



Burma: The Quiet Violence

Political Paintings by Myint Swe

Text by Shireen Naziree

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FOREWORD

Jørn Middelborg

Thavibu Gallery

Thavibu Gallery is pleased to present the collection of political paintings, "Burma: The Quiet Violence," by Myint Swe. The collection features 38 paintings that reflect the artist's concerns about the detention of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the discouraging socio-political environment in Burma. The paintings were executed in Rangoon between 1997 and 2005 and secretly transported to Bangkok where they have been stored for some years.

However, due to the worsening situation in Burma, it has become necessary to remind a wider audience of the atrocities of the military junta. And while the paintings of artists such as Myint Swe will not change the political climate of Burma, we applaud his courage as he and other artists risk their lives and the future of their families by commenting on their country's grave and tragic state.

Like many Burmese, Myint Swe is a committed Buddhist who lives by the principles of his faith. He abhors corruption and deceit: "The establishment regards me as a fool – as according to the Burmese proverb: You are our enemy because you do not agree to do according to our wishes."

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Shireen Naziree for writing this catalogue. She is an art historian and independent curator with particular interest in Burmese contemporary art. Thanks also to Kt Twint Lwin Tuu who has contributed various papers on Myint Swe. "Burma: The Quiet Violence" is dedicated to the memory of Mr James, the late Australian- Burmese friend and mentor of Myint Swe.

BURMA: The Quiet Violence

Shireen Naziree

INTRODUCTION

In Burma, the beginnings of painting in the Western tradition may be traced back to the late nineteenth century when new styles, techniques and materials were introduced as a result of the influences of British colonial rule that brought about a greater access to and interest in Western artistic trends and cultural values. Consequently, these trends quietly permeated the existing traditional Burmese painting practices of the period.

By then traditional temple wall paintings, executed with natural pigments and exclusively related to religious themes that paid homage to the Lord Buddha, started reflecting these new Western styles. The result was a diversity that displayed new techniques and pictorial idioms that included secular environments associated with Buddhism. Artisans were infusing new interests into the already rich and vibrant artistic practices that existed in earlier royal empires, which had developed advanced artistic expressions in parallel to the rise of their political power from as early as the second century BC. While architecture, sculpture and painting had existed from times immemorial, it was the depictions of the Jatakas or the fables surrounding the Buddha's life journey that became the pantheon that distinguished the iconographic rules. The rich aesthetic that developed over the centuries since Buddhism was introduced into Burma from India in the sixth century enhanced the transcendental religious practices of Buddhism and was exclusively consecrated for the benefit of the faithful as a means of expressing gratitude and piety to the Buddha.

Although the religious and philosophical ideas in the service of which the artistic tradition of Burma flourished are not enough to go by in understanding the temperament of modern Burmese art, these ideas continue to remain the background of Burmese symbolism. Equally significant are the artworks themselves, the results of the technical skill of generations of unnamed artists, who often worked in guilds under the guidance of court-appointed master artists who brought their individual sensibilities to bear on their work. It is this essential humanism, persisting in various artistic forms from the long centuries of the past up to the present, which Burmese artists continue to regard as a vital element for their art.

This new visual analysis of Burmese painting practices also led to a new way of perception that was available only to artists who were either associated with the royal court or the British administration. Many young Burmese interested in learning the Western type of rendering and drawing in perspectives continued to follow the age-old practice of apprenticing themselves in the studios of noted artists. The practice continued to evolve over the decades and has since become an important tradition in the history of modern Burmese painting.

Until the early twentieth century, the concept of “fine art” as distinct from the other arts did not exist in the minds of the makers of the earlier painting traditions. Modern Burmese painting had by now come into its own and found its intellectual place alongside other cultural discourses that distinguished Burma as the most cultivated nation in Southeast Asia. Influential movements and artist groups surfaced in both Rangoon and Mandalay, catering largely to the affluent and intellectual middle classes. However, despite the thriving capitalism of the time that created an interest in international art forms, traces of traditional aesthetics and attitudes continued to persist.

Today, while many artists of the modern era are content to follow Western examples and try to create their own individual approaches, they usually continue the tradition of studying under a master painter. It is still understood that no matter how much a culture adopts certain technologies and lifestyles, nevertheless deep cultural structures remain as guiding forces in creating forms or in relating to the world. This understanding is not advocacy for a return to the past but rather emphasizes a form of cultural analysis in order to rediscover certain traditional sensibilities for use in creating new artistic forms that will be meaningful.

Today, much of the evolution of Burma’s contemporary painting tradition attests to the enduring spirit of many individual artists’ talents. Although many of them may be downtrodden, yet they remain vigilant, exuberant and undefiled by all the difficulties inflicted on postcolonial Burma, in particular the oppression of more than forty years of military rule.

Myint Swe is one such artist, for whom the suffering that has arisen from Burma’s questionable political environment has created the determination to address issues of humanity and dignity. Born in 1956 in Taungoke, a small town in Burma’s western Rakhine State, Myint Swe describes this locale as having an historical and cultural identity that dates back to the second century, parallel only to the Pyu dynasty of the same era. The artist recalls an untouched land, separated from the rest of Burma by the long Yoma mountain range as well as the Irrawaddy River, where Rakhinese achieved an intimacy with nature as farmers and fishermen. However, Burma’s military dictatorship saw fit to triumph over nature in the name of progress when the region was opened up primarily by road across the mountains and bridges across the Irrawaddy River.

Paradoxically, the improvements in transportation and communications brought about an unwelcome intrusion by the military as families were indiscriminately stripped of their land and crops, pressured into forced labour and becoming increasingly poorer.

Very much an individualist and socialist at heart, Myint Swe espouses many humanitarian causes particularly because of his unswerving beliefs about life, art and the rights of man. Despite working as a civil servant for a number of years, Myint Swe was and remains first of all an artist. Painting has always been his passion; all other media in which he has worked have primarily been means to make a living.

When he decided to become a full-time artist in the early 1990s, he realized that acceptance by the larger artistic community required him to master or at least acknowledge earlier traditional models. Thus, as in the age-old tradition of apprenticeship, to improve his artistic skills and learn firsthand the techniques of painting from master

artists who had the opportunity to study in Europe, he studied under several of Burma's most important senior artists. Myint Swe believed that through painting he could achieve the power of utterance. The integration of art and his social conscience would be the key to unlocking the door to his path in life.

Myint Swe was coming into his own, while the political situation in Burma was deteriorating and the social and economic rift between the military elite and the general population was growing dramatically.

Raised in the precarious situation of genteel poverty, he became extremely sympathetic to the less fortunate and was especially devastated to realize the degradation of his fellow Rakhinese who were forced to move to the urban environment of Rangoon. His deep understanding of Buddhist ethics was translated politically into socialism, resulting in a fundamental socialist philosophy to which he has adhered for most of his artistic career. As a result, his creativity has evolved in the context of the current Burmese social environment with a need to address issues of humanity and dignity, identity and equality. Myint Swe is understood to have digested the suffering arising from a state of questionable governance that has seen his nation become increasingly isolated from the rest of the world.

THE QUIET VIOLENCE

In the connection between politics and art, we generally assume that if the nature of politics changes, then art's identity and narrative regarding the political also changes. In addition, where the content of radical discourse is often little more than an ascetic condemnation of contemporary industrial society, cultural practitioners question the cultural value of their particular discipline and how they may contribute to the political moment through their art. At the same time, political activity is ever more focused on new forms of organization, intervention and communication that turn political activity into an increasingly cultural form of spectacle.

While these critiques of free association are purposeful and are situated in a time that is simultaneously present, recently past and historical, generally applying to the vast majority of the global arena, Burma's modern art practices remain grounded atmospherically in earlier, more romantic moments and often in specifically configured cultural spaces. Artists whose works ask questions of the nature of nationhood and are simulations of politics and democracy, practice in a frightening state of siege; for Burma's defining temperament is hormonal -- perched between the palpable loss of its past and an almost impossible understanding of its present, with the military junta's heavy-handed political agenda that has resulted in a sadly impoverished social environment.

