internal contradictions.



◀ Homage to the Monks of Burma (2), 2010
Acrylic on canvas
91 x 91 cm



◀ Meditators, 2009
Mixed media
(acrylic, shan paper)
on canvas
100 x 70 cm

The richness of his chosen materials such as gold leaf and the arrangement of repetitive forms in *Homage to the Monks of Burma* and also in *Meditators* have a quasi mystical purity born of their very simplicity, tacitly encouraging questioning and reaching for the possibility of a hidden power. While such imageries may symbolize silence, it also signifies a need for much deeper questioning of identity and situation. Together they form an index of forms that also suggest the powerful symbols of peace. This meeting of mathematical purity and vibrant color is quintessentially Htein Lin.

Htein Lin has embraced art's ability to reveal complex and often universal meaning, and to practice the ideals to freedom of expression even when in his case was ironically when he was a prisoner. "You might think that I had not experienced freedom of expression in Burma. But I did experience it when in prison, for we could not be imprisoned for expressing ourselves freely and free from the constraints of commercialism." And if democracy is an expression of a form of 'ideal' in the traditional sense, Htein Lin does not contest it but draws attention to contradictions and rules that underline democracy.

Multivalent and open-ended, Htein Lin's art practice is as close as an artist comes to phrase issues and experiences that drive his work into readings that have compositional rhythms, which compliment the eye. Though the spirit of his art follows Burma's alienation, his interest in art making has grown to a high degree of "direct symbolism" as it triggers history and actuality, his homeland,



▲
Angry Wave, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 60 cm

nationalism as well as personal and collective memory as Burma remains his most important symbol.

For both Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein living outside of Burma has impacted their art which has compelled them to consider how formal tensions between figuration and expressionism can assume a larger socio-political meaning.

Htein Lin's radical pictorial is open and pragmatic with shapes that play off each other by repeating variations. Based on capturing events and experiences, his formalism relate directly to the social contexts that encompass his world. Chaw Ei Thein on the other hand, expresses a very different formalism that is imbued with feminism and expresses her concerns for social justice in a less obvious way. Even though Chaw Ei Thein's pictures operate aesthetically at an opposite pole to Htein Lin's, they are similar in their annihilating absence from Burma. Her art interacts with interpersonal relationships affected by her socio-political environment. The academics of color organization, surface and structure are her necessary tools as she interweaves meaning and principles into a bigger social picture.

Chaw Ei Thein's early artistic renderings have been somewhat traditional, based on the romantic ideal of the artist's capability of capturing original and spiritual aspects of the world that would otherwise remain invisible. Her interest in art began at an early age under the guidance and tuition of her father, the painter and art academic Maung Maung Thein, which led her to win numerous international awards as a young artist. The exhibiting of her paintings alongside those of her father at Rangoon's Lawkhanat Gallery in 1991 represented her formal graduation into the art world. In Burma it is common for the work of young artists to generally reflect the influences of their mentor; Chaw was instead encouraged by her father to explore a brighter and broader palette that would represent

her own ideas and look beyond the comfort of her social environment. Though this individual approach would be pivotal for her international career, in Burma it was regarded with differing response.

Chaw has at times been labeled as being a political activist and criticized for mingling art and politics. Like Htein Lin her creativity is deeply enmeshed in her life experiences and she stands true to her convictions. Forever searching for ways to take personal control in her artistic expressions have been challenging in the restrictive Burma's socio-political climate. Trying to escape from the realization that many innocent people are imprisoned for their beliefs and democratic actions along with the current living environment in Burma has been part of her inner conflict, and she attests that art is a constructive means of highlighting that socio-political realm.

While Chaw Ei Thein's work is not overtly political; she has developed an artistic portfolio with a series of forms when juxtaposed, address contemporary realities through careful intimation and illusiveness. *September Sweetness* the site-specific installation created for the 2008 Singapore Biennale by herself and Richard Streitmatter-Tran was a response to the 2007 protest by monks in Burma 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 Burmese people.



