



HIGHLIGHTS
from the
THAVIBU ART COLLECTION

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FOREWORD
Jørn Middelborg
Thavibu Art Advisory

The Thavibu Collection was initiated when I established Thavibu Gallery in 1998 and subsequently ran it for eighteen years. As many galleries do, I built a collection of art works since a flow of works passed through my hands and I wanted to collect a representative selection, and the best.

When Thavibu Gallery was established, Thai contemporary art started to gain international recognition, Vietnamese paintings experienced a boom after Vietnam opened up, and Myanmar (formerly Burma) was isolated and insular. I felt it was particularly important to include Myanmar art since almost no contemporary art was known from the country at that time. While attending an art performance in Yangon in the late 1990s, I witnessed an exhibition by Nyein Chan Su being shut down even before it officially opened – the artist showcasing a heavy and spiny threatening object hanging over fragile balloons underneath. A metaphor for the perils of Myanmar. Fortunately the situation in the country has improved considerably.

Southeast Asian contemporary art often lives in the shadow of Indian, and particular Chinese contemporary art which has blossomed over the last two decades. Japanese and Korean contemporary art are also prominently featured in international events and markets. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the largest and most populous country, and it is the country which has made most impact on the Southeast Asian contemporary art scene. Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar are medium sized countries with diverse and highly interesting art scenes, and they deserve more exposure and focus.

The purpose of this publication is to put the spotlight on selected contemporary art works from Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar and describe them, their context and narratives, and the artists who made them, and bring it out to a larger audience. The quality of the works is outstanding and the concepts and narratives are compelling. I have made a selection, a subjective selection of eighteen works; one work by each artist and six artists from each country. The purpose is not to impress, but rather to explore and contemplate.

The art works are called ‘Highlights’ since they are among the best pieces I have seen by the artists, and these artists are among the top contemporary artists in their respective countries. The selection consists of paintings, sculptures and photography rather than works produced in other media due to the relative ease of collecting and storing them. Regrettably this excludes art forms such as installations, performances, video art, and others. Another limitation is the small number of female artists represented. There are more female artists active in the art scene today than it was when I started collecting, and they will continue to make an important impact over the coming years.

This publication is accessible online for free, and its aim is to reach out to viewers all over the world as the intention is to create an increased understanding of some of the excellent contemporary art being created in Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar.

I thank the writer of the text, who wishes to remain anonymous.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Jørn Middelborg

THAI ART WORKS

Chatchai Puipia
Pinaree Sanpitak
Jirapat Tatsanasomboon
Kritsana Chaikitwattana
Thaweesak Srithongdee
Vasan Sitthiket

VIETNAMESE ART WORKS

Trinh Tuan
Dinh Quan
Truong Tan
Le Quang Ha
Pham An Hai
Nguyen Trung

MYANMAR ART WORKS

U Lun Gywe
Htein Lin
Nge Lay
Myint Swe
MPP Yei Myint
Aung Kyaw Htet

REFERENCES

CHATCHAI PUIPIA, b. 1964

At the groundbreaking exhibition *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* at the Asia Society and Museum, New York in 1996,¹ Chatchai Puipia's self-portrait *Siamese Smile* (1995) was chosen as the key visual of the exhibition catalogue, on its cover, to represent the 'face' of 'Asia'. Since then, Chatchai has come to be known as the artist of physiognomy. Commencing his artistic journey with paintings of abstract assemblage in the early 1990s, the artist then moved on, from mid-1990s onwards, to scrutinise his own image in the mirror, looking for any hint of psychological strata which he has taken as his artistic material. Chatchai's obsession with self-portraiture can be said to have rooted in the personal although its significance goes beyond the artist's introspection and encompasses the social. Jennifer Gampell aptly observes that behind the 'wild pain-filled eyes and lips contorted into hauntingly twisted smiles' is the production of the 'other'—the other that Chatchai feels he is and has always been. 'I feel I have enemies, but I don't know who is my enemy. I'm not even sure if they're really my enemies or not because the world goes like that,' so he told Gampell in an interview for 'Desperately Seeking Chatchai', a Bangkok Post profile which later appeared in ArtAsia Pacific.² Perhaps his best known self-portrait series, the *Siamese Smile* (1995) embodies a dichotomy of self and other: Thai and *farang*. It deconstructs the stereotype of Thai people as always bearing 'Siamese smiles' to foreigners. The smiles - grinning with clenched teeth and glaring eyes - which Chatchai's canvases bear are, in fact, those of discomfort arising from linguistic opacity where a Thai passer-by grinned out of awkwardness because he could not comprehend what a *farang* said to him.

The Painter (2007)

Oversized heads appear across Chatchai's mediums, especially sculpture. Ing K's 'A Portrait of the Artist as Erupting Still-Life' reveals this curious treatment of the artist's own figuration as a way to cope with his sense of alienation from *Kwampenthai* (Thainess). 'I was very uncomfortable about being a half-breed, or quarter-breed, rather. In those days we were never allowed to tell people that we were Vietnamese, otherwise we'd be accused of being communists.' 'So I see myself as a weirdo: both Vietnamese and someone with a short torso with a disproportionately huge head,'³ said Chatchai to his artist friend. *The Painter* (2007), a rare representation of the figure of the artist in his repertoire, aptly comes in to complicate this intricate relationship between otherness and the oversized head, which is central to Chatchai's visual vocabulary. The sculpture brings in the role of art and the artist right in the middle of this curious nexus, which, in time to come, will invite endless possibilities of interpretation. But for Chatchai himself, being an 'artist' is to be free from the existing system of symbolism through which the Thai culture operates. 'It is a battle of discovery rather than a battle for conquest.'- an endless adventure to explore the uncharted territory, which paradoxically requires that one looks at oneself in the mirror rather than accommodating 'the pressure to pay lip-service to fashionable political social concerns'.