With the capital Rangoon as its most visible platform and given the depth of its past cultural and economic history, one is confronted by the country's nakedness that orients itself towards an environment that is void of any economic or political instrumentality. What it succeeds in showing is an oppositional state of isolation, absence, discomfort and loss of identity. Most countries gained a new status when colonial dependencies were redefined as points of cultural transmission and refraction due to the fact that colonialism shadowed the most desired of dreams. In 1948 when it gained independence, Burma had already lost much of its prosperity as it had been severely

impoverished by the destructive Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Ironically, the fight against British imperialism was replaced by the new imperialism of an authoritarian policy that adopted an ideology posing every conceivable threat to any democratic system fused to basic human rights.

It is the hope of Burma's pro-democracy movements and the international community that new beginnings are born in the not too distant future, paving opportunities for an open political dynamic that would hopefully take the beleaguered country out of its current repressive state. However, the military junta remains intent on holding supreme power despite the universal outrage at its questionable human rights record, in particular the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi – the uniting icon of a fragmented opposition movement.

Despite continuous condemnation, the military junta remains resilient. When General Ne Win came to power in 1962, he nationalized the economy, expelled thousands of ethnic Indians and by restricting foreign trade and tourism isolated the country from the outside world. Although he stepped down in 1988, he continued to wield power through a succession of generals until General Than Shwe came to power in 2002 as a result of infighting within the military regime. Today, after forty-seven years in power and with a new capital in Naypidaw, built in secret with Chinese expertise, it appears that the generals are very comfortable with their state of isolation, which highlights their indifference to the sufferings of the people.

Co-operation by Burma's closest allies and trading partners, China and India, has emboldened the junta to accumulate continuous and unimpeded power. Although both China and India share centuries-old cross-cultural bonds with Burma, today the dominance of China's presence is omnipresent and expanding. Even scrutiny by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has done very little to stir the junta, let alone that by the United Nations. The decision by ASEAN to admit Burma into the association in 1997 was part of a broader plan of expanding its territorial strength, primarily to promote economic co-operation amongst member states for the realization of a free trade area by 2015 that would also include China. India is scheduled to sign a similar pact with ASEAN in October 2009, further strengthening its ongoing border trade with Burma.

Despite the policy of noninterference in the internal affairs of member states, the indiscriminate detention of Burma's citizens (in particular, Aung San Suu Kyi) has prompted ASEAN to voice concern – the most explicit statements coming from Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 2003. Although there have been sporadic threats of expulsion from ASEAN, such an event is quite unlikely. While refugees have been pouring out of Burma for a long time, ASEAN has remained indifferent to the rights of these displaced people; it is known that refugees have been inhumanely turned away from the borders of Thailand and Malaysia.

The military junta remains unfazed by any international threats. By releasing a few political prisoners from time to time when international concerns mount, they use these detainees as pawns in the same manner that North Korea uses its nuclear arsenal. However, unlike North Korea, the junta is not overtly dependent on international assistance for food and other aid. Their slow response and reluctance to accept any form of assistance from the international community during any kind of emergency, such as in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, reflects the negative attitude the junta has towards its own people.

ASEAN faces constant pressure to adopt a stronger voice towards Burma, but it is obviously not in the economic interests of member states to adopt such measures. For example, the porous border of 2,400 kilometers between Thailand and Burma is inhabited by common ethnic groups and the two countries share long-lasting historical bonds. Trading activities along the border include a thriving black market, particularly in the lucrative gem trade, drugs and human trafficking.

The booming economic growth of recent years in Southeast Asia has led to an increase in the trafficking of workers from Burma into Thailand and Malaysia. Currently, about 200,000 ethnic Rohingyas from Rakhine State are languishing in refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh and working illegally in Thailand and Malaysia. The junta refuses to acknowledge the Rohingyas as citizens of Burma, partly because of their Islamic faith and their South Asian roots. Those who remain in Burma are subjected to some of the worst forms of apartheid, including the denial of Burmese citizenship and restrictions on intermarriage with members of other groups and on movement within the country.

Bilateral trade between Burma and Singapore in 2008 amounted to US\$2 billion. Singapore is also Burma's next largest ASEAN trading partner after Thailand. Human Rights Watch has cited investments in Burma's lucrative oil and gas industry by companies from Australia, China, India, France, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the United States, Russia and the British Virgin Islands. Natural gas accounts for almost half of Burma's exports. The country's export of gemstones, especially jade, to China and Southeast Asia remains very lucrative and has prompted the United States to initiate sanctions on the import of Burmese gemstones.

Internally, calls for reconciliatory dialogue by the opposition National League for Democracy over the past few years have been ignored by the military junta, which has promised a general election in 2010 as part of "the road map to democracy." However, the junta leader, 76-year-old General Than Shwe, appears to have no intention of altering the current political landscape, let alone allow for any democratic political transition. The deteriorating health of the aging Aung San Suu Kyi is not encouraging either, while the junta's proposed new laws will bar her from any role in governance. These factors are aggravated by the junta's discomfort with the mounting discontent and the growing fearlessness by ordinary citizens. In a recent interview, the Burma scholar and historian, Thant Myint-U, is quoted as saying, "The next year or so will be the most important. There is change within the armed forces leadership. Critics say the new constitution and the elections planned for 2010 will not be democratic. But they will represent at the very least a massive shake-up of the existing structures of the government."

The unprecedented move by the junta to allow international humanitarian aid for the victims of Cyclone Nargis and the establishment of an ASEAN operational centre in Rangoon has the potential to bring about improvements in at least that area of human rights. It is hoped that the proposed ASEAN Charter on Human Rights to be launched by the end of 2009 will allow the organization to review its noninterference policy in order to check human rights abuses perpetrated by states on their citizens. At a recent symposium in Kuala Lumpur organized by the Malaysian National Council of Women, Malaysia's foreign minister Rais Yatim reiterated the importance for all ASEAN members of continuing to pressure Burma to acknowledge human rights.

What role can art play in these defining moments? Art and politics share the same medium of gesture, which in an expanded sense encompasses the same physical manifestations through which people seek to confront each other and to evoke desired responses, whether through the display of imagery or other forms of artistic expression. Consequently, criticism helps to boost liberal attitudes and the overall view of society then becomes more inclusive. Although the notion of political connectedness with art is not new in contemporary society, in Burma freedom of expression is regarded as a form of resistance.

Performance art provides examples of the social function of gesture. In Mandalay, the parodies by the Moustache Brothers are dedicated to the reigning political pathos. In Rangoon, performance art, mostly performed in clandestine locations, has become a popular medium of investigation into the social power of artistic gesture. A raw and passionate anti-establishment sentiment has ignited civic and cultural activism as a select group of artists bravely takes advantage of every available opportunity and the temporary nature of the expressionism of performance art.

Censorship of the arts in Burma is exceptionally rigid though it has not completely disabled the potential for socially explicit expression. Nevertheless, politically charged paintings are only found in alternate venues, generally outside Burma.

Myint Swe's intimate works deal with the numerous social ills and the overarching devastation that lies beneath the veneer of traditional archetypes. "I am numbing myself by not acknowledging that a significant part of my people's collective self has died. I want to posit the misery and acknowledge what is happening in Burma and although my works point to obvious issues, I also try to reach to the spiritual, to the infinitude of hope that is always available in my creative core. My work is an attempt to portray the dimensions of the realities of our socio-political identity."

By exploring the currency of categories such as still life, portraiture and landscape, each of Myint Swe's paintings is laden with symbolic baggage that exposes the quiet violence in the political ethos that has emerged and the defiance directed against the political choreography imposed by the military junta.

Within these territories of confinement the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi has become an axis that illuminates the ideological strength of the democracy movement. The painting *Waiting for the Last Station* (p. 21), with its treatment of broken brushstrokes, is an example of this disparate situation. It also reflects the relationship between Aung San Suu Kyi and the yearning for the end of an era of containment. The translucency that permeates the painting becomes in itself a meditative exercise.