▲ September Sweetness
Singapore Biennale, 2008

Chaw Ei Thein's arrival in New York in 2009 on a residency program under the auspices of the Asian Cultural Council, New York was prelude by an international profile that has been aligned within scholarly as well as artistic contexts. Chaw easily absorbed herself into the eclectic art scene of the metropolis, despite setbacks of language and cultural differences. Through her conceptual art practice, she articulated the psychological dimensions that have

impacted her personal world. Her installation *Bed* in New York in 2009, gave out a very different model of engagement as the literal meaning of the work (a bed composed of a multitude of red bell peppers) perversely played with a montage of sensuous fragments of personal memory. These elements of the work revealed her extraordinary flexibility and ability to excavate from otherwise insignificant moments such as her daily traveling on New York's subway.



▲ Bed
New York, 2009



▲ Far Away in NYC @ 231 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan (1), 2010
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 100 cm

New York may seem to be a city of wealth, but this dynamic leads one to consider what effect these economic forces have on artists who work and live in the city. In her series of autobiographical paintings *"Far Away in New York"* Chaw explores the emotional territory and the process of attempting to earn identification and gain a new presence within herself

after her art residency ended earlier this year. With her passport impounded and threats of imprisonment a reality should she return to Burma, New York has presented itself within a very different perspective. With this uncertainty underscoring her displacement and financial future, she has only had her art through which she is able to evaluate and express these formal



▲ Far Away in NYC @ 231 West 25th Street,
Chelsea, Manhattan (2), 2010
Acrylic and mixed media (sequin) on canvas
80 x 100 cm

tensions. Despite her fears and insecurity she continues her attempts to reclaim a modernist dream against a difficult reality that encompasses values conflicting with her own.

Chaw has referred to art as the plenipotentiary of freedom and as such she has embraced both arts'



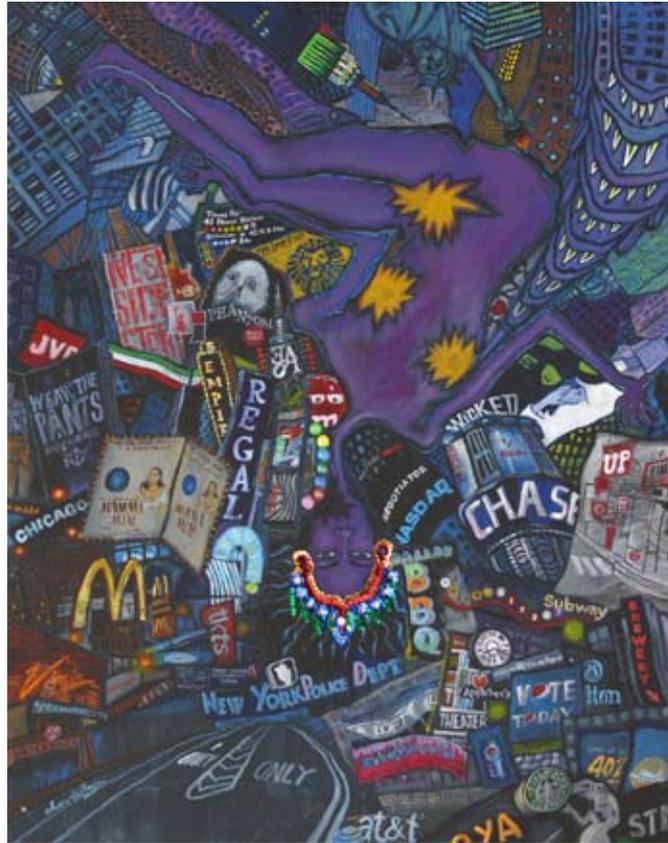
▲ Far Away in NYC @ 86-2, 57th Road,
Elmhurst, Queens, 2010
Acrylic and mixed media (shawl) on canvas
80 x 100 cm

ability to reveal complex and universal meaning to freedom of expression. In contrast Chaw humbly posits her inability to have her voice heard – a muteness she has encoded in all her paintings by obliterating her mouth and exposing herself as a nude. She questions how she might gain knowledge from New York. Once again she chooses to rely on distribution and delegation as this



▲ Far Away in NYC - Chaw Ei Thein
in New York, 2010
Acrylic and mixed media (sequins) on canvas
80 x 100 cm

body of work becomes an index of encounters juxtaposed with very personal and emotional encodings. While her work reflects her own displacement and personal life, a more appropriate way to look at these paintings is through the idea of the self as a multiple. “We play many roles. In my studio, I am an artist. When I am commuting on New York’s subway I am someone