Chatchai Pui-pia | The Painter, 2007 | Painted bronze | Height 47 cm | Edition AP

PINAREE SANPITAK, b. 1961

Pinaree has devoted her entire career to a greater visibility and equality of the female sex in artistic representation. She has tirelessly and resourcefully spun myriad possibilities of the female form; each time managing to cultivate surprise. This is a result of her continual commitment to experimenting with different artistic materials, mediums and strategies when thinking about the formal, social, historical or even philosophical challenges surrounding the female sex, its gender, sexuality and body. *Golden Womb* (1997) is an early two-dimensional mixed media work on canvas which makes use of abstracted circular form to represent the female body. Challenging the gender dimension of the genre of sculpture by literally softening it, the series of *noon nom* (2001-2002), translated 'nestling at the breast',⁴ embodied a couple of hundred puffy organza 'breast cushions' which invited the gallery goers to probe the fuzzy line between the sensuousness of the female sexuality and the nurturing nature of motherhood. The work was also representative of Pinaree's embrace of the strategy of participation popularly adopted by Thai artists, which turned the visitors into co-producers of the work. The *Breast Stupa Cookery* series (2005), which made use of perishable foods as its material, pushed the interpretation of femininity and participation to a new level where one can actually consume such representation of the female sex.

Quietly Solid, Green (2010)

Despite her admirable deftness in tackling the multi-faceted nuances surrounding femininity, Pinaree's art is prone to criticism that it reproduces the objects of male gaze and desire. However, this problem has astutely been solved in the *Solid* series where the soft materiality of varied breast forms has turned into a solid glass sculpture whose cloud shape still suggests, subtly, femininity, however, without subjecting itself as an object of male desire. *Quietly Solid, Green* (2010), which belongs to this revolutionary series, remarkably encapsulates Pinaree's journey as a woman artist who, at the height of her career, resolved the tension between passion and reason inherent in the representation of the female body. The lucid and transparent solidity of the outer layer of the glass sculpture bespeaks the power of the faculty of reason, which literally contains the 'emotional' and unpredictable nebulous 'fluid' which comes in different affective colours inside. *Quietly Solid, Green* is the testimony to Pinaree's astute negotiation with the genre of the female nude in art history. In this series, Pinaree collaborated with Murano glass-blower master Silvano Signoretto from Venice in Italy to produce the unique breast-cloud sculptures.



Pinaree Sanpitak | Quietly Solid, Green, 2010 | Hand blown Murano glass | 34 x 16 x 23 cm, 19 kg

JIRAPAT TATSANASOMBOON, b. 1971

Throughout his career, Jirapat is committed to the art of interculturality, conflating Western and Thai visual narratives. Although the neo-traditionalist artists before him had already carried out such intercultural amalgam, Jirapat stands out because, in the early phases of his artistic career, he offers a fresh take on cultural imperialism: pitting characters from the Thai *Ramakien*, such as Rama, Thotsakan and Hanuman, against American superheroes and supervillains such as Spiderman, Superman and Green Goblin. These series of battles between the East and the West - *Uncle Sam vs Thotsakan* (2004), *Leave Me Alone* (2007) for example - demonstrate a power relation beyond the usual development discourse where the former simply looks up to and draws on the 'expertise' of the latter. Another uniqueness of Jirapat's interculturality which has pushed the boundary set by his neo-traditionalist predecessors is his development of a visual economy which produces new meanings out of the cross-breeding of existing Thai and European visual or literary narratives. *Camouflage (after A. Warhol)* (2010) and *Break Free (after P. Mondrian)* (2010) are good examples of this intercultural intertextuality.

The Guardian of Siam (after K. Haring) (2010)

When Thailand's post-2006-coup political crisis escalated into bloody violence in 2009, Jirapat, like other contemporary Thai artists, was consumed by such unprecedented fragmentation in Thai society. What marks him out, however, is his remarkable commitment to his intercultural poetics. In *The Guardian of Siam (after K. Haring)* (2010), a piece in his intercultural-intertextuality phase, Jirapat draws and expands on Keith Haring's multi-coloured bold-lined abstracted figures to convey colour-coded discordance in Thai socio-political life. According to the Thai context, the red colour represents anti-establishment supporters of either the man Thaksin Shinawatra or the populist neoliberal policy he practised. Yellow and pink are shades used by royalists and conservatives to identify themselves whereas blue was adopted by a small fraction of opportunists and white non-partisans. In this work, Jirapat depicts these multi-coloured figures swarming calamitously at the feet of the sacred Guardian of Siam—a deity highly revered and known locally as 'Phra Siam Thevathirat'—who is shedding tears at the national fragmentation, which culminated in the 2009 bloody riots.



Jirapat Tatsanasomboon | The Guardian of Siam (after K.Haring), 2010 | Acrylic on canvas | 100 x 130 cm | Illustrated on p. 244⁵

KRITSANA CHAIKITWATTANA, b. 1977

Underlying Kritsana's painterly practice is an attempt to resolve the tension between two polarities - something he assigns to his belief in striving towards the noble Middle Path preached by the Buddha. His art manifests the pursuit of balance, for instance, between light and darkness; happiness and suffering; utopia and reality. Especially recurrent in his work is the gap separating the rich and the poor; Bangkokians and the countrymen including himself who came from Hat Yai, a city in the Southern part of Thailand. This preoccupation with socio-economic imbalance between the urban and the rural is seen translated into many socially-engaged series including that on the homeless and the prostitutes. As a devout Buddhist, Kritsana uses the art of painting as a means to practice *vipassana* or 'seeing things as they really are'. This unfolds into those series in which he explored his own physiognomy and different gestures of varied Buddha statues as an act of meditation. As an artist who experiments with the surface of his paintings, Kritsana has made use of many materials to tangibly bring out the contrasts aforementioned. Most well-known among these is the juxtaposition of the smooth surface of vinyl tiles and the rough texture of wooden board to convey the clash between the comfortable life of the middle-class in their polished living space and the hardship of the working-class's lives as well as the homeless who continuously have to struggle just to daily get by.

The Long March (2005)

The painting *The Long March* (2005) can be situated in Kritsana's preoccupation with the imbalance between the urban and the rural which has driven endless immigration into Bangkok - Thailand's capital city where prosperity is concentrated and ill-distributed. With the same significance conveyed by the rough wooden board, small pieces of rock inlaid into the painting's surface makes reference to the artist's struggling life journey from his Southern hometown into Bangkok in search of a better life promised by urbanity. These are pieces picked up by the artist himself from the rail tracks of Bangkok's Hua-Lampong central station where he first disembarked upon arrival from Hat Yai as a young student. These small pieces of rock also represent the lives severed from their larger community and scattered around at the end point of their journeys only to be merged again, unrecognisably, into the whirlpool of new possibilities life in Bangkok has to offer. The human figures rendered up-side-down, in cyclical movement and in Expressionistic style connotes the repetitive journeys in the *Samsara* in the Buddhist cosmology—an epitome of his use of painting as a means to practice *vipassana* meditation.



