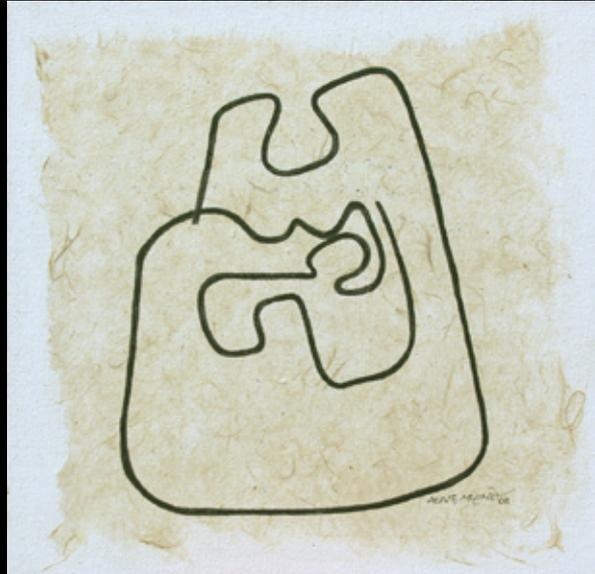


An Exhibition of
Conceptual Art from
Myanmar/Burma

AUNG MYINT, AYE KO
PHYU MON, NYEIN CHAN SU



SPEAKING ALONE

Thavibu Gallery 21 February - 15 March, 2009
Curator: Shireen Naziree



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SPEAKING ALONE

Shireen Naziree

Myanmar... the past has been punctuated with so many waves of repression that any sort of sensible society must renegotiate its relationships with its rich historical past as well as with the dynamic flux that represents the rest of Southeast Asia. Geographically speaking, Myanmar's isolation has become the face of its current national identity which is underwritten by the extreme conditions that affect its civil and social environment. Decades of social deconstruction and economic unease have reconfigured its geographic representation, which is clearly distant from the global intersection of technology and visual culture that allow openness, free movement and interconnectedness. This national fragility results in wasted vitalities and the forced isolation of a population and culture obliged to play their assigned roles with quiet dignity.

This dynamic inevitably leads one to consider whether these forces allow for a blossoming of artistic activity and natural dialogue among artistic and cultural practitioners. As raw material, this uncertainty can be transformed into visual poetry and become a point of departure for unanticipated artistic expeditions through irony and allusion, as well as homage to traditional cultural and moral values. Keeping in mind Myanmar's rich cultural past and its current national identity, it goes without saying that any shifting of cultural conditions will affect the production of art in meaningful ways.

Most pertinent to the understanding of Myanmar's cultural landscape with its melange of activity is Myanmar's capital – Yangon. Yangon is above all a commercial centre with a rich history of international exchange. Throughout the British colonial rule that lasted almost a hundred years, Yangon was a hub of international commerce. Colonial Yangon with its spacious layout and mix of exquisite colonial and traditional architecture was known for its beauty. Despite its current dilapidated state, the arts inevitably have their foundation in the city's former past glory. Yangon has a number of private art galleries and artists whose work continues to be a vital export commodity and source of income, although it is true that there are fewer foreign visitors nowadays.

With virtually no state support and with only two art academies offering basic training best suited for artisans, Yangon does not have the grassroots initiatives necessary for an innovative and internationally competitive art scene. While it is not uncommon to encounter numerous self-taught artists, it could only be expected that serious professional artists (either progressive or conservative) would become increasingly committed to finding discursive avenues to explore issues and expose their art environment where “almost everybody aspires to be an artist.” This attitude is not only embedded in the

polarization that has dramatically altered every facet of economic practice, but also lies in a historically-based nostalgia that has become one of the foundational sources of artistic inspiration.

Although artistic production is often permeated with the nostalgia of a quiet paradise that idolises the past and is deeply engaged in the serenity of Buddhism, simultaneously there exists a desire to reflect on the present with its contemporary values, as well as history. In addition, there is the mapping of an expanded field by subtly negotiating the relationship between the visible and the invisible. This refers to the subliminal aspects of culture that are articulated through everyday events and daily practices, which suggest a more circuitous commentary on Yangon's contemporary art scene.