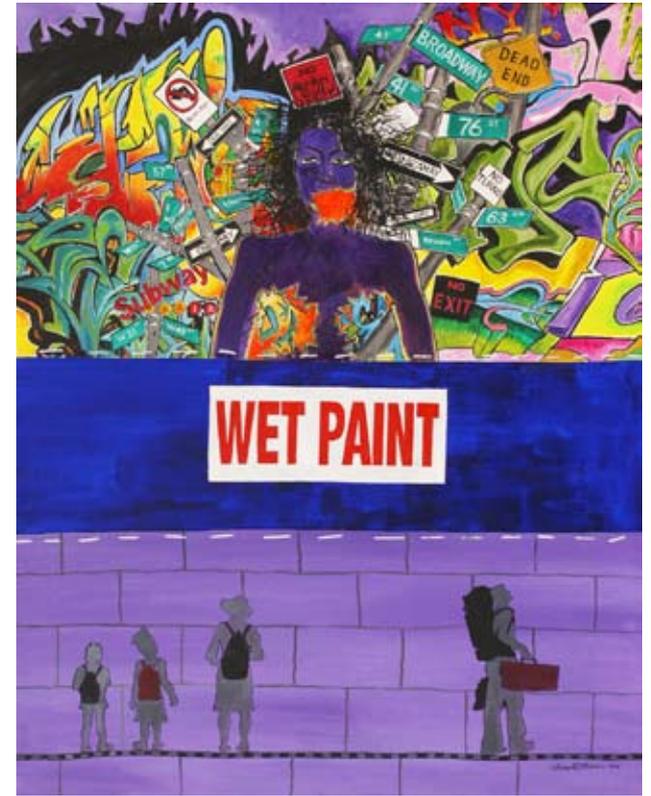
▲ Far Away in NYC @ 7520, 41st Avenue,
Elmhurst, Queens, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 100 cm

else, possibly just another misplaced migrant.” Just as the foreignness of New York is protective, her own foreignness ensures her certain invisibility. Thus her explorations of her domestic space and the transcendence of its confinement open onto a new territory of a cold and unknowable city.



▲ Far Away in NYC @ Prince Street Subway Station, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 100 cm

In *@ 86-02, 57th Road, Elmhurst, Queens* Chaw refers to the challenges she faced when her residency ended and the bright possibilities of New York started to dissipate. With an amazing interweaving of looking and meaning, Chaw draws attention to her frenzy of her social context through a restless energy that is constantly at play. With an unlikely level of poise, the



▲ Far Away in NYC @ Chamber Street Subway Station, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 100 cm

interplay of loud color, organization and structure relates to the social codes to which her life had been reduced. These are themes that constantly surface in these paintings as her expressions and forms are in reality the transposition of cultural values.

Chaw Ei Thein's practice interrogates the meeting of culture and nature in the broadest sense. Here in *Far Away in NYC* her work is a meditation on the body and its negotiation of the space and things around it. *@7520, 41st Avenue, Elmhurst* reflects that consciousness as she aesthetically seeks to stimulate her experiences that invite the viewer to cross the line between commonplace and emotion. Within the restricted confines of yet another transient habitat, Chaw's work investigates the potential to extend the body's sense by subverting them. The development of her oeuvre has gravitated towards immersing the viewer emotionally in the work. With this awareness in mind, the muted expressionism in *@231, West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan (1)* is a response that conveys her vulnerability, fears and insecurity when she learnt that she could not return to Burma. Within the same context, these paintings evoke her negotiation of the city as she relates her own situation to that of the numerous Burmese exiles. In essence her dialogue is a continuing intersection in her sustained quest for similar encounters through the gaze of others.

In contrast *Chaw Ei Thein in New York* demonstrates Chaw's ability to balance her emotional complexities as she recalls her euphoria as well as her concerns when she first arrived in New York. She explores the connections between the familiar and the unfamiliar through bright representation, personal and cosmopolitan, happy and melancholy through a chaotic but composed palette. Chaw has stated that art is a reflection of her material world and through this body of work she seeks to stage the relationships,

conjunctions and disjunctions between the different realities between her identity as a feminist and as an exiled artist. It is on the latter relationship that she concentrates most.