Kritsana Chaikitwattana | The Long March, 2005 | Oil, rocks, wood and mixed media on board | 120 x 180 cm

THAWEESAK SRITHONGDEE, b. 1970

Although Thaweesak Srithongdee's stylisation of the body has changed over the years, what remains consistent in his varied practices is the artist's curiosity 'about what humans might be concealing beneath their outer shells'. His art pivots on how the body can speak of the inner world it embodies. Obtaining his Master of Fine Arts (Painting) from the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art, Silpakorn University in Bangkok in 1996, Thaweesak has been known for his 'spurious race of Adonic pectoral defined super beings', as Steven Pettifor aptly put,⁶ in form of acrylic paintings. The two-dimensional slick idealised figures then grew into monumental resin sculptures - two gigantic of which stand prominently in the Bangkok Art and Culture Center's cylindrical atrium. Mixing Caucasian eyes with brown Asian complexion, Thaweesak, in both mediums of painting and sculpture, blends idealised features from all races into his signature fantasy forms. Despite their perfect bodies, both the steroid-pumped male and the collagen-swollen-lipped and naked doll-like female caricatures, however, exude an air of self-doubt. This paradox exteriorises the mindset of the body in modern consumerist culture. *Cinderella* (2003) is very good examples of this. Pettifor, interestingly, reads this awkwardness in Thaweesak's stylisation of the body as 'modesty' which borders on Thai conservatism which informed the artist's own self-censorship: 'Before I tried painting in genitalia and nipples on my figures, but when I looked at them afterwards I felt ashamed and immediately painted them out,' confessed Thaweesak.

Cold (2011)

The expressionist germ that runs through Thaweesak's representation of the body took a curious turn in the exhibition entitled 'Bruised'. Here the bodies are unusually rendered with ethereal bleeds, primarily of black, blue and red which seep in and out of each other. Transparency of the figuration is key to the series which seeks to exteriorise the 'bruised' of the inner world which becomes manifest through the intensification of colour whereby transparency gives in to opacity. *Cold* (2011), a variation of diverse scenarios of the 'bruised' inside our human mind, recounts the contradiction between love and hatred experienced by two camps of soldiers during the Second World War who waged deadly war against one another in the midst of snow-covered landscapes. Here death is figured as skulls hovering on both sides of what is to be understood simultaneously as the heart and the uterus. Above all this is presided by the face of the archetypal woman—those whom they loved and those whom they killed during the war—a chilly paradox which defined humanity at that point of world history. This sheer coldness felt in the heart of both side of the soldiers is aptly expressed through the transparency of the figurative rendition.



Thaweesak Srithongdee | Cold, 2011 | Acrylic on canvas | 130 x 150 cm

VASAN SITTHIKET, b. 1957

One of the most notable artists of Thailand, at home and abroad, Vasan, active since the mid-70s, is known for his use of canvas, among other diverse mediums, to manifest his frustration of the world's seemingly endless socio-political and economic injustice. If newspapers are the content of history, Vasan's canvas, too, holds almost the same function, only with all the clear positions that he has taken and firmly holds on to. His paintings engage with topical issues of the day, sometimes with quick, broad and angry Expressionist brushstrokes, at other times, with patchy pointillism. These range from such domestic issues as corruption and economic inequality between the urban middle-class and the rural disadvantaged in Thailand to multi-faceted adverse effects of globalisation perpetrated by economic superpowers and neoliberal institutions in the international affairs.

Mother Earth Crying (1998)

Environmental degradation due to endless demands for 'growth' and the abysmal depths of capitalist incentives to exploit nature has been one of the longstanding issues Vasan has addressed. Though painted in 1998, *Mother Earth Crying* has never been more relevant, perhaps even more relevant now than in the late 90s, given today's unabating reportage of the seemingly irreversible environment problems worldwide. But what makes *Mother Earth Crying* stands out aesthetically is the artist's use of the female nude and that it was finger-painted with soil-based pigments. Vasan usually uses the body as the perpetrator or part of the vices he is exposing and censuring with brutal sarcasm. This is apparent in paintings such as *Stimulate the Economy* (2009) and *You Must Poor and Idiot Forever* (2010). Particularly in pieces like *Attention Please: Guard Your Virture* (2004) and *Hegemony* (2012), the female nude is employed as the source of moral corruption. However, in the series *We Come from the Same Way* (2001) which features faces of well-known people in history exiting up-side-down from the vagina, the artist extends the meaning of Gustave Courbert's *L'Origine du Monde* to encompass the democratic value of equality. Even then, rarely has he used the body, especially the female nude, as the victim of human's irresponsible and exploitative actions as he has with *Mother Earth Crying*. The oozing red-soil-based pigments bespeaks bleeding from violation of the Mother Earth.



Vasan Sittthiket | Mother Earth Crying, 1998 | Finger painted with soil based pigments | 120 x 150 cm

TRINH TUAN, b. 1961

Of the three practitioners of contemporary Vietnamese lacquer painting presented in this collection, Trinh Tuan has stayed closest to the 'traditional' technique developed during the later phase of the French colonial rule of Vietnam: creating layers of paint on top of each other - in Tuan's case, as many as ten and then rubbing these superimpositions out to reveal the desired form on the treated surface. The effect of this 'building-up and rubbing down' is the fluid interweaving of different layers and their colours, which brings forth intricate patterns to the surface. The establishment of the *École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine* in Hanoi in 1925 saw not only the introduction of Western painting techniques into Vietnam, but also the development of lacquer painting as an art form. In the early colonial context, lacquer painting was practised for decoration of lacquerwares produced to be exported back to France. After that in the 1930s, the technique was applied as a means of 'painting' in the Western sense of the word; that is, not only as mark making but also as a means of self-expression. This amalgam of traditional craftsmanship and Western artistry was a collaboration between the French teachers and the Vietnamese students at the *École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine*. Any artists working in this medium carry both the pride of practising a uniquely Vietnamese art form, but also the burden of the medium as a colonial legacy. Tuan's response to the history of this colonially charged medium involves an interesting interpretation of the human form and the physiognomy of the characters he 'paints'. His rendition of the 'primitive' body and countenance invites the debate if he is reproducing the exotic spectacle to feed Western spectators' expectation of non-Western art. Or is he challenging the Western idealised body epitomised by classical Greek and Roman human sculptures.