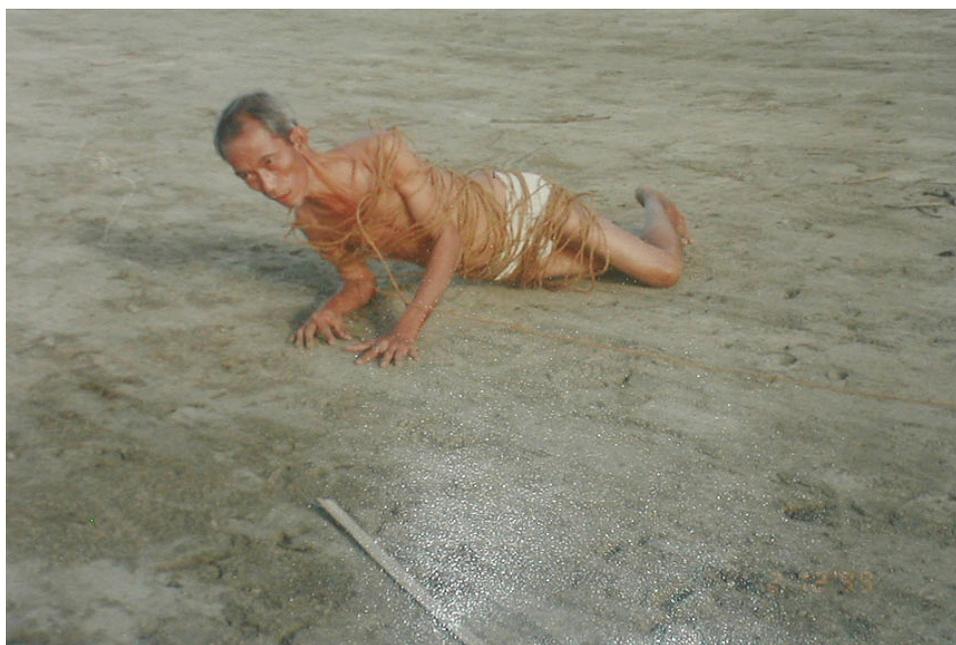
Conceptual art and performance art often focus on negating art's commodity status, a crucial dimension that the global contemporary art market now manifestly appropriates. A handful of Yangon artists clearly embrace conceptual art practices and performance art that subtly focus on the notion of social sculpture, which in turn consistently addresses the structures of power, challenging the controlled ambiguity that generally characterizes art in order to promote critical awareness and dialogue. In a place where art feels more literal than ever, conceptual art practices actively

reinterpret the commodification of art and ideas to remind us what it really means to have the liberty to think differently.

With Yangon's cultural landscape seemingly isolated, it is tempting to question how conceptual art practices may be perceived to have long-lasting effects while claiming to be original yet inclusive, autonomous yet relevant. An art space such as the Lokanat Art Gallery in downtown Yangon has served as a vital social and intellectual gathering point of the city's artistic scene since the 1970s. Within its downtown location in a time-scarred building, Yangon's art community has literally preserved an artistic lifestyle of quiet yet determined opposition to the flattening of cultural meaning and imagination. This has occurred at a time when the speed of an electronically linked planet is reflected in the swift expansion of art practices beyond traditional painting and sculpture to an inclusiveness that represents the best possible means of making personal artistic statements. Freed from the constraints of the canvas, conceptual art allows the artist freedom to express any concept through any means, especially relating to the politics of the day or the politics of the self.

Aung Myint's art is a clear product of the dynamic interplay between art and life in Myanmar.

A self-taught artist, Aung Myint graduated as a psychologist from the Rangoon Arts and Science University in 1968. Although his interest in art began at an early age, it wasn't until 1969 that he actively pursued artistic expression when he participated in a group show in Yangon. Sympathetic to the political struggle that has nurtured present-day Myanmar, he sought new ways of seeing that would parallel his concerns. Given the lack of support and exposure to modern art during the latter half of the twentieth century, largely as a result of the introduction of socialism in 1962, Aung Myint became one of the founding members of Yangon's Inya Gallery of Art in 1989. With



▲ **Aung Myint in performance at Chaungtha beach, Pathain, 1997**

his own synthesis of Theravada Buddhist influences in traditional Burmese art (where non-realist depictions reflected the artist's inner visions and spirituality) and the interpretive characteristics of Western abstract expressionism (amongst others), Aung Myint became a leading figure on Yangon's art scene.

Aung Myint and his peers were seeking new dimensions of expression and were ready for a new explosion in art. The work *Beginning and End* in 1995 marked Aung Myint's debut as a pioneer of performance art. The aesthetic that developed, inherited from his vanguard experimental art, would extend itself to earn him international recognition and become an important element in the development of new media art in Myanmar. A renowned painter (Aung Myint was the recipient of the Juror's Choice Award at the 2002 ASEAN Arts Awards competition), he used his experience of examining the illusory space of the canvas to configure his place in performance art by making of himself a piece of material, which together with movement and other elements allowed for complex and emotional statements.

Together with a number of noted Burmese artists, Aung Myint elevated the status of performance art in Myanmar, particularly through participation in numerous international performance festivals. Aung Myint's interactive practices reflect the sentiments of

many Burmese artists and intellectuals. Combining live performances with other forms of expression such as installations and video, artists parodied Myanmar's politics of isolation, often seizing on its idiosyncrasies to highlight their situation.