The language of art with its vast and subtle vocabulary and complex syntax can give an insightful expression to nuanced emotions. *The Lotus Beauty* (p. 23) is an example where Myint Swe plumbs the depths of his Buddhist understandings for communication; for the lotus flower is symbolically a flower associated with worship, endurance and beauty. Similarly, in *The Enduring Water Hyacinth* (p. 25), Myint Swe does not allow his creative instincts to evade the ties to his Buddhist beliefs. The perception of Aung San Suu Kyi's intellectual strength and endeavour has been the inspiration for this and many of his other paintings, conveying messages under her highly noble motives.

The Rose (1) (p. 27) is another classical idiom where the flower's individuality and rhythm represent the truth that imparts polish to human understanding. Myint Swe is unafraid of using classical idioms, a philosophy that he believes is a torchbearer of the intellect and enlightenment of his Eastern values.

Although he trained under some of Burma's most influential painters, Myint Swe's technique, colour combinations and sense of structure are all his own. He has spent years in giving them a maturity in individuality. In this respect, he has risen above any pettiness and represents his art as his goal and responsibility, which he hopes will gain him his place in eternity. Every movement by the army against Aung San Suu Kyi gives birth to a response. *The Rose (2)* (p. 29) is a reflection of her ability and strength in facing opposition; such strength has been the bearer of revelation and courage. Here the interrelationship between the imagery and the reality highlights cultural values that are buried deep within Oriental authenticity.

Welcome to Freedom (p. 39) represents Myint Swe's prayer for Aung San Suu Kyi's final release to freedom. In this painting, he portrays her as a young, strong woman, as he believes that it is her representation of courage and strength that has become the beacon of hope for the Burmese people.

Myint Swe's work is contemporary. He is careful not to express himself personally using simple formulas in regard to Aung San Suu Kyi. Instead, he engages the viewer in his dialogue while he plays with philosophical questions related to her experience. In *Dead Lock* (p. 33) he raises an awareness of her monumental commitment to her people and in a manner creates a dialogue in reference to her cause. The painting evokes both density and softness with a tightly knit mesh of tone and space. At the same time, there is a menacing tension in the scale of the figure representing Aung San Suu Kyi and the oversized padlock that represents the enormity of her situation.

Myint Swe believes that his art not only interprets his own creative abilities and aesthetic values, but hopes that it gives birth to a new set of values and responses. He hopes that its silence gives eloquence to the intellect and perception. In *The Gate* (p. 35) there are personal memories shrouded in emotion and nostalgia. Aung San Suu Kyi's now dilapidated home on Rangoon's University Avenue has become a poignant landmark and symbol of democracy connoting nostalgia for an earlier time when she would regularly deliver speeches from a platform erected near this gate, undeniably a significant chapter in Burma's modern history.

The Lady is Going to Heaven (p. 31) shows a figure going towards infinity. It represents Aung San Suu Kyi with a unique admixture and blend of colours and hues that intuitively respond to an interpretation of the divine spirit through the compositional element of light. Through these references, Myint Swe is referring to the depth of his Buddhist philosophy in which reverence in this world paves the way towards Nirvana.

In her 1990 landmark speech, "Freedom from Fear," Aung San Suu Kyi referred to her father: "Bogyoke Aung San regarded himself as a revolutionary and searched tirelessly for answers to the problems that beset Burma during her times of trial. He exhorted people to develop courage: Don't just depend on the courage and intrepidity of others. Each and every one of you must make sacrifices to become a hero possessed of courage and intrepidity. Then only shall we all be able to enjoy true freedom." Later in her speech, she added: "Fearlessness may be a gift

but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavour, courage that comes from cultivating the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one's actions." Myint Swe regards the role of an artist as that of an inheritor of human values and is thus duty bound to lead in the right direction. His painting *Freedom from Fear* (p. 37) represents the usefulness and importance of the creative image in keeping this vital mantra of hope alive. This is also the title of her book.

The military junta came to power in 1988, the same year Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma to care for her ailing mother, a trip that coincided with mass demonstrations against the government, leaving thousands dead and one that would end her own freedom. In 1989, she became one of the founding members of the National League for Democracy. Like her late father, Aung San, who played a crucial role in her country's history; she has become a symbol of freedom. Aung San was the enigmatic nationalist leader who flirted with both communism and fascism in his struggles to see Burma freed of British colonial rule. In 1947, months before independence, he was assassinated along with a number of other potential leaders of a new and free Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi was first arrested in 1989 on charges of inciting unrest and barred from running for elections called by the junta in 1990 when her party won 392 of the 495 parliamentary seats, a result that the junta refused to honour. Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990.

Balancing Act: Myanmar vs. Burma (p. 43) is Myint Swe's response to the use of both Myanmar and Burma as the country's name, for although much of the world has accepted Myanmar as the official name of the country, it is a much debated issue, as freedom and human rights groups continue to refer to the country as "Burma".

The outlook for the Burmese economy remains bleak, despite the country's arsenal of natural resources, including rice and other crops, minerals, natural gas and timber. More than half the population comprises subsistence-level farmers, mainly in the Delta region, and poverty amongst the urban population is dire. Internationally, Burma is regarded as a high risk destination. The mass protests of 2007 reflected the population's dissatisfaction with current hardships and the military junta's decision to increase fuel prices. Myint Swe depicts this situation resulting from the junta's mismanagement in his painting *Myanmar: a Volcano* (p. 44), where the letter M has become a volcano waiting to erupt.

Under British colonial rule, Burma's traditional social structure entirely collapsed and today Burma is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. With a growing population of 55 million and an estimate of about half living below the poverty line, Burma ranks 130 out of 177 in terms of quality of life according to the UNDP's 2006 Human Development Index. The public sector expenditure on health and education is considered to be less than US\$1 per person per year. Forced confiscation of land, violence, and deliberate discrimination against minority groups are only a few of the atrocities committed against citizens. This crisis has resulted in up to one million internally displaced people and a constant flow of refugees across the border, mainly to Thailand.

In *Pretty but Poor* (p. 47) Myint Swe characterizes poverty through the somber expressions of three young girls who poignantly convey a sense of hopelessness. Poverty is another example of Myint Swe's defiant art that confronts the grave situation of children in Burma. Malnutrition has become a growing problem as both urban and rural families

struggle to maintain their families. With a high infant mortality rate (104 per 1,000 live births for children under five) it is not unusual for families to give up children as young as three years old to monasteries. In rural areas, it is not uncommon for children to drop out of school in order to care for younger siblings while both parents work. *Embarrassment* (p. 59) is another painting related to issues involving children. *Poverty* (p. 49) has also led to children being exposed to the destruction of moral and social values. While these are not pretty pictures, nevertheless they are the voices of dissent. As poverty widens the gaps of morality, it is not surprising that AIDS has beset society. *The AIDS Threat* (p. 89) shows the need to expose and redress the structural imbalances that have contributed to its manifestation in the first place.

With the situation worsening, children are often forced into labour. The worst abuse involves children from ethnic minority groups who are regularly forced into the ranks of the army as well as recruited by ethnic minority insurgent groups for the purpose of combat. In urban centres, children are employed as housemaids and manual workers.

Children are being trafficked out of Burma into commercial labour as well as for sexual exploitation. It is estimated that about 20,000 are working in Thailand as beggars, street vendors and sex workers. Working along this trajectory, Myint Swe hopes that paintings such as *Child Labour* (p. 51) increase the awareness of the bleak future for young and impoverished Burmese children. A deeper conceptual engagement within these linkages is reflected in *Forced Labour* (p. 53), which shows us another level of human abuse whereby villagers are often randomly and forcefully recruited to work on government construction sites.