Adam and Eve (2002)

This debate can be seen as best playing out in, among other works, Tuan's *Adam and Eve* (2002) where the epitome of the classical male and female body, through the figuration of Adam and Eve, is de-Westernised and primitivised. Tuan, however, took advantage of the Western introduction of emotional expression into the medium of lacquer painting to complicate the narrative of Adam and Eve as we know it. Here in this painting, it seems as if Adam was appalled by what he had said while Eve, on the righthand side, looked away, as if expressing her disapproval. She held the 'fruit of knowledge' reinterpreted here as a pair of lips - a symbol of speech and language generated by the male sex, the sex of God himself which had now been taken away from Adam who was left speechless. These intricate negotiations with not only the history of the medium but also Western iconography is an example of why contemporary lacquer painting is an important contribution from Vietnam to the international art field.



Trinh Tuan | Adam and Eve, 2002 | Lacquer, dyes, gold, silver, egg shell on board | 80 x 80 cm | Illustrated on p. 77⁷

DINH QUAN, b. 1964

Dinh Quan has a unique position in the tradition of lacquer painting. Compared to a more traditional method of lacquer painting as adopted by, for instance Trinh Tuan, which involves ‘building up and rubbing down’ layers of paint (see previous article), Quan is known for his challenge of that convention, taking this uniquely Vietnamese art form to a new direction. Instead of rubbing down layers of paint to let the desired form manifest, Quan makes his marks on the lacquered board, treated with only one or two layers of paint, by vigorously sweeping his brush soaked with a curious mix of most probably silver powder and epoxy to create a unique texture on the surface. The effect of Quan’s innovation in lacquer painting is the much-admired great dynamism. The highly textured marks that he makes on the lacquered board is, however, far from being thick and heavy. On the contrary, Quan’s dynamic ethereal lines of the figures he conjures up reminds one of those found in Jackson Pollock’s ‘action painting’. Despite the adoption of Western techniques of mark making, Quan stays close to his Vietnamese identity when it comes to the colour scheme he uses; that is, gold, red and white—the auspicious colours one also finds in Chinese visual representation. Due to the artist’s great reverence for his mother, the female body which is usually Quan’s subject matter is rendered in such a respectful way. It is indeed a different kind of ‘nude’ that one comes across in Quan’s art. His rendition of the female body is not to cater for the male gaze as such. The abstraction which he embraces to give shape to his subject matters, together with a uniquely dynamic brushstroke, convey a mysterious sense of transcendence, of the world beyond, as if suggesting that it was women who had the power to dictate where the future holds. This, however, changed in 2008 when he painted a more amorous type of the female body such as *Virgin for a Day* or *Virgin for the Throne*.

A Formidable Horse (2004)

A Formidable Horse (2004) is an interesting execution along this line of thought. Against the brown backdrop, the auspicious colours of gold, red and white are used to render visible a female horse - intriguingly clad with a woman’s breasts. Horses are of a holy significance in the Vietnamese culture. Around the former imperial city of Hue, for instance, one can still find many temples where horses are worshiped with incense and offerings. With the artist’s conviction that ‘We now exist in a world where culture is blemished and ethics have degenerated as a result of war, corruption and unjust social conflict’ and that ‘art is [his] faith to express [his] feelings and hopefully to bring forth the core values which are vital to a civil and cultured society’,⁸ the fact that Quan gives us a female horse in her full command in this painting perhaps presents itself as the artist’s urge for us to listen more to values that are less male- and human-centred - an iconography of riddle most relevant to our contemporary society.



Dinh Quan | A Formidable Horse, 2004 | Lacquer, dyes, gold, silver, epoxy on board | 120 x 120 cm

TRUONG TAN, b. 1963

Truong Tan's sexuality and artistic practices intertwine. Well known for being Vietnam's first openly gay artist, Tan's paintings and performances have revolved around the theme of homosexuality and the conservative Vietnamese society's prejudice against it. Hanoi, in the 1990s, saw Tan delivering gay performances and paintings which both outraged and inspired people. Some of his shows were censored and/or shut down by authorities. This revolt against Vietnam's cultural heteronormativity runs parallel with the artist's attempt to break free from the rigid nationalist curriculum offered at the Hanoi Fine Arts University where he graduated in 1989. Tan's works are indeed products of the *doi moi* milieu of the 80s where Vietnamese artists since then have demonstrated a strong commitment in escaping from established patterns (the romanticisation of Vietnamese history in languid sceneries, for instance) and traditional values (what is moral and immoral). Within this new creative context, Tan developed a 'reactionary' lacquer painting technique. That is, rather than only adhering to the traditional method of 'building up and rubbing down' hidden layers of multi-coloured interfaces beneath to render visible the desired form on the surface, which Tan uses to create the background of his paintings, the openly gay artist makes marks on his 'canvas' by literally painting with paintbrush. As if seeing the building-up-and-rubbing-down process as a 'negative' creation which involves repression (hidden layers of paint beneath), Tan's return to the method of 'positive creation' through the use of paintbrush represents the ability to freely express oneself: 'It is the first line the artists puts that holds the strongest emotion,'⁹ said the artist.

Crazy Dogs, Crazy Men, Everything Crazy (2008)

This 'positive' creative process represents a state of mind where one is as close and at peace as possible with oneself. It is a state of mind where one is not compromised by external forces such as discriminatory state power or cultural dictatorship. For Tan, this state of mind, as demonstrated in the series 'How to be An Angel' on display at Thavibu Gallery in Bangkok in 2010, is the 'angelic state'. *Crazy Dogs, Crazy Men, Everything Crazy* (2008), which belongs to this series, shows the contrast between this angelic state and its counterpart through two different representations of beings: one with the two-legged archetypal physique of man and the other the four-legged body of the non-angelic beings. While the former is true to oneself, the latter is enslaved by the command of social norms and values.