Both Aye Ko and Nyein Chan Su are internationally renowned artists whose multimedia practices include performance. In capitalising on the frustration of their social environment, both artists often use graphic and cosmetic representations to illustrate their statements. Also a self-taught artist, Aye Ko made his international

debut in performance in 1999 at the Asiatopia II performance art festival in Bangkok. With subsequent performances in Hong Kong, Nagoya and New York, Aye Ko often used elements such as fire and water to support his ritualised movements. Prominent in Aye Ko's performance works is the use of the written word, which can at once be quietly revealing and secretive, a source of bonding as well as of separation that often portrays people under impossible conditions. It is also a dramatic testament to the power of words and the way words are linked to the direct and indirect experiences that constitute the apprehension of his world



▲ **Aye Ko in performance in Yangon, 2006**

Working with multiple artistic disciplines, Aye Ko produces results that are striking at many levels. What is often remarkable is his association with nature. While nature is often reduced to an abstract form, he incorporates sources from philosophy and his own personal history in his work, sources that he explores simultaneously. For Aye Ko, the challenge remains a constant discovery of trying to weave concepts of the individual, the spiritual and nature together into a seamless continuum of reconciliation amidst the uncertainty and harshness of his social environment.

Nyein Chan Su is best known for his vibrant artistic expression and free association performances.

A founding member of Yangon's Studio Square Art Gallery, NCS – as he is more popularly known – is recognised for his eclectic practices, often formally challenging the primacy of the painted surface. NCS revels in the excess of meaning, which has reduced the gestures of his canvasses to a fluency that is a rarity in Myanmar art. NCS does not limit himself by the hierarchy of thought but instead strives to create a human intimacy whether in his paintings, installations or performance works. Multiple identities, interactivity and narrative choices join together with complicity to form the axis of NCS's works. Less reliant on the construction of identity, whether individual or cultural, but rather on psychological events, NCS has created works with peripheral vision in which sight extends beyond the borders of physical location. These elements are particularly visible in his series of "Nat" paintings. The artist has used these indigenous spirits, an important part of Myanmar's cultural and spiritual grammar, as thumbprints or signatures to refer to his Burmese identity.

Nevertheless, it is in performance where he boldly defines his situation as an artist within his country's painful modern history. His early works were site specific such as the crowded streets of downtown Yangon, which he chose to boldly define his own fragile emotional states. However, he claims, often with humour, that his works are not particularly rooted in



▲ **Nyein Chan Su in performance in Bangkok, 2008**
At Thavibu Gallery's 10th Anniversary

any particular social or historical circumstances. As much as anything, NCS's work is about the assertion of his own persona.

In Southeast Asia, it is no coincidence that the emergence of women artists is one of the most interesting developments in contemporary art. While it is a fact that feminist symbolism has incorporated a number of attitudes inspired by the rich history of the region, the identity of feminist art practice in Myanmar remains ambiguous. However, it is imperative to understand that in Myanmar both individual consciousness and a system of social communication require time to establish themselves in a differential relationship to the social environment. And neither of these can occur in an environment of isolation because their very being depends on exposure.

Artist Phyu Mon is a rarity. Born in Mandalay but now living in Yangon, she makes use of a different set of Myanmar traditions. Her work is based on the cultural values that have encompassed her world as a daughter of Myanmar, but with an element of ironic contemporary commentary. Digital photography has allowed Phyu Mon to work at the intersection of several cogent themes, although gender, presence and absence are paramount in her work, which has also included performance. Her early career focused on paintings that reflected her interest in surrealism.



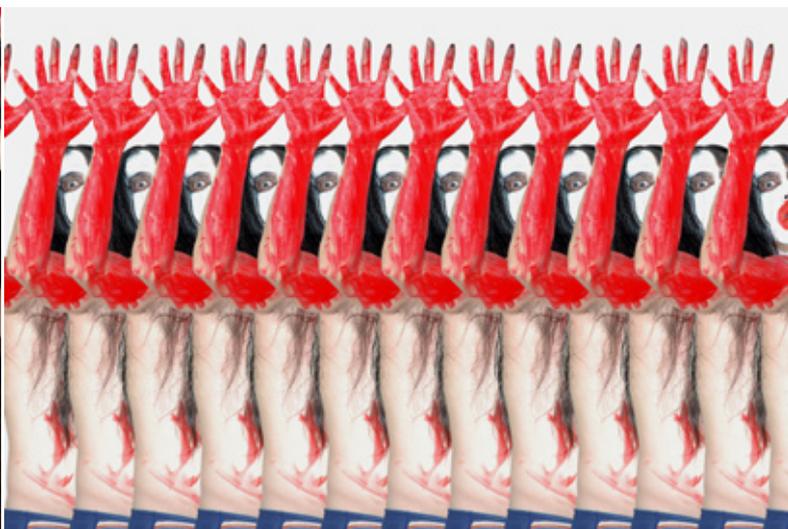
▲ Phyu Mon in performance in Yangon, 2008

▶
Transfixed: What am I?
Giclee print on archival paper, edition of 2
90 x 136 cm

Intellectual explorations of poetry and the spirituality that embodies the self have provided her with a link to her world fractured by prejudices, philosophies and crises of identity.