Myint Swe's paintings, dealing with social concerns, regularly employ an abstract language that reminds the viewer of the concrete struggles of those who have no voice and are so often ignored. In the middle of this political destruction are the results that have degraded the humanity of all those caught in its grasp with or without their acknowledgement. Thus he can only turn to a discreet language in order to move beyond the loss of identity. *Modern City* (p. 55) captures the bitter effects of an isolated society evoking some sort of emotional connection with the person's place in life, whether that be corruption, prostitution or the promise of a better future. *The World Upside-Down* (p. 57) is no brighter in its message, as people disregard the laws of nature and put aside their Buddhist principles.

For Myint Swe, the personal has always been the political. Through his own personal history, he has explored the world of poverty and struggle in tandem with the larger struggle for democracy. By blending the two, he has developed imagery that has taken control of his representations. He has provided a vision of everyday reality. *Gun Barrel* (p. 61) is a view into this psyche where observers can possibly feel the same emotional pain. However, Myint Swe does not push formal principles aside in favour of ideas. Vibrant colours are one of the key elements in his work, including *We are Thirsty for Democracy* (p. 63). Yet there is more than meets the eye. Behind these seemingly colourful exteriors lay sadness and uncertainty. While he remains committed to bearing witness to the political and social costs of his situation, he is also shadowed by an anxiety about the loss of cultural values which together with the loss of democracy has become a double threat. His painting *Cultural Desertification* (p. 65) reflects a recurring fear of isolation from his signs that bear an ominous message.

Somehow the more Myint Swe varies his work, the more unsettling it becomes. He sees his works as being crucial for understanding the connection between cultural and ideological positions that the junta would prefer to be out of sight. Similarly, the subjects of his imagery are treated in a way that both conceals and reveals them. In *Development is a LIE* (p. 67) the buildings are recognizable, yet the lettering and the figures are abstract. They are hidden and obscure, compelling the viewer to contemplate the deeper meaning of his imagery.

Like many, Myint Swe believes that the future of democracy in Burma lies in affirmative action by the major powers and at the United Nations. *New York* is a consciously conceived landscape painting that defines the need for productive dialogue between the military junta and democratic voices through the diplomacy of the United Nations. *Stalemate: NLD vs. SPDC* (p. 71) is another visual statement that recognizes the futility of the current situation where the junta refuses to have any dialogue with opposition parties. *Might and Right* (p. 73) represents a more philosophical view. Asian legends are full of imagery on the might of tigers and the wisdom of the tortoise.

In *Conflagration* (p. 75) Myint Swe shows how art can be critical of politics as it orients itself to comment upon the junta's mainstream propaganda, which defines Burma's current socio-political environment. *1988* (p. 77) represents the backdrop of the fight for democracy. The title aptly describes the historical moment of the uprising, which started with peaceful demonstrations at the University of Rangoon. *University Campus* (p. 83) reflects the deep sentimental attachment the artist has with both cultural and political activism. The demonstrations led to the arrest of many young students and the random imprisonment of political activists, for many of whom the appalling prison conditions are a psychological death sentence in itself. There is something revealing and tortuous about *Death Row at Insein Prison* (p. 85), as the painting challenges the subconscious in its reflection of the fear of solitary confinement.

As a spectator, Myint Swe absorbs the dynamics of his volatile world. While his conceptual framework has consistently been in one way or another a response to the social and the political, his choice of style for a painting also plays a part in dictating its content. *Gunfire* (p. 79) is an example of how he refuses to be contained within the parameters of one style of painting, freeing himself to innovate and find new configurations of expression. In contrast, he employed the colours and techniques of impressionism in the still life *Flowers for a Hero* (p. 81). Here he aptly shapes an identity for the actual shooting of an unknown person, an image that still resonates today.

At times Myint Swe can be coyly flippant because in Burma cultural practitioners often use satire to disguise their messages. *Three Secretaries* (p. 87) is an unconventional expression whereby he attempts to create an image in the viewer's mind by the use of text and a "non-image" approach. The paradox lies in trying to create an image by the lack of it in the same manner as the clandestine generals 1, 2 and 3 who rule the country are rarely physically visible. Nearer to conventional expression is *Inauspicious Trading* (p. 95) where his narrative relates to the exploitation of commerce by international investors who accord the junta recognition despite the exploitation of resources and labour. In other works such as *The Red Hand* (p. 93), the message speaks between the lines and purposely so: the meanings are layered. These works use wit and irony to remind us of the hardship of human existence and the injustice perpetrated by dictatorial regimes for almost half a century.

Amidst reflections on the serious concerns that afflict Burma, Myint Swe's body of political art presents many sites of contention, whether in terms of cultural identity, social geography or humanitarian concern. While the rest of Southeast Asia comes to terms with globalization with new visions and imperatives, *Blind Alley* (p. 91) is a reminder that progress in Burma has fallen into dystopia.

It is clear that fourteen years of international sanctions and the continuing global concern for the detention of political prisoners and the abuse of human rights have had very little effect on the junta. However, many believe that diplomatic engagement is required, as well as more assertive sanctions, particularly with the co-operation of Burma's Asian neighbours and the United Nations. *What will the Future Bring?* (p. 97) is part of Myint Swe's emotional struggle to find pertinence in his disparate world.

In Myint Swe's paintings, we see the struggles of the Burmese people: personal, specific, caring, evoking the large issues of his times. The content is not part of an overt political agenda. In its personal treatment, it is evocative of the tradition of painting that has evolved from a cultural history. These works show us that the painted surface can bear traces of emotional strength. They tell poignant stories reminding us that, as human beings, many of us are discovering that the world is full of hope as well as pain and suffering.

"The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development." Aung San Suu Kyi uttered these words in her "Freedom from Fear" speech in 1990. Such shared optimism is a starting point and an intuitive way to look at Myint Swe's art.

My Outlook and Attitudes towards Art and Life – by Myint Swe (1999)