Truong Tan | Crazy Dogs, Crazy Men, Everything Crazy, 2008 | Lacquer, dyes and mixed media on board | 110 x 90 cm

LE QUANG HA, b. 1963

Figuration of authority and subjection to it dominates Le Quang Ha's canvas. Practising both lacquer painting and oil on canvas, Ha has notably taken Vietnamese painting away from the 'beautiful' romance of Vietnam's cultural past. Sourcing from Vietnamese contemporary life, Ha's canvas shows his understanding of how different power structures operate and govern the lives of people in his society. The figuration of these power structures often comes in form of the uncanny and the grotesque, effecting distinctly apocalyptic overtones. Ha owes much of his visual vocabulary to Pablo Picasso's and Francis Bacon's rendition of the physiognomy. This is most conspicuous in such pieces as *Power* (1996), *Self-Portrait* (1999) and *Dreaming* (1999). Ha, however, did not begin his artistic career with intense engagement with the political. Despite the implementation of economic liberalisation known as *Doi Moi* in 1986 which opened up new possibilities, formerly restricted to social realism, Ha embarked his career by returning to the genres which had been suppressed by the revolution: The romanticised past attractive to Western audiences. This is most apparent in *Country Girl* (1995). However, this changed. The year he created *Power* (1996) marked a turning point in which he ceased looking back and, instead, started looking at the present. Since then, he has engaged in the 'new realism' which characterises his art to date. Ha's mission of his artistic practice, according to art historian and curator Shireen Naziree, is to 'cleanse society'—a situation in which art has become 'a vehicle of critique'.¹⁰

No God—This is My Land (2007)

In this painting, we see how Ha demonstrates his understanding of the intersection, and collaboration, between both local and international power structures in Vietnam. Against the backdrop of Hanoi, on the left side of the background, stands an architecturally-hybrid church representing the perennial legacy of European colonialism, shaping the past and present of Vietnam. With this, on the opposite side, flanking a pair of armed local authorities riding their superbikes, a metaphor for mobility and progress, is the Statue of Liberty, the emblem of 'freedom' and 'free market' characterising the post *Doi Moi* era. But 'freedom' is not to be taken at its face value here. Like the rest of the composition, the Statue of Liberty is rendered in menacing dark apocalyptic tone which is in stark contrast with the clear bright and hopeful sky on top. As much as the 'free' market is not really free, the market-oriented 'freedom' embodied in the painting is not a real freedom either. The tri-partite iconography—Europe on the left, local power taking centre stage, and the hovering US on the right—suggests how contemporary Vietnam, on its way forward, is locally governed by local authorities, as greedy as a drooling dog, yet, driven by both the 'progressiveness' of American-dominated global capitalism, and the legacy of European colonialism. The artist intentionally leaves out any trace of Vietnam's citizens in the painting. 'My Land' is obviously not their land.



Le Quang Ha | No God – This is My Land, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 195 x 155 cm | Illustrated on p. 12

PHAM AN HAI, b. 1967

Running deep in the rich depth of Pham An Hai's highly-textured colours and canvas of abstraction is the artist's varied currents of emotions. Started off as a figurative painter, Hai would soon begin to 'extract' the essence of the figurative and transform it into abstraction. The turning point of his move towards this non-figurative genre was his experience of a terrible road accident which he suffered from, physically and psychologically. Submerged and almost drowned in this cesspool of frustration and desperation, he felt the urge to paint. And painting abstract, for him, helps purge these negative emotions consuming his mind. Abstraction on canvas for him, therefore, is with deeper meaning—something like a large door opening to a vast ocean, as Phan Cam Thuong once wrote.¹¹ Hai has a Master degree of Fine Arts from Hanoi Fine Arts Institute in 2006. The subjects of his figurative painting were mountains, forests, ethnic minorities, their brocades and embroideries. But from around 2000 onwards, Hai has adopted abstraction as his main style. He is usually inspired by the quarters and streets of Hanoi and the contours of the architectures in the city. His solo shows at Thavibu Gallery including *The Flow of Time* (2009) and *Changing Seasons* (2015), however, reveal that he revisited nature, the subject of his pre-2000 figurative period, but in these exhibitions, he explored it in an abstract manner.

Night in Hanoi (2003)

'Hanoi is a city of artists—though few have made it their own', wrote Naziree.¹² But for Hai, this city of birth has definitely been his endless muse. It has inspired him since childhood and it continues to do so with its myriad of emotions, memories and history—all coming together through his sensitive fibres of being before he extracts it into a universal language of abstraction. In *Night in Hanoi* (2003), networks of grid-like shapes are emerging and forming the suggestive contours of buildings informing the cityscapes of Hanoi. But at the same time, any attempt for a figurative form to emerge from this richly textured surface is also, at once, cancelled out by the pervasive, yet subtly undulating, ripples of deep blue. In this painting, Hai seems to be defining the nocturnal beauty of Hanoi as something ephemeral and on the verge of disappearing, transforming concrete beauty into a subjective one inside his sensitive mind's eye.



Pham An Hai | Night in Hanoi, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 100 x 80 cm | Illustrated on p. 65⁷

NGUYEN TRUNG, b. 1940

Born in Soc Trang and enrolled in an art college in Saigon, Southern Vietnam, in 1962, amidst the horrors of the Vietnam War, Nguyen Trung's artistic training was synonymous to the art of survival where he spent much of his time dodging explosives and life-threatening situations. After the liberation in 1975, his repertoire was characterised by what the late curator and art historian Shireen Naziree called 'pastoral representations'.⁷ These early canvases are filled with the bounty of nature and the industrious people of the countryside. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, he began exploring abstractionism which he researched in depth during his time in Paris in the early 90s. The fact that he lives in Saigon (current Ho Chi Minh City) means that it was easier to try out abstractions, something he could not have done so easily in Hanoi since the North presented a more rigid socio-cultural climate towards something which was synonymous to American democracy. In an interview with Angela Molina in 2013, Trung revealed what 'abstraction' as an artistic representation means for him: 'Artistic representation is not a copy of something.' '...with my creative imagination, I give them different meanings and roles.'¹³ Turning the 'commonplace' into the 'poetic'.