Digital art has allowed Phyu Mon to turn her attention to personal narratives that reflect her desires and quest for a greater identity and social equity for women, although she asserts that these developments often reflect economic realities and the subservient position of Burmese women, an issue that has become an ongoing theme in her performance art.

“SPEAKING ALONE” re-enacts the practices of these four artists. The exhibition unfolds aspects of the ongoing story of the solitary situation in which artists in Myanmar find themselves. Under the present circumstances, artists have become increasingly interested in finding alternative discursive avenues to shelter their artistic expressions from the impact that has dramatically altered many facets of their world. Digital electronic technology and the monolithic power of the global industrialised art markets have encouraged artists to reinvest their aesthetics with new dimensions. While this dialectic appears to be in opposition to a cultural landscape seemingly little altered by time, the limited available technology has



Transfixed: Where am I?, 2008 ▲
Giclee print on archival paper, edition of 2
90 x 136 cm

Transfixed: Inside Out!, 2008 ▲
Giclee print on archival paper, edition of 2
90 x 136 cm

allowed these artists to transcend typical representations with renewed authenticity and stronger resonance, even if only as a critical reference point at a time when internationally there is a clear and dynamic interplay between art, technology and life in general.

Transfixed features three digital prints on paper and a video work by **Aye Ko**. This combination of digital, video and performance art reveals Aye Ko's artistic practice as an ongoing exploration of an irresolvable relationship between his ethos and, by extension, the vacuum of his social environment.

Aye Ko subtly harnesses the viewer's habits of perception to access his works, clearly understanding that art is absorbed through the senses. He uses imagery from his own physical world to create pictures inspired by his own spirituality and emotions wrapped within a humanist perspective, which he questions by using his physical self as a canvas to illustrate and mimic the issues he highlights.

Aye Ko's dynamic images in *Transfixed: What am I?*, accomplished through varied camera angles and sophisticated montage editing, owe much to the fragmented shapes of Cubism, in which multiple views of reality seen in repetitive layering allow for multiple understandings of reality. In dealing with issues of identity, Aye Ko frequently uses his own image to

illustrate the notion of alienation and to involve his audience intimately with his narrative. By moving away from the conventional boundaries of representation, he confronts the difficulties of being three-dimensional in a two-dimensional pictorial. The mediation of digital photography in Aye Ko's work closes the gap between dimensionality and flatness: Aye Ko and his pictures assume equal presences in the photographic frame. Typically in *Transfixed: Where am I?*, he presents his emotions as imagery, emphasising the negative through a potent use of primary colours.

Aye Ko makes full use of his artistic space. *Transfixed: Inside Out!* is both provocative and quiet as he fully externalises the notion of self-exploration. In his video *Transfixed: Silent Escape*, he continues the trajectory, touching on an overlay of gestures that allow him to manipulate the surface as a painter engages the canvas. These gestures demonstrate that sophistication and dignified artistic eloquence can continue to thrive even in adversity. The video draws us into Aye Ko's interior life – which is to say, his soul, through a kind of spirit photography that is evoked by a palette of black and white. Aye Ko's video concerns itself with the viewer's reaction to his emotional solitary state. It does so by allowing viewers a glimpse into an historical framework through gestures that he hopes will inspire contemplation of the outer world that surrounds

Transfixed: Silent Escape, 2008 ▼

Video still

62.45 minutes, edition of 4



him. Within the context of Myanmar artists, Aye Ko has gained the most international recognition for his explorations of self beyond conventional boundaries, using the camera as a conduit for real life.

But Aye Ko has not been utterly solitary in his isolation.

Emotions are the places where different memories and concepts of representation collide. For **Aung Myint**, the concept of memory is particularly vexing. The loss of his mother at four years of age has with varying degrees vexed his emotional stability.

Also drawing upon the political, economic and cultural considerations that have dictated his intellectual makeup, he has constantly attempted to knit the

fragments together and reconnect with his past. For the past several years, Aung Myint has explored issues of his identity, with a focus on its manifestation in the emotional ideal of a mother's love. In contrast to Aye Ko, Aung Myint describes his melancholy not only in spiritual terms, but as a state of mind that is ultimately as life-affirming as it is negating – delicately balancing his emotions. In *Tears for my Mother, My Motherland*, a body of work that he has executed for this exhibition, he offers viewers two signature drawings on handmade paper, collage and installation.