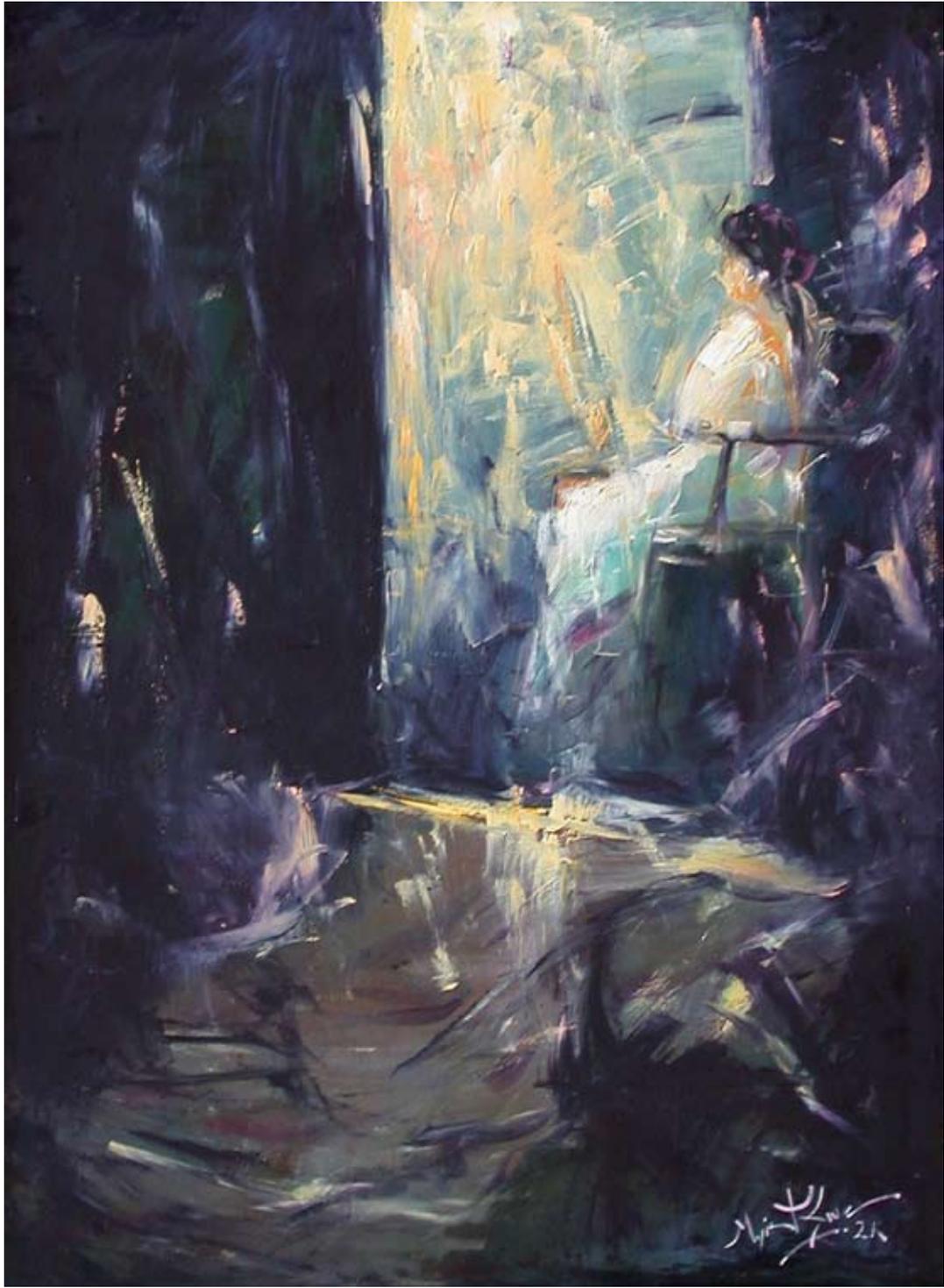
- I believe that within a beautiful painting lies emotion and a theme. It is impossible to paint without passion and thought.
- The poisoning of one's mind is the most destructive medicine.
- Virtue and Vice is the privilege of every individual. Love and hate is the choice of the recipient.
- Truth is forever. It never fades or weakens.
- Man beautifies and embellishes the world. And man also has the power to destroy beauty.
- The origins of the most priceless and beautiful ruby are rough. Rubies are buried deep in wild valleys and rocky mountains.
- An artist understands the value of freedom more than others.
- Man believes that money buys happiness. As an artist, I create my happiness with my only needs – paints and brushes.
- Artistic talent is a gift from God. A strongman may lift 1,000 kilos – but he is incapable of holding a brush.
- A priceless painting that may be cherished for a lifetime may be created by the quick and swift strokes of a brush.
- The more gifted an artist is, the poorer he is.
- An artist needs no lawyers.
- A conjuror can mislead a small group. An artist can influence an entire world.
- When an artist uses his lover as a model, they can never become spouses because the lover may become obsessed with her beauty.
- While most artists are patient and objective with their art, they are often intolerant in mundane affairs.
- Destruction in war takes a shorter time than surveying a map. While putting paint to canvas can be rapid, formulating the idea takes time.
- Be an artist and the world will appreciate your talent.
- People are obsessed with love, power and wealth. I am an artist and merely a fool.
- Painters and lovers are the same – lovers pamper each other, paintings pamper painters.
- My abilities are a tribute to my life experiences and my art.

PLATES

Paintings of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

The Lady is going on a very long journey. As she sits in her solitary compartment, she contemplates the passing scenery of her commitments – waiting patiently to reach her destination.

Waiting for the Last Station, 1999 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



A strong hurricane tries its best to blow away the fragile Lady and fling her off far away. Watching with anxiety, I wonder whether she will crumble like a piece of brittle wood or melt away like wax. But no! She is fearless and hard as steel. Her head remains unbowed. Oh! You foolish wind – no matter how hard and strong you blow, you can never destroy her. And though you can win over others, you will never win over her....She is a Lotus Beauty.

The Lotus Beauty, 1999 | Oil on canvas | 59 x 89 cm



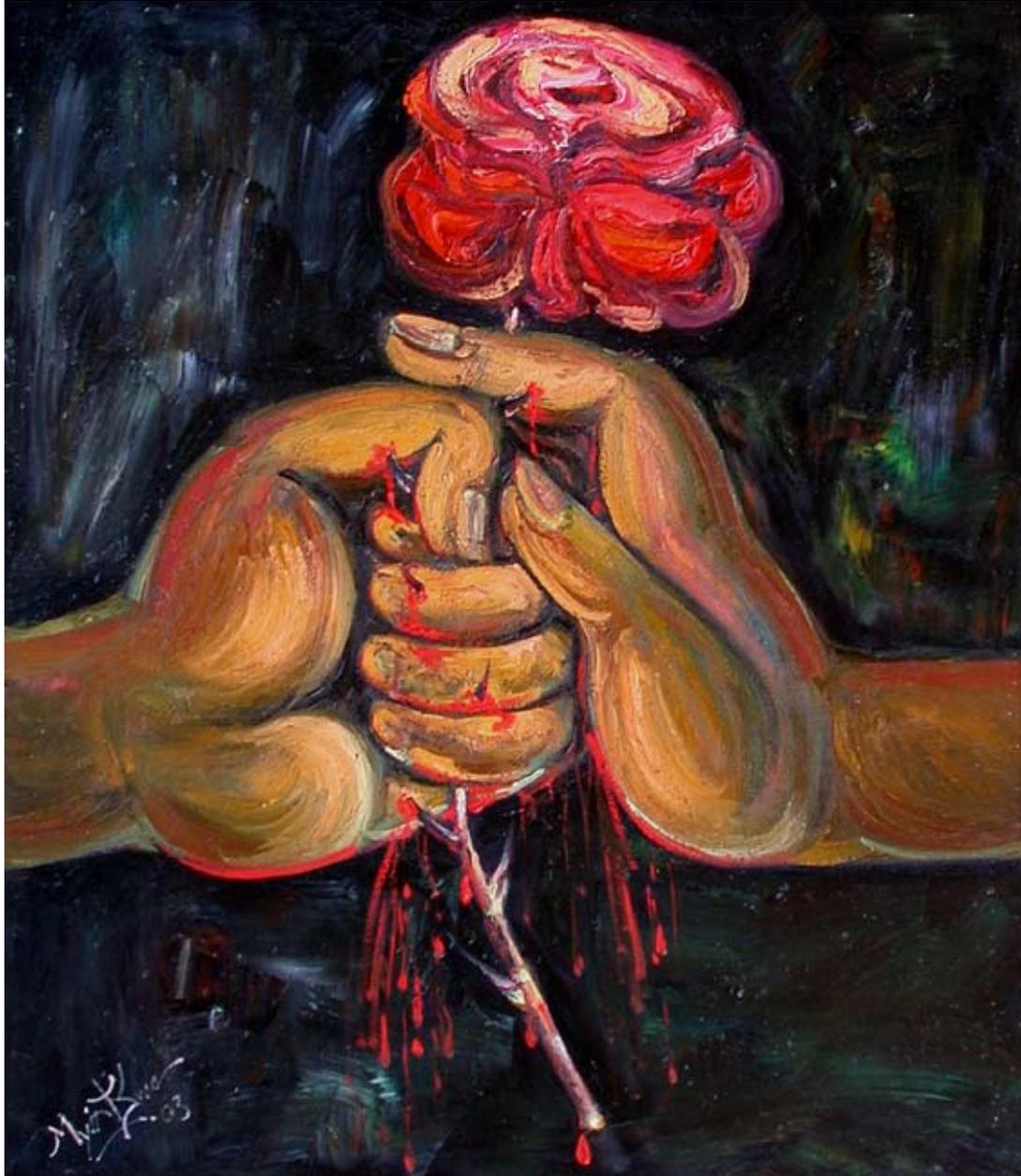
Characterized by its beauty and strength and its ability to stay afloat – the Water Hyacinth is valued for its endurance. No matter how turbulent the waters are, the water hyacinth always floats serenely above the surface and is never pulled down by turbulence.