9/11 (2001)

Nowhere can one find Trung's concept of abstraction, an artistic expression which turns the 'commonplace' into the 'poetic', better played out than in *9/11* (2001). Here in this painting, the terrible violence of the 9/11 Event was abstracted into a childlike montage which draws on a curious combination of oil, acrylic and papier mâché, which creates a sculptural dimension to the painting. The texture and colour are highly reminiscent of the tops of the traditional enamelled Dong Son bronze drums, which for him is a means to express his personal emotions and, at the same time, his never-ending quest for truth and serenity. Although Trung was deeply shocked by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, which he saw on television, he did not fuel his canvas with a gushing outrage as an expressionist would have done. On the contrary, if one compares this painting with his 'religious' paintings such as the equally serene *Monastery* (2002), one will understand that abstraction is, for the artist, a means to sublimate and pursue peace. Forgiveness is perhaps symbolised through the figure of Christ emerging from the bottom of the painting under the deep traumatic cut on the upper right of the canvas. The abstracted body of Christ is straddled with the catastrophic flight path and a luminous white impact point on the left side of the canvas. The artist's preference for a near monochromic effect of his colour scheme tells us that emotions through different arrays of colours are cancelled out in his 'artistic representation' of an external event, which, for Trung, holds an extraordinary meaning. Repetitions of scribbles scattering around this subtly textured canvas bear the mark of influences from Cy Twombly and the Chinese art master of the Song Dynasty, Mu Qi, who, for the artist, showed 'more clearly than anyone else' what 'abstraction' really is about. At the end of each of Trung's artistic pursuit lies an ever ephemeral object called 'beauty' which, according to him, almost 'does not exist and, if it does, it is merely a blurry shadow, which sometimes makes us happy and want to start looking for it all over again.'



Nguyen Trung | 9/11, 2011 | Oil, acrylic and mixed media on canvas | 100 x 100 cm | Illustrated on p. 61⁷

U LUN GYWE, b. 1930

Central to U Lun Gywe's artistic practice is his unique ability to interpret French Impressionism, which for him is 'the most refined form of artistic expression', in ways that reflect his own Myanmar identity, hence the self-given title the 'Burmese Impressionist'. U Lun Gywe's formal training at the Art Institute of Specialist Teachers' Training in Yangon reflected the coming together of the postcolonial institutionalisation of education and the Southeast Asian tradition of master-student relationship. There, U Lun Gywe studied under many notable Myanmar pioneer artists, but he attributes the late U Thein Han as his foremost teacher who has been the most important influence on his life and career. At the art school U Lun Gywe learnt to paint by copying and mastering 'correct' form endorsed by the conservative academic values typically taught during this era. But even at this stage, U Lun Gywe already felt the urge to find his own artistic vocabulary. A sojourn in China in 1964 provided an important experience which added to his fascination with and interpretation of French Impressionism - a school of art which was first introduced to him by his teacher U Thein Han, a student of the legendary U Ban Nyan. Although U Lun Gywe did not pursue the Chinese art of brush and ink, he has come to paint from memory, relying on the mind's eye, as the Chinese do, rather than paint from a sketchbook as customarily practiced in the occidental tradition. Furthermore, his study in Germany in 1971, which allowed him to see the works of European masters he had earlier studied at school with his own eyes, confirmed his preference for Impressionism over Expressionism. As for him, although Expressionist paintings are 'interesting', Impressionism is 'fluid and fresh'—it is 'a reflection of the inner self.'¹⁴ U Lun Gywe started teaching at the Art Department of the State School of Education in 1956, then transferred to the State School of Fine Arts in Yangon in 1958. In 1979, however, he decided to become a full-time painter. This marked a new direction in his painting style where the composition and rendition have become looser, the palettes richer, adding more to the exuberance. The artist's post-1979 practice sees the act of painting as an attempt to find balance between representation and being. *Carrying Water Jars* (2008) and *Female Abstraction* (2009) are perhaps two most representative examples of these traits. The artist's dynamism, fluid brush strokes and the subtle blending of colours are the factors why U Lun Gywe is considered Myanmar's 'master' painter.

The Artist and His Model (2005)

Not only embodying the post-1979 characteristics, *The Artist and His Model* (2005) is also one of U Lun Gywe's best works which clearly demonstrates his ability to yoke together Western visual tropes/techniques and the local Myanmar culture. Viewers familiar with Western art are likely to see the similarity between this painting and, among other possibilities, Johannes Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* also known as *The Allegory of Painting* or *Painter in His Studio* (circa 1665-1668) which depicts an artist painting a woman posing as model in his studio. A thinking exercise would reveal how similarly or differently the Myanmar artist approaches this trope popular in Western art history. While Vermeer's female model is carrying a trumpet and wearing a laurel wreath—symbols referencing *Pheme* and the Muse of History, respectively, U Lun Gywe seems to have localised his Muse to don a unique Myanmar hairstyle decorated with flowers while fluttering her fan. While it is widely believed that the figure of the painter in Vermeer's source painting represents the artist himself, the figure of the artist in U Lun Gywe's Myanmar version of this popular Western trope is confirmed to be U Lun Gywe himself. But instead of keeping the painter's back to the viewers, U Lun Gywe seems to have inverted the figuration of the artist with his face turning towards the viewers while his Muse turning her back to us. This inversion invites a further investigation of what possible implications could arise from such a translative decision.



U Lun Gywe | The Artist and His Model, 2005 | Oil on canvas | 180 x 120 cm | Illustrated on p. 10/11¹⁵

HTEIN LIN, b. 1966

Unlike most artists in this collection, Htein Lin, a law graduate, did not receive any formal artistic training at an institution. Self-taught, he learned how to paint through the course of his lived experience. According to curator Shireen Naziree, while in a refugee camp in the jungle, he met Sit Nyein Aye, a Mandalay artist, who taught him the fundamentals of drawing and the formal aspects of painting. Another cellmate, the poet Maung Tin Thit who had trained as a doctor taught Htein Lin basic anatomy. The effect of this organic learning is a unique style of high versatility and unconventional use of materials—something that sets Htein Lin apart from those trained at an academy.¹⁶ The *People's Desire* series (2010), for instance, boasts the artist's intriguing amalgam of local patterns and a painting style which could be described as expressionistic. *Angry Wave* (2009) too, outstandingly presents a local temperament in an international language of expressionism. Being imprisoned for his pro-democracy advocacy from 1998 to 2004, he made use of cigarette lighters and the cotton of prison uniforms as the materials for his painting. With 'lived experience' as the major source of his art practices which range from painting, installation to performance art, Htein Lin's artistic projects are very much tied to the locality he embeds himself in. He once explained '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* (2009) is a good example of how he engages with the politics of the place he lives in. *How do you find London?* (2009), also, is a product of his direct experience with the city of London where he lived from 2006 to 2013, following his marriage with a British Ambassador to Myanmar. In this painting, one can see how the artist negotiates with 'otherness' and makes an unfamiliar space a place more likely for him to call 'home'. Amidst the architectural landmarks which define the cityscape of London, Htein Lin, among other things, empties out the statue of Lord Nelson in Trafalgar square and replaces it with that of Lord Buddha.