Even though Aung Myint's work does not make grand political statements (as "SPEAKING ALONE" is less about nationhood and more about the artists' transnational or transitional circumstances in relation to



Mother and Child (5), 2008 ▲
Acrylic and handmade paper on canvas
82 x 82 cm



Mother and Child, 2007 ▲
Ceramic
18 x 23 cm



Mother and Child (6), 2008 ▲
Acrylic and handmade paper on canvas
82 x 82 cm



Elements from Tears for My Mother, My Motherland, 2009
Traditional Myanmar papier mâché doll and mixed media paintings
Size variable



◀ **Farewell**, 2008
Collage and pencil on canvas
85 x 117 cm

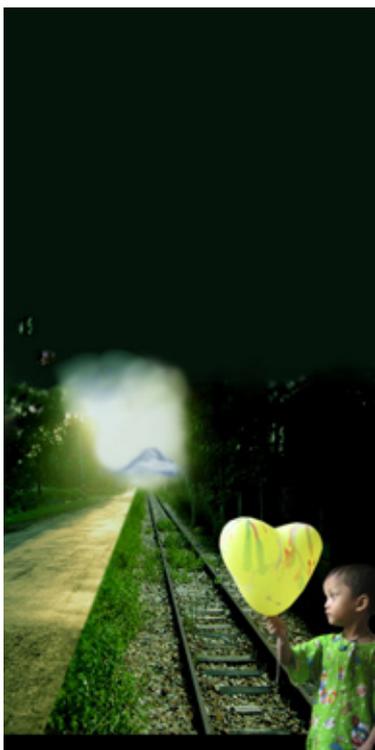
sonal memories; by engaging familiar objects of his childhood which are imbued with deep meanings together with his signature sketches, Aung Myint defines where he places himself in relation to the art object. For the installation environment also allows for a greater participation by viewers, as Aung Myint invites them to enter the artwork in a literal sense.

For “SPEAKING ALONE,” **Phyu Mon** favours genteel appreciation of the everyday in her ongoing series of digital photographs titled *Hope*, with images of children and women gazing into the male stronghold that she perceives dominant in her society. She deals cogently with the themes of gender, presence and absence. The expansion of various media now allows artists to tell their own stories, and thus digital manipulation has enabled her to undertake an ever deepening exploration of the self.

their living conditions and impending paradigm shifts), he does present the transitory condition of the economic environment of Myanmar in his mixed media collage *Farewell*, where he addresses the paradoxes of present-day Myanmar. This work respectively questions the bigger picture of Myanmar’s lost consumer economy and social degradation.

His mixed media installation combining sketches, traditional toys and found objects is rich with per-

Phyu Mon’s dominant concern is with the status of women, their inner tensions and despair at the challenges they face. For regardless of any token gestures of equality, it is ultimately the male who is in control. It becomes clear that *Hope* is one of her major projects as it stands as a beautiful testament to the positive values embodied in images such as a child with a balloon. The cultural qualities of her photographs also relate to the desire to hold onto what is being lost. If the images are meant to be a

