Restricted Contemporaries

ARTS & SOCIETY

practices in present Myanmar

BY JAERA HAN

To comment on the cultural and artistic scene in Myanmar (Burma) is like peeling an onion. Every layer can bring surprise and irritation to researchers – even for those who are not casual visitors to the country. One needs much time to understand Myanmar’s current position. It shall not yet be used the term “contemporary” in the context of artists’ work within the society.

The long isolation and authoritarian rule imposed on a predominantly Buddhist society has produced pockets of missing knowledge and discreetly in thinking about historical art processes. The visual art practices of most of the so-called modern and contemporary artists in Myanmar are part of a conscious community that span various art movements and styles, most with a slight confusion of styles and terminologies. Works of artists who are members of the state-sponsored Myanmar Traditional Artists Association reflect this – some of them work with Western classical motifs in naturalist styles while others’ works include elements of abstract and expressionist styles. The association began its life in the Bama Art Club and in colonial times, and has since then been through numerous name changes.

Among Myanmar’s artistic communities, abstraction in synonomous with modernist art is the reason not very difficult to fathom. Abstraction offers a way out of the decorative and picturesque naturalist, realistic styles considered “acceptable” in this country and promoted by the official. It is a break with what has been labelled as “painting”, although what constitutes “painting” in Myanmar, and the movement from traditional to contemporary practices, is barely defined. Thus, terming someone, or the work, as “contemporary” is one of the reasons for the popularity and also the state’s stricter control over expression and expressive art forms. In this atmosphere, one’s artistic creativity finds free expression in the ambiguity offered by abstraction. “Traditional art” is associated with portrayals of “traditional” imagery, like water buffalo andGrids in ethico tribal costumes, executed skillfully in oils, constitute 50 per cent of what is seen in art galleries in Myanmar (styles and directions long abandoned by most countries’ art circles). “Traditional” here does not denote paintings that have evolved from Myanmar’s indigenous art and materials like lacquer, but stimulate from the ‘modern’ which is unwelcome by the authorities. Some of the notable and engaging works that break away from the binary of modern and traditional are the figurative expressions found in paintings of San Minn, Tho, So Naing and So Myoe. San Minn’s strong, direct and expressive images, measured with empathy of life and culture, Til’s absurdity, satirical and graphical images, often laced with humour; So Naing’s ‘deconstruction with a fusion of abstraction and figurative elements; Ko Myoe’s incorporation of children’s drawing...

Both on a personal level, and group shows, paintings and exhibitions that are open to the public, went through a prior examination by an exhibition review committee. There are also artists who work independently, mostly intentionally isolating themselves, especially from organized groups and art institutions, andkernel on the margin of the society. Such individuals include well-regarded artists-couple Chan Aye and Pyu Mon from Mandalay, who both also write. Pyu Mon is also hailed as the first female performance artist of Myanmar.

Although modern art is generally not accepted by the authorities and the prescribed “public”, and not taught in any official school, so-called modern and contemporary art paintings are making their presence felt in the art scene of Yangon and Mandalay. Some of these artists are also making a name for themselves abroad.

Performance and installation arts are also gaining popularity in Myanmar; making forays into the visual art practice of many modern artists, especially those of a younger generation like Nyein Chan Su (Myanmar Gallery of Contemporary Art) and Nyan Lynn Htet (Inya Gallery). These mediums are seen as allowing more spontaneous and immediate freedom of expressions and are adopted by painters, poets, and even filmmakers as an additional medium of expression to their body of work.

Much of these art works, labeled as “contemporary” may not be for what is normally
declared as contemporary, which centres with the intention to critically reflect upon present social, economic and political environments and make commentaries, takes definitive positions, revealing differences and other processes in these environments.

For example, artists in Myanmar, societal and contemporary art practices are shown here on limited platforms and are defined as ‘contemporary’ in the strictest sense of the word. It is important to note that the art scene outside of the oligarchy and state sponsored groupings is its own, and contains a wider pool of artists and art forms.

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