How do you find Yangon? (2017)

Having moved back from London to Myanmar since July 2013, Htein Lin, according to Claire Wilson, observed several changes in his home country. People no longer have time. His artist friends, for instance, are always in a rush. No one has time to meet and discuss their ideas about art. And although there is more freedom for artists to express themselves than before, religion and ethnic differences are still sensitive issues.¹⁷ These observations very interestingly play out in *How do you find Yangon?* (2017). Tugged away in small corners amidst the imposing religious icons and architectural landmarks which define Myanmar's cityscape as we know it are petites logos of different corporations as well as construction cranes. These range from Telenor, KBZ, MPT, AYA Bank, YBS. *How do you find Yangon?* is a topography which shows the spatial tension between tradition and modernity. From a society where temples and religious routines are the skeleton of the Yangon lives, Htein Lin seems to be subtly suggesting that these capitalist infrastructures, though not yet so prominent, are changing the old ways and rhythms of the Myanmar lives. Far from being monolithic in his representation of 'Yangon', a mosque with its characteristic minarets stands side by side a Buddhist temple and a Christian church.



Htein Lin | How do you find Yangon?, 2017 | Acrylic on canvas | 191 x 151 cm

NGE LAY, b. 1979

Nge Lay's artistic practice centres on the use of digital manipulation of photography to investigate the *status quo* of various public discourses. A holder of degrees both in fine art and economics, Nge Lay's corpus of works demonstrates the socially-engaged role of art. Her practice calls into questions what is considered in society 'normal' or 'natural'. In the *Endless Story* series (2013), for instance, Lay uses digital technology to either crop out the original faces in the source photographs, as seen in *Endless Story (1)*, or superimpose them with shadowy layers, as seen in *Endless Story (2)*, *(3)* and *(4)*. The effect of such manipulation on these old photographic portraits originally taken in Thuyeddan, Panduan Township in Bago Division between the 1930s and 1970s is not only a ghostly appearance. Nge Lay's artistic intervention also significantly disrupts these old photographs' attempt to convince the viewers of the subjects' coherent identities. Indeed, contrary to the conventional use of portraiture as a way to construct a stable identity of the represented subject, Lay presents to the viewers collaged portraitures. Her digital manipulation brings to our attention the constructedness of the photographic image and the complexity of different layers of time existing between the subject of the photograph and the spectators. Nge Lay is no strangers to Biennales in the region including the Singapore Biennale (2013) and the 8th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary (2015) in Brisbane where she exhibited *Sick Classroom*. The installation is a product of her long-time stay and interaction with villagers from whom she learned about the poor state of education in rural Myanmar and with whom she collaborated to produce the sculptures of the teacher and students which are the major components of the installation.¹⁸

Futuristic Women in Those Days (2012)

The coming together of different temporal planes typical of Nge Lay's practice recurs in *Futuristic Women in Those Days* (2012). But in this work, reference to time is coupled with the testing of the boundary separating the notions of 'male' and 'female' that the Myanmar society, and also elsewhere, holds. The series is structured on two binary-opposites: social signs pertaining to the male and the female. Noodles, fish, shrimp and chicken legs are signs society associates with women whereas robots are the signifier of the male sex. In this subversive series, Nge Lay disrupts the space usually assigned to the female—the fresh food market—with a sign usually associated with male: the robot. But these robots, however, bear the face of the woman artist herself - the strategy of physiognomic transformation we have also seen in the *Endless Story* series and the *Urban Story* series. Indeed, as curator Shireen Naziree puts it, the *Futuristic Women in Those Days* series draws attention to the boundaries, limits and hopes of the world Nge Lay moves through. 'At a glance, in today's Myanmar society, sexual discrimination in our everyday life and work environment is not as strong as before. However, due to deep-rooted conventions, as well as economic and political imbalances, the role of women has as not yet been recognised despite the fact that an icon such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is more powerful than any male,' so reflected Nge Lay on the position of women in her society.¹⁹



Nge Lay | Futuristic Women in Those Days (1-9), 2012 | Prints on archival paper, Edition 1/8 | 30 x 35 cm

MYINT SWE, b. 1956

As an artist who believes in the political potential of art, Myint Swe's practices are engulfed in the politics and the political economy of Myanmar. 1988 was the landmark year for anyone interested in Myint Swe's art. It was the year when the military junta came into power and also the year when Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Myanmar to care for her ailing mother, a trip coinciding with mass demonstrations against the government, leaving thousands of people dead. It was ultimately the year that put an end to Suu Kyi's freedom and, yet, the one that made her become the national, or even international, icon of hope and democracy. This was also when the military government officially changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. Censorship of the arts in Myanmar was exceptionally rigid though it had not completely disabled the potential for socially explicit expression. Nevertheless, politically charged paintings were only to be found in alternative venues, generally outside Myanmar. But for someone like Myint Swe who primarily worked and exhibited in Myanmar, an alternative means of communication has to be invented and relied upon. Coded imageries therefore fill Myint Swe's canvases. The artist, for instance, uses different types of flowers such as lotuses, roses and water hyacinths as symbols to refer to Suu Kyi and her political importance for Myanmar. These are *The Lotus Beauty* (1999); *The Enduring Water Hyacinth* (2000); *The Rose (1)* (2003); *The Rose (2)* (2003). In *Dead Lock* (2003), a larger-than-life padlock blocking a fragile woman's access through the door is used as a metaphor to reference Suu Kyi's plight, and her supporters', of being barred from democracy and freedom²⁰. Apart from symbolism, Swe also makes use of English letters to communicate hidden messages. In *Aung San Suu Kyi: Freedom from Fear* (1990), for example, the artist uses three of the letter 'F' to convey Aung San Suu Kyi's principle of 'freedom from fear' as a way to avoid corruption of power. That power itself is not the source of corruption, but the fear of losing it. This intriguing use of letters and words recur in paintings such as *Balance Act: Myanmar vs. Burma* (2001) and *Three Secretaries* (2001).