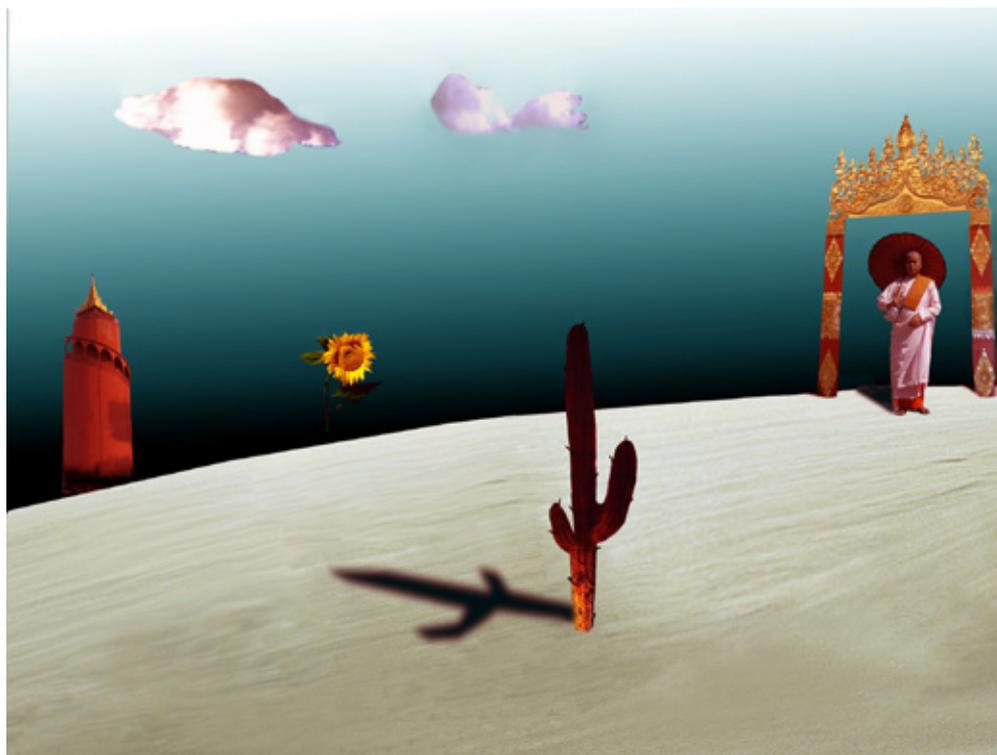


▲ **Hope (1)**, 2008
 Lambda print on archival paper
 edition of 2
 61 x 122 cm



▲ **Hope (3)**, 2008
 Lambda print on archival paper,
 edition of 2
 60 x 91 cm

Hope (2), 2008 ▼
 Lambda print on archival paper,
 edition of 2
 61 x 122 cm



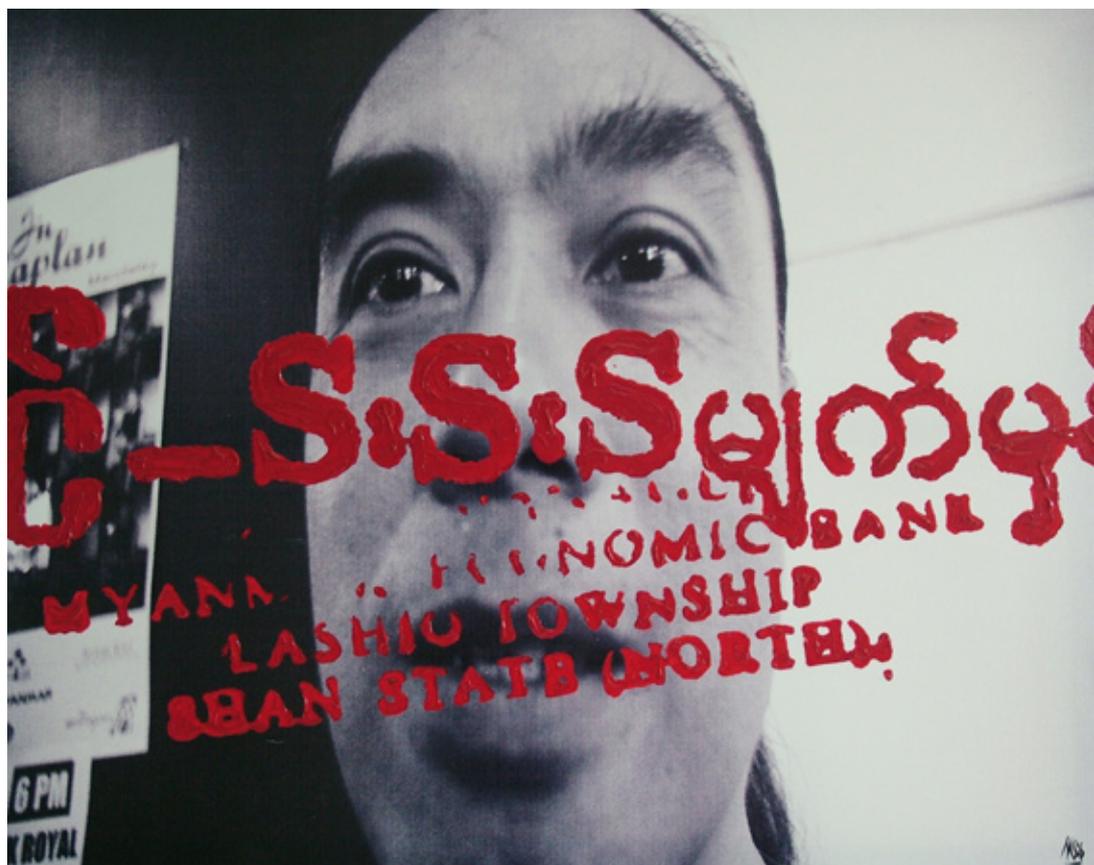
▶ **Hope (4)**, 2008
 Lambda print on
 archival paper,
 edition of 2
 68 x 91 cm



memorial to a passing era in her own personal life (her youth in Mandalay), they also reveal the loss of place that had a significant impact in that life. *Hope* is nostalgic as it gives us a sense of Phyu Mon's own emotional location. Through her connectedness with time, place and situation, Phyu Mon has produced an allegorical body of work that offers a rare contemporary engagement with moral consciousness in a world that prefers to bury its horrors.