The Enduring Water Hyacinth, 2000 | Oil on canvas | 45 x 60 cm



Everyone loves flowers, especially
Roses. A Rose is fragrant and
soft, but beware of its thorns!
Treat it gently...for the harder
you squeeze it, the more pain
you will feel and the more you
will bleed. The Rose is worthy
of respect and admiration.

The Rose (1), 2003 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 120 cm



The army is abundant as green grass on the ground. A fire has been ignited to burn the rare and precious Rose to death. But she is resilient and her strength can withstand the flames.

The Rose (2), 2003 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 150 cm



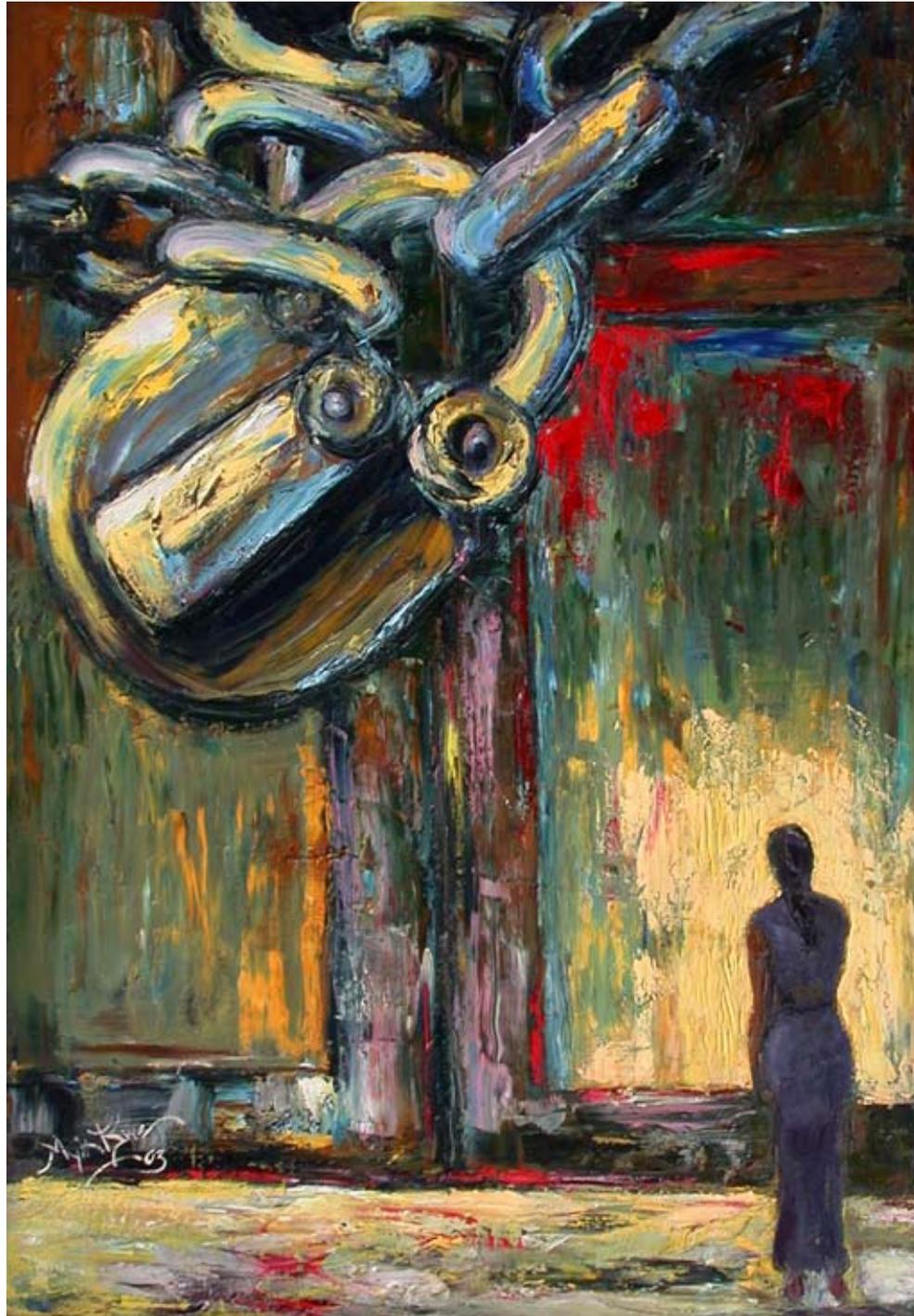
The Lady is guided by the universal principles of justice and the philosophies of Buddhism.

The Lady is Going to Heaven, 1997 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



Do you think that she
can open that big
and heavy door with
her fragility? Yes, it is
possible!

Dead Lock, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 150 cm



The Gate outside the Lady's
House where she used to
give speeches and blessings
to the people

The Gate, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 150 cm | Collection of Larry Jagan



It is not power that corrupts but fear.
Fear of losing power corrupts those who
wield it and fear of the scourge of power
corrupts those who are subject to it. *Aung
San Suu Kyi: Freedom from Fear, 1990.*

Freedom from Fear, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 105 cm



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was temporarily released from house arrest in 2001... and then re-arrested.

Welcome to Freedom, 2002 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 179 cm



PLATES

Other Paintings

Balancing Act: Myanmar vs. Burma, 2001 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



Myanmar - A Volcano, 2004 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 150 cm



Pretty but Poor, 1999 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 90 cm



Poverty, 1999 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 90 cm



Child Labour, 1999 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



It is a usual practice for the army to round up villagers in the middle of the night and force them into bonded labour to build roads and work on government construction sites.

Forced Labour, 1999 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 90 cm



Modern cities offer many different life choices, but to live comfortably one requires a good income. In Rangoon, corruption and vice provide these opportunities. This apartment building represents the many facets of modern living here in Rangoon. For example, Apartment One may be occupied by a family whose ambitious and avaricious daughter regularly spends her nights with wealthy men. Apartment Two may be an illegal gambling den; however, the family living there has the police on their payroll. The daughter of the owner of Apartment Three is seen every night, being driven off in expensive cars to entertain rich men who pay her well. Living a very comfortable life in Apartment Four is the family of a school principal, who accepts bribes from those who strive for good examination results. In Apartment Five is the wife of a seaman who regularly sends money home unaware that she is having an affair with another man. Apartment Six is occupied by seven prostitutes and in Apartment Seven is the family of a doctor who demands exorbitant fees for his services regardless of the suffering that surrounds him. In Apartment Eight lives the mistress of a high military official. It is devastating how these people earn their keep. Who is responsible?

Modern City, 1998 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm | Collection of the National Art Gallery, Malaysia



Life is not fair. In this world, men and animals live together, but man is cruel to animals; he treats them cruelly, making them work, torturing them and then killing them for food. Despite the laws of respect that profess compassion, man has become oblivious. In a reversal of roles where man takes the place of the animal, he is certain to become wiser about life – for the rich abuse the poor, the educated disrespect the uneducated and those in power suppress the powerless. BUT in this world TRUTH will prevail, for the Law of Nature is: What Begins must End!

The World Upside-Down, 1998 | Oil on canvas | 75 x 104 cm | Collection of the National Art Gallery, Malaysia



Our youth and children are being corrupted as a result of poverty and the destruction of morals and social values following the dictatorship here in Burma.

Embarrassment, 2000 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



Water and Democracy do
not flow from a gun barrel.
Only fear and intimidation
flow from it.