Development is a LIE (2003)

Such a strategy, however, culminates in *Development is a LIE* (2003) where what our eyes first register as modern buildings, after looking hard and well, give way to three letters making up the word 'LIE'. Myint Swe's skill for hiding the word underneath the painterly surface is admirable. Viewers who glance past the painting quickly are likely to miss the hidden message. This is most probably because Myint Swe effectively uses perspective, on the left side of the canvas, to create a sense of depth and lure the gaze of the viewers to the sketchy yellow buildings behind the bridge. Such a direction of gaze and visual contextualisation makes us associate what could also be seen as the letters 'L' and 'I' as, among other buildings in the background, two buildings. The artist's choice to doubly render these modern buildings also as the word 'LIE' reveals his opinion about the way modernity is handled in Myanmar. Through this double sense, Myint Swe wants to convey that 'development' under the junta only means development of infrastructure, not of the people who are here figured, on the right half of the canvas, in such marked desperation. The helpless horizontal female bodies, on the right side of the canvas, are contrasted with the victimising vertical male one marked by a hanging penis adroitly hidden in the upper right corner of the canvas - a construction of the visual language of 'rape' which can both be read literally and metaphorically.



Myint Swe | Development is a LIE, 2003 | Oil on canvas | 210 x 150 cm (2 panels) | Illustrated on p. 67²⁰ | Exhibited at Dahlem Museum, Berlin and Chiang Mai Art Museum

MPP YEI MYINT, b. 1953

MPP Yei Myint is a senior Myanmar artist who is known for his 2001 intercultural series including *Van Gogh Visits Bagan* and *Gauguin Visits Bagan* where reproduction of figures and visual vocabulary pertaining to Van Gogh and Gauguin are inserted or juxtaposed with iconic scenes of Bagan representing Myanmar culture. His painterly invitation for the West to meet with the East speaks for his fascination of both Western modernism and the local Myanmar craftsmanship: he lives in the midst of an enormous amount of artefacts, paintings and sculptures. MPP Yei Myint studied at the State School of Fine Arts in Mandalay with the legendary Win Pe. He was one of the two Myanmar artists who was nominated for the 1999 Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards. MPP Yei Myint's fascination with intercultural art does not stop at conflating Western modernism (Van Gogh and Gauguin) with Myanmar local visual language. *Eroticism in Black and White*, an acrylic series executed in 2006 on handmade paper on canvas, deserves a great attention and mention. Working in a country where censorship is stringent and conservatism is high, MPP Yei Myint shares a cultural and artistic milieu with fellow Myanmar artists such as Myint Swe where Western language of abstraction is applied and readjusted for local visual flavours to codify hidden messages or images. Myint's works are also politically engaged. One of such vocal works includes *National Registration Card* (1992) which is in the collection of the Singapore Art Museum.²¹

Ménage à Trois (2006)

In the context of production where neither nudes nor erotic paintings were allowed, MPP Yei Myint, in the *Eroticism in Black and White* series, invented a new local language of abstraction, mixing Western abstraction with Eastern-styled territorial delineation, to 'suggest' Myanmar nude bodies engaging in an amorous activity on canvas. *Ménage à Trois* (2006) rests on the fluidity of brushstrokes and the uniquely Southeast Asian¹ curved lines, used to delineate the contour of the body, to conjure up the three sensuous lovers engaging in a *ménage à trois*. Sexual and almost pornographic, it is an artwork which should be seen as revolt against the order of the military state's demand on how their citizens should live.

¹Yei Myint's style of bodily delineation is highly comparable to that of the late Thai artist and poet Angkarn Kalayanapong's.



MPP Yei Myint | Ménage à Trois, 2006 | Pencil and acrylic on canvas and handmade paper | 143 x 122 cm

AUNG KYAW HTET, b. 1965

Among the other Myanmar artists featured in this Collection, Aung Kyaw Htet is perhaps the most outstanding in his relationship with, or some may say distance from, Western modernity. While others make reference to Western artistic languages and tropes in their practices, which reflects their desire to be modern, Aung Kyaw Htet has dedicated himself to the portrayal of what he describes as the distinctly Myanmar everyday lives. This includes figuration of people in his immediate surroundings such as *Mother* (2003); *Grandmother* (2001); *My Old Neighbour* (2006) and *Enjoying A Break* (2006) which depicts a group of local elderly women gathering in circle and taking a break, smoking or preparing their favourite self-made cigars. Depiction of local scenes such as *Floating Market* (2001); *In the Village* (2002) and *Mauyaw Lake* (1999) is also an important part of his repertoire. But most outstanding of all is his dedication to the monastic life in Myanmar, especially his figuration of the young novices and nuns, which for him, according to Shireen Naziree, is ‘a meditation on his world...that reflects a consciousness of the materiality of Myanmar’s deeply rooted Buddhist culture’.²²

Draping the Robes (2007)

Draping the Robes is a culmination of Aung Kyaw Htet’s oil painting practice - the skill which he started acquiring in 1994. Airy and translucent, the painting is a testimony to Aung Kyaw Htet’s mastery over the medium of oil on canvas, something that tempera cannot achieve. The painting depicts a young novice gently spreading his ethereal maroon robe with both hands in order to drape it around his body. Spectators with good knowledge of the Myanmar cultural life will not find it difficult to arrive at the symbolism imbued in the painting: a young life being protected under the grace of Buddhism—a way of life deeply ingrained in the existence of the people of Myanmar. Against the critique that Aung Kyaw Htet’s representation of his subjects on canvas isolates them from their actual contexts, which may result in a romanticisation of an exotic culture in the eye of the West, Shireen Naziree argues that Aung Kyaw Htet’s ‘efforts are not superficial or self-conscious efforts to showcase his heritage and tradition as merely decorative art.’ She recounts the artist’s emphasis that his art is never a fabrication of design, but ‘a direct connection with the monks and their surroundings’. This involves the artist’s own personal experience and an intriguing attachment to monkhood. Aung Kyaw Htet often recalls the period when he, ordained as a young novice, so willingly followed rigorous rituals. There he experienced camaraderie, warmth and comfort in the company of his fellow novices - the nostalgic feeling suffusing in his paintings depicting groups of young novices and nuns. For Aung Kyaw Htet, monastic lives underlie the lives and development of all Myanmar children - a fact well underlined in *Draping the Robes*. As much as temples play a big role in the Myanmar people’s lives, it is customary that both boys and girls, usually at the age of seven, enter the monastic life and allow Buddhism to become part of their lives since.



Aung Kyaw Htet | Draping the Robes, 2007 | 113 x 84 cm | Illustrated on p. 89²³

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