The striking images comprising **Nyein Chan Su's** latest body of work, *People*, find him exploring the expressive power of being human. While he confronts questions pertaining to the deteriorating conditions of his social environment, he does so in largely formal and sophisticated terms. For "SPEAKING ALONE," Nyein Chan Su offers examples of the multiplicity of his practice with works on canvas and video. Abandoning his colourful signature style of painting in favour of another territory that is equally rewarding, he taps into a frequency that is both universal and up to the minute, displaying a rare curiosity for experimentation.

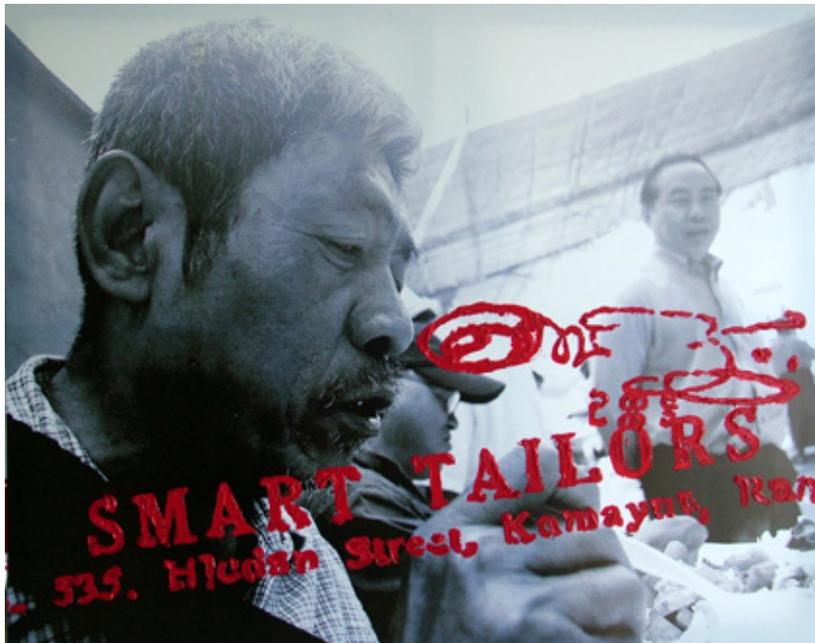
As a photo-conceptualist, Nyein Chan Su expands photography with a level of intelligence that subtly resonates on multiple cultural planes and yet which occasionally reveals fissures. In his mixed media portraits of prominent cultural activists, he employs layered colour and distorted scale and perspective



▲ **People – Artist Aye Ko, 2008**
Acrylic painted on inkjet print on vinyl
122 x 152 cm

even though he has moved to starker material. The dualism of these inkjet prints on canvas, stamped with acrylics, has as much to do with the relation of image, art and life as it does with artistic innovation.

Social discourse amongst artists and cultural practitioners is paramount in Yangon, and such relationships



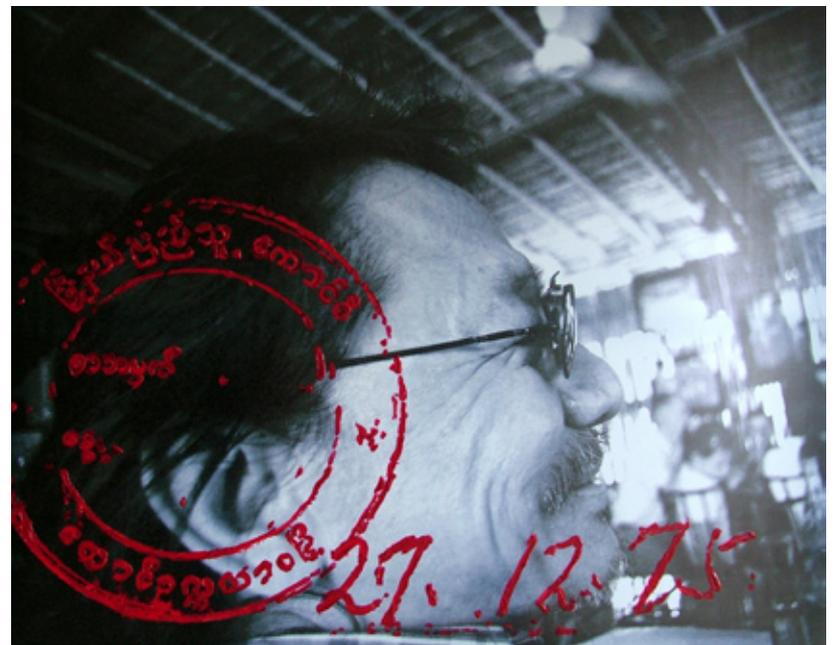
▲ **People – Artist Maung Di, 2008**
Acrylic painted on inkjet print on vinyl
122 x 152 cm