Gun Barrel, 2002 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 120 cm

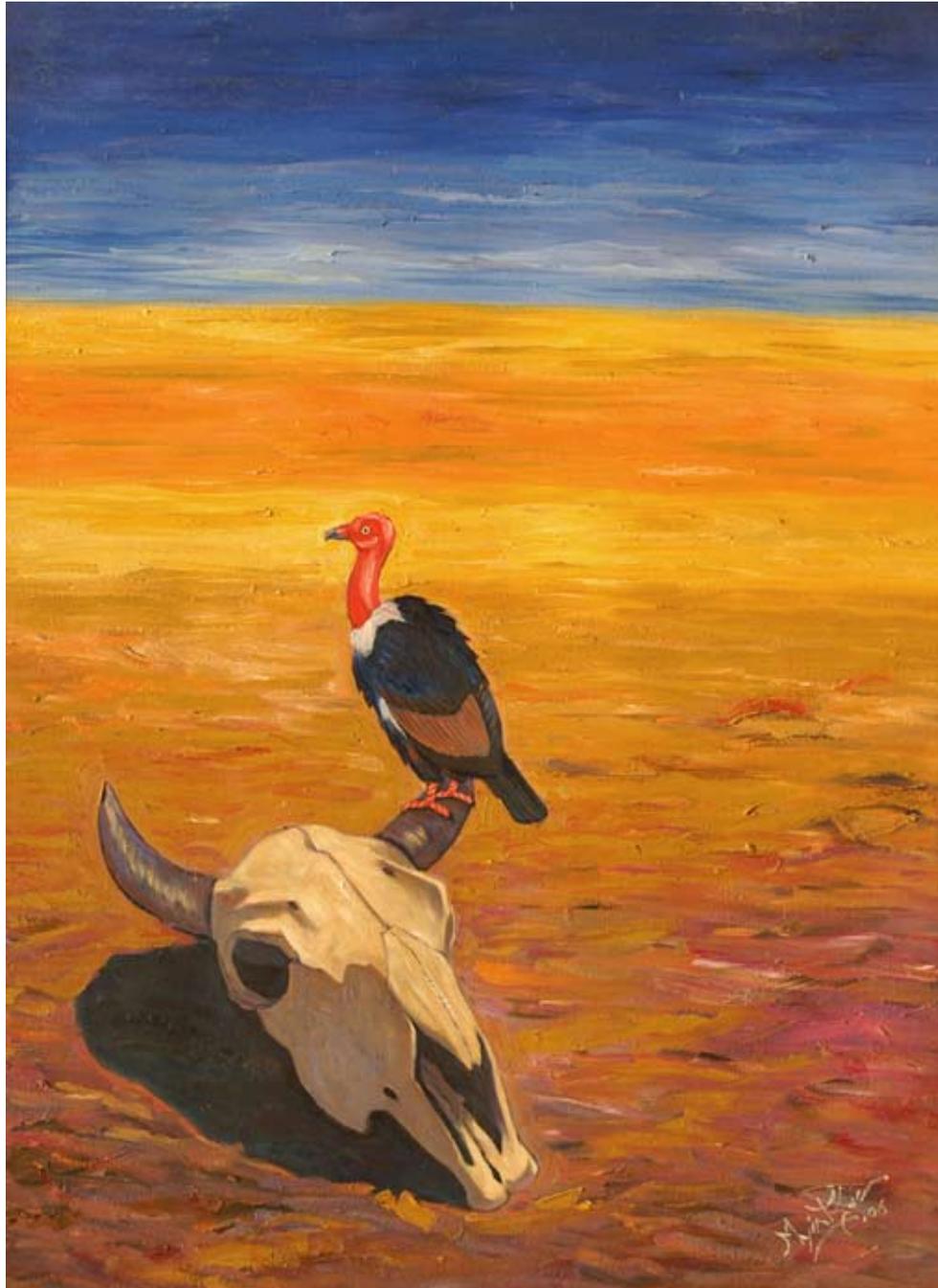


Democracy is as essential as
water for life.

We are Thirsty for Democracy!, 2002 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 180 cm



Cultural Desertification, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 91 x 120 cm



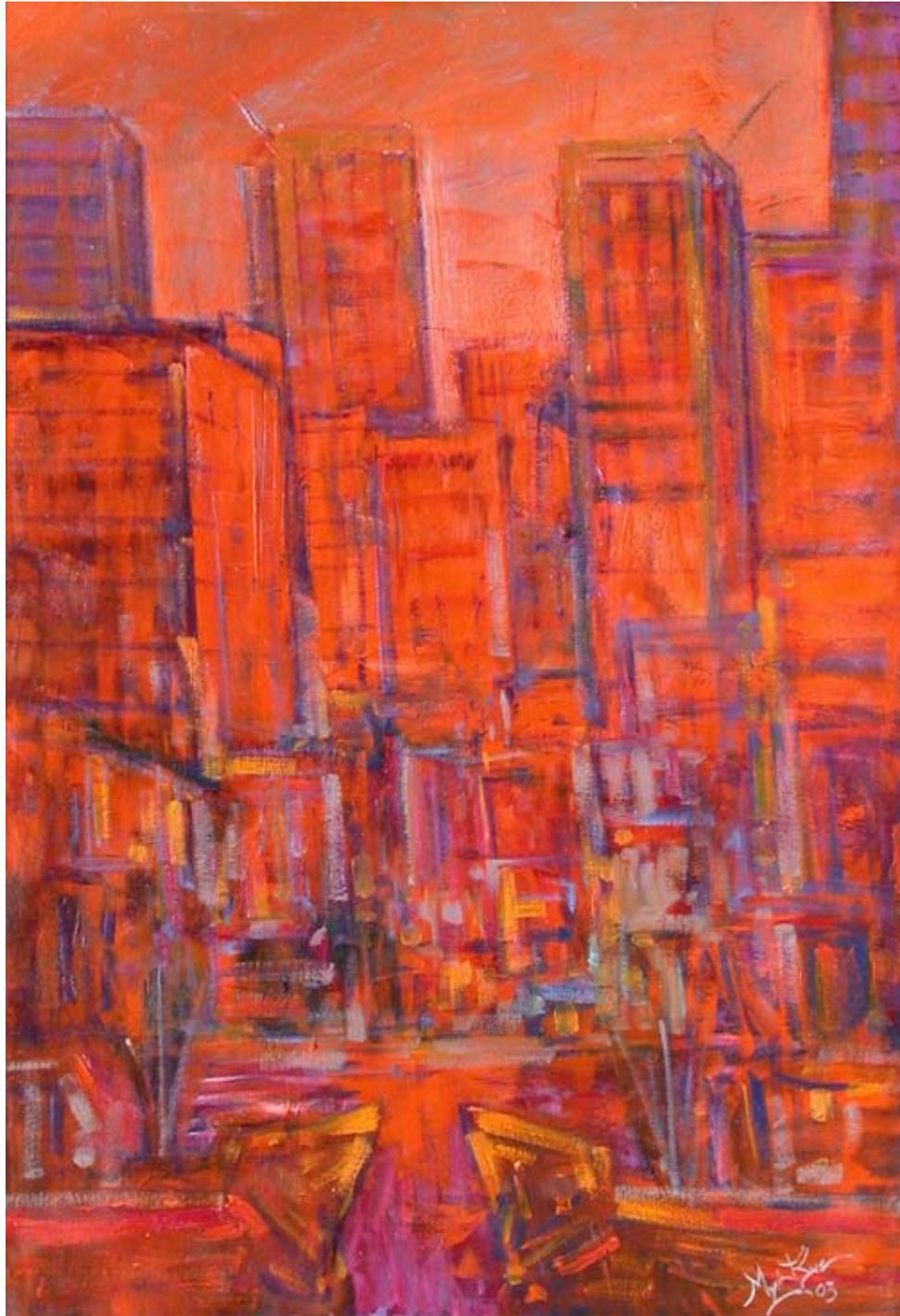
Development in Burma is a LIE - symbolized by the three large letters incorporated in the building structure. In this painting, the people are diminutive in scale and dwarfed by the buildings since development in Burma is seen as investing in infrastructure rather than investing in human development. The painting on the right shows the broken bodies of mothers and daughters symbolizing the rape of the country by the army.

Development is a LIE, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 210 x 150 cm (2 panels) | Exhibited in the Chiang Mai Art Museum and Dahlem Museum, Berlin



Two ships are on a collision course in New York harbour outside the United Nations Building. Will they ever resolve their differences?