Chaw spends a great deal of time commuting on New York's subways which has become an intimate setting of dialogue and exchange for the artist. The melange of the subway's activity with its distinctive social scenes and galvanizing energy and its constantly shifting contexts has emphasized how her own isolation is laced through New York's complex social fabric. As Chaw explores territory and the process of identification, she reveals an extraordinary flexibility and absolute ubiquity. Her video manifest *Far Away in New York* is a montage of fragments of her life in New York; for the production and dissemination of the work, Chaw relied on a double and paradoxical approach that combined absorption and projection. Her mode of production developed out of the lessons of images spontaneously gathered while traveling the subway. Her negotiation of the unstable territory that extends from this work, extends retracts and warps between self and the other as Chaw herself becomes the model of engagement.

Though these environments she evokes feel intimate through familiar visuals of the everyday as in *Chaw Ei Thein in New York and @Chamber Street Subway Station*, it is her observation of detail that reflects the delicate balance between civil liberties of a free society and the anxieties of a restrictive regime; it is that degree of her exchange that makes her story arresting. Chaw

Video stills from *Far Away in New York*



Ei Thein's reputation for combining complex mark making with layered references is very established. Significantly her imagery also relies on the sublimity of the dispersion of differences. It is the site of dissolution of the physical and psychological boundaries of her surrounding space - the sited process of its quiet surrender. What distinguishes this body of work is her

comfort with her visual vocabulary, a confidence that allows for an incisive reading of her central themes; her homeland and her feminism.

Chaw Ei Thein's works are explicitly emotive and intimate while Htein Lin's art addresses a broader multiple.

Artists' Biodata



Chaw Ei Thein
b. 1969

Born in Rangoon, Chaw Ei Thein graduated from Rangoon University with a Bachelor of Law degree in 1994. Her artistic recognition started at an early age through the numerous international art awards that she received. With her father, Maung Maung Thein, as her art teacher and mentor, Chaw's art practice has developed into a diverse art practice. Highly regarded as a painter and a conceptual as well as a performance artist, her international career is highly profiled as she candidly portrays the contradictions and conflictions of her socio-political environment. Her feminist approach to her art is both gracious and candid and has earned her accolades and recognition as one of the most important contemporary artists to emerge from Burma. The recipient of the Elizabeth J McCormack and Jerome I Aaron fellowship in connection with the Asian Cultural Council in New York, she has lectured and exhibited extensively in and outside of Burma. Amongst her numerous and most notable achievements include participation in the 2008 Singapore Biennial, 2009 Open Studios Exhibitions, International Studio and Curators Program in New York as well as several performance works together with Htein Lin in Burma and at Asia House, London in 2007. Chaw Ei Thein currently lives and works in New York.



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Htein Lin

b. 1966

Htein Lin was born in Mezaligon, in Burma's Northern Irrawaddy Delta. His interest in art was innate as Htein Lin has stated that he was imbued with creativity since birth. A student activist, Htein Lin spent a number of years as a refugee in the jungles of Northern Burma and was imprisoned as a result of his protests against the atrocities and injustices perpetrated by Burma's military junta against fellow students and contemporaries. It was while in prison first in Mandalay in 1998 and later while in Rangoon, where he developed his iconic style of painting, improvising by using prison uniforms as canvasses and a variety of found objects as well as his fingers in lieu of paint brushes. Htein Lin is highly regarded for his performance art, a genre that he pursued through the many years. Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein met while law students at Rangoon University. After his graduation in 1994 he continued his artistic pursuits with numerous exhibitions as a painter and as a performance artist in Burma and abroad. His highly regarded international art practice include his 2007 solo exhibition at Asia House, London and his participation at the 2010 Singapore Fringe Fest where he presented his site specific installation, *Scale of Justice*. Htein Lin's artworks are included in numerous important art collections in Europe and in Asia.

STORIES OUT OF BURMA is Chaw Ei Thein and Htein Lin's first multidisciplinary exhibition that highlights their diverse artistic practices.



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The Silom Galleria, 3rd Floor
Suite 308, 919/1 Silom Road,
Bangkok 10500, Thailand

Tel (662) 266 5454, Fax (662) 266 5455
E-mail. info@thavibu.com