▲ **People – Artist Maung Aw, 2008**
Acrylic painted on inkjet print on vinyl
122 x 152 cm



▲ **People – Artist Wathone, 2008**
Acrylic painted on inkjet print on vinyl
122 x 152 cm



▲ **People – Artist Maung Maung Zay Ya, 2008**
Acrylic painted on inkjet print on vinyl
122 x 152 cm

are at the heart of Nyein Chan Su's practice. *People* is clearly about emotional connection; although all of the artworks are conceptual, they possess considerable elegance nonetheless. At the same time, they combine an acute sense of respect with what could be termed a formal characteristic of appreciation – he avoids being sentimental even though interaction with these individuals is at once personal and intimate. Likewise, he plays with the visual perception of contrasts, as manifest in the lack of eye contact by his subjects and the distorted scale of the images disfigured with the stamps of authority that are the power representations pervading all levels of everyday society. By dipping his paintbrush into these mainstream value systems, he effectively explores their infringement, be it psychological, intellectual or physical.

Multiple narrative choices, including complicity, come together to form the axis of Nyein Chan Su's work. In *Goldfish*, the video camera allows viewers to experience the physical and psychological location of an unstable, contested space where one must tread carefully. Deceptively simple in its formal rigour, the film blends both sound and image together into one homogeneous whole. NCS knows exactly how to use common examples of his social environment to turn it into something one would never expect. His output of typically loud music and garish colours takes the viewer straight to the streets of Yangon.



▲ **Goldfish**, 2008
Video still
3.51 minutes video

The effect is realistic even though we understand that what we are really experiencing is merely a silhouette of his own reality. Making the invisible visible is the heart of visual expression. That's what Nyein Chan Su and his peers are doing.

Artists' Biodata



Aung Myint

Born in 1946, Aung Myint is regarded as a pioneer in contemporary art in Myanmar. He is known for his minimalist expressionism and as an innovator in experimental art. As one of the founding members of Yangon's Inya Art Gallery in 1989, Aung Myint distanced his art from the traditional romanticism and instead chose to address social and critical issues through his multidisciplinary artistic practice that includes performance and installation art. However, he is best known for his ongoing "Mother and Child" series, a subtle but critical interplay between his own personal emotional and social parameters. A self-taught artist, U Aung Myint was the recipient of an ASEAN Art Award in 2001 and has participated in numerous exhibitions and performance art projects internationally as well as in Myanmar. His works are in the permanent art collections of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, the Singapore Art Museum and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, as well as in numerous private collections internationally.



Aye Ko

Aye Ko was born in 1963. Although trained in classical and traditional painting under the master artist U Min Soe, Aye Ko has established his international reputation through contemporary forms of expression that have become his hallmark. The artist has exhibited extensively; his notable shows include a solo exhibition in New York in 2002 and his participation in the exhibition "Thermocline of Art, New Asian Waves" at the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2007. A renowned performance artist, Aye Ko has participated almost annually in performance art festivals in Southeast Asia, Japan, China and the United States. His art is included in numerous private collections internationally as well as in the private ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art.



Phyu Mon

Born in 1960 in Mandalay, Phyu Mon graduated from Mandalay University with a Bachelor of Arts degree and studied painting under the master artist U Ba Thaw during 1978 and 1979. She was introduced to video and film production through a programme at the University of Finland. Phyu Mon is one of the very few women artists in Myanmar who currently works with digital photography, a medium that has enabled her to address the angst that many Myanmar women experience. She has been a regular participant in exhibitions since 1985. She represents a new breed of artist who openly invests their sense of restriction and oppression with broader meanings. Phyu Mon is also a performance artist and a renowned poet in her native Burmese language.



Nyein Chan Su

Nyein Chan Su was born in 1973 and graduated from the Myanmar State School of Fine Arts, Yangon, in 1994 and had his first solo exhibition at Yangon's Lokanat Art Gallery in 1997. His participation in the 1999 Fukuoka Art Triennale in Japan launched his international art career. He has since participated in numerous international exhibitions. He is equally renowned as a painter and performance artist as for his video installations. A founding member of Yangon's Studio Square Art Gallery, Nyein Chan Su is widely regarded as one of Myanmar's most promising mid-career artists. In 2001, he received a Certificate of Recognition from the ASEAN Art Awards and in 2004 was the second prize winner of the Myanmar Contemporary Art Awards competition. Nyein Chan Su's artworks are in the permanent collections of the Singapore Art Museum, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum as well as private collections in Europe and Asia.



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