New York, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 150 cm | Exhibited in the Chiang Mai Museum and Dahlem Museum, Berlin



Stalemate: NLD vs. SPDC, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 104 x 150 cm



Tigers are fierce, wild and cruel animals that use their power to kill and devour other animals. Tortoises are small, timid and harmless. But they are adept at avoiding danger and are courageous in confronting their enemies. They simply retract and hide in their shells, patiently accepting torture while waiting for the danger to pass. Do not give up your courage. Truth is like the tortoise shell; it will prevail and will protect you from the tyrants.

Might and Right, 1998 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



Culture and Education
Organization of Society
National Cause
Forced Labour
Literature
Art
Grid of Electricity
Religion
Agriculture
Transport
Inflation
Organization
Narcotics

Conflagration, 2002 | Oil on canvas | 105 x 185 cm



The student uprising at the University of Rangoon – leading to peaceful democracy demonstrations throughout Burma and marking the start of the Democracy Movement, known as the 888

1988, 2004 | Oil on canvas | 318 x 151 cm (3 panels)



Gunfire, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 160 x 210 cm



This is about an actual event. Not long ago, some gunmen shot a man along a roadside and removed his body but left behind his spectacles and handkerchief lying in a pool of blood. A while later a stranger placed a bouquet of flowers beside the dead man's belongings as a tribute of praise for a hero.

Flowers for a Hero, 1998 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 90 cm



Everyone in Rangoon knows the university campus by the Burmese name “Gangaw –Ywa.” When I was a student there, we had ten art exhibitions under the banner of “Gangaw- Ywa” at the university’s Dome and Judson Building. Exhibitions were organized by a “village headman” and a group of ladies known as “paddy planters” – an avant garde group, who made the campus a happy and joyful place. Today you only see the leaves shed by the *Mohur* trees with their red and blue flowers covering the ground and you imagine that you hear the sobbing of its mournful past.

University Campus, 1998 | Oil on canvas | 45 x 60 cm



Death Row at Insein Prison, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 102 x 120 cm



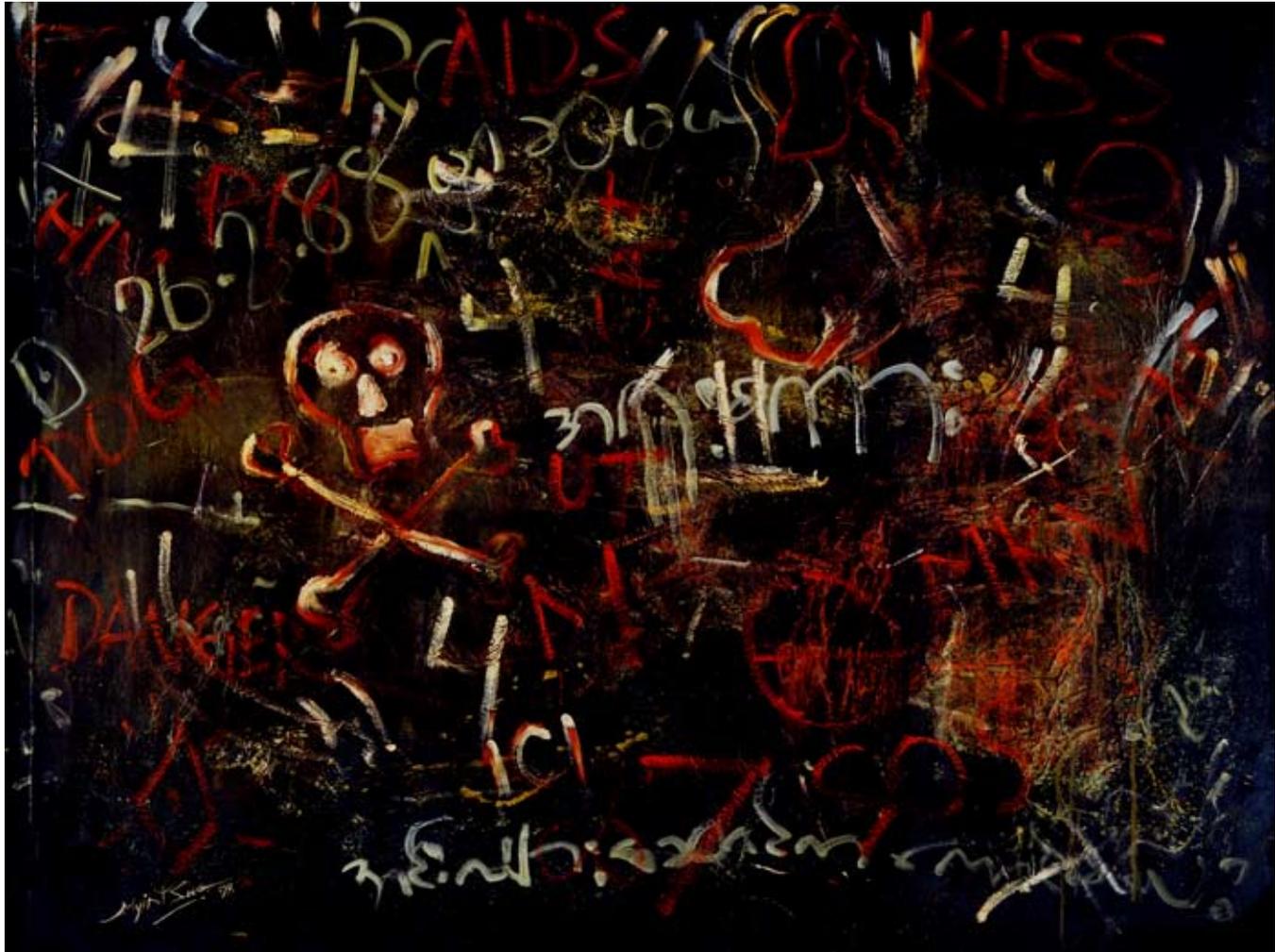
- S** – Secretary Number One
- O** – Secretary Number Two (is no more..)
- S** - Secretary Number Three

This painting was executed after Secretary Number Two was killed in a helicopter crash.

Three Secretaries, 2001 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 90 cm



The AIDS Threat, 2000 | Oil on canvas | 90 x 120 cm



Development
in Burma is like
a blind alley - it
goes nowhere.

Blind Alley, 2001 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 90 cm



The Red Hand, 2004 | Oil on canvas | 182 x 107 cm



International investors and traders continue to do business with the military junta only to be exploited and ridiculed by the international community. We are sacrificing our lives for the love of our country and we ask of you: "Stop feeding the plants of poison. Are you only interested in profits? "

Inauspicious Trading, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 107 x 184 cm



We need the support of the international community and more assertive action from the United Nations to end the destruction and further degradation of Burma.

What Will the Future Bring?, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 324 x 210 cm (2 panels)



BIOGRAPHY



Myint Swe was born in Taungoke, Rakhine State, Burma, in 1956 to U Tun Tin and Daw Shwe Thant. He graduated with a B.Sc in Zoology from Rangoon University in 1981 and worked for five years as a civil servant in the Department of Fisheries in various states throughout the country.

He studied at the State School of Fine Arts between 1975 and 1977. He later studied painting under S Tin Shwe for twenty years. He also studied under U Lun Gwye, one of Burma's most noted modern-day painters and in the typical Burmese tradition honours the critique and advice from other artists such as U Mya Aye, U Myat Kyaw and Daw Tin Tin San – all of whom were his teachers at the State School of Fine Arts and at the Rangoon University Art Association. His work has also been strongly influenced by the paintings and philosophies of U Thein Han, one of the most important pioneers of Burmese modern painting practices. He established Vision Art Gallery in Rangoon as a platform for his art.

He has participated in more than fifty exhibitions in Burma and has had shows in Thailand in 1999, 2001 and 2002. In 2004, he participated in the international exhibition *Identities vs. Globalisation* at the Chiang Mai Art Museum and the Dahlem Art Museum in Berlin. Myint Swe is married to Daw Nwe Nwe. He lives in Rangoon, Burma.

Museum collections:

National Museum of Myanmar

National Art Gallery of Malaysia



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