



ARTS & SOCIETY

Restricted Contemporaries Art practices in present Myanmar

BY JAERA HAN

To comment on the cultural and art scene in Myanmar (Burma) is like peeling an onion. Every layer can bring surprises and irritation to researchers – even for those who are not casual visitors to the country. One needs much time to understand Myanmar's current (I shall not use the term 'contemporary') mixture of artists' styles and their practices in relation to art history. A less than in-depth study will only produce superficial labelling of an artist's work as 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' or 'contemporary'.

The long isolation and authoritarian rule imposed on a predominantly Buddhist society has produced pockets of missing knowledge and discontinuity in thinking about historical art processes. The visual art practices of most of the so-called modern and contemporary artists in Myanmar embrace a gamut of expressions that span various art movements and styles, most with a slight confusion of styles and terminologies. The works of artists who are members of the state-sponsored Myanmar Traditional Artists

Association reflect this – some of them work with Western classical oils in naturalist styles while others' works include elements of abstract and expressionist styles. The art association began life as the Burma Art Club in colonial times, but since then has gone through numerous name changes.

Among Myanmar's artistic communities, abstraction is synonymous with modernist art. The reason is not very difficult to fathom. Abstraction offers a way out of the decorative and picturesque naturalistic, realistic styles considered 'acceptable' in this country and promoted by officials. It is a break with what is labelled as 'traditional' painting, although what constitutes 'traditional painting' in Myanmar, and the evolution from traditional to contemporary practices, is hardly explored. Seen within this context, one may understand the reason for the popularity and also the state's stricter control on abstract and expressionist art forms. In this atmosphere, one's artistic creativity finds freer expression in the

ambiguity offered by abstraction.

'Traditional art', associated with portrayals of 'traditional' imagery, like water buffalos and girls in ethnic tribal costumes, executed skillfully in oils, constitutes 90 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 differentiate 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, Tito, Soe Naing and Ko Myoe. San Minn's strong, directly expressive images, executed with dynamic lines and colours; Tito's absurdist, satirical and graphical images, often laced with humour; Soe Naing's experimentation with a fusion of abstract and figurative elements; Ko Myoe's incorporation of children's drawing



(Such as his son's) in his works; and Hla Toe's stark, solemn narrative paintings, are works that do not fall neatly into any established categories.

There are a small but growing number of art spaces available for rental by artists who wish to organise their own exhibitions. The oldest of such independent spaces is Lokanat, on Yangon's Pansodan Street, whose history dates back to the 1970s, while the most recent is Mandalay's Htan Yeik Nyo art centre, which was transformed from the Htan Yeik Nyo gallery, so as to provide studio spaces for local artists and to offer seminars and workshops.

Other possibilities for artists who do not wish to join state-sponsored associations are to form independent art societies like Gangaw Ywa, one of the very few in Myanmar. Gangaw Ywa consists mainly of ex-students of the Yangon University's Art Club from 1979, and is run in a 'family-minded' way, with members working in a cooperative style. They continue to hold annual shows, with



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members taking turns to carry out the organisation of the event. They held their 13th annual show last year which, like all 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 organised groups and art institutions, and keeping on the margins of creative society. Such individuals include well-respected artist-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 proclaimed "public", and not taught in any official school, so called modern and contemporary art paintings are making their presence felt in the art scenes 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 inroads into the visual art practice of many modern artists, especially those of the younger generation like Nyein Chan Su (of Myanmar Gallery of Contemporary Art) and Nyan Lyn Htet (of Inya Gallery). These mediums are viewed as allowing more spontaneous and immediate freedom of expression 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, labelled as 'contemporary' may not be what is normally



Top: Nyein Chan Su, performance in Collaboration, Networking, Resource-sharing: Myanmar workshop on performance art (June 2002) Right page: The turn-of-the-century building in which Lokanat gallery is located in at Pansodan Street, Yangon.

defined as contemporary, which carries with it the intention to critically reflect upon present social, economic and political environments and make commentary, takes definitive positions, revealing differences and other processes in these environments. Practiced in this way, such forms of art would be regarded as too sensitive. As in many Asian societies, contemporary art is shown here on limited platforms commanding a very restricted following.

A local traditional art form that continues to evolve and enjoy wide public following and attention today is however narrative oral story-telling of often humorous and satirical stories relating personal experiences. Celebrating writer's month every December is a tradition dating back to the Japanese Occupation of the country during World War II. Readings and story telling take place as a way to boost public moral and hope. During this month, well known writers, editors and poets are invited to rural communities to speak. These events often go on late into the

night, as it is normal for each speaker to talk for over an hour or two. Crowds of up to 1,000 people gather to listen attentively to the stories in the cold December nights; a spectacle, as existing laws discourage even small gatherings from taking place. The writers and poets are provided with food, transport and lodging.

Another notable literary event was the setting of a commemorative stone for the late Linn Youn Maung Maung during the December 2002 writer's month in Kyentahl. He was well-respected in the cultural and political arena as a literary commentator and translator. Among other literary works, he made translations and interpretations of the writings of many renowned leaders and figures of the world, including Ho Chi Minh, Hitler, Che Guevara and Mother Theresa. For the occasion, over 60 people gathered on a beach to listen to poetry readings and story-telling by about 15 writers, editors and poets.

Festivals, celebrations and commemorative events that take place during birthdays, marriages, anniversaries and deaths are occasions for cultural life. Performances, dancing, singing and story-telling often take place on such occasions. Large groups gather under the watchful eyes of Military Intelligence and small groups gather to exchange the latest gossip, news and renew networking ties. Such were the recent Both birthday celebrations for Daw Amar, a very well-known female writer, at the Emerald Buddha Pagoda in Mandalay. Members from all sectors of the artistic and cultural community congregated, lining up in queues to wish her well and participated in the ceremony by making public performances of dancing and singing.

Censorship of intellectual products is not peculiar to Myanmar as censorship is quite widely practiced in other Asian countries such as in communist regimes like Laos and Vietnam, and the democratic authorities of Malaysia and Singapore. The censorship practice observed in Myanmar is close to that of the communist style: last minute inspections of visual art works carried out in the morning of the opening

day of exhibitions, with certification served after a breakfast 'tour' of the exhibition. Offensive works are briefly discussed and removed from the exhibition space. Print media goes through the review committee and is modified. Public appearances, such as readings, are recorded by the Military Intelligence and in mild cases, the 'offenders' are ordered not to speak over the next few days or weeks while serious cases are dealt with over a personal appearance at Headquarters.

In such atmosphere, collaborations between groups seldom materialise, as most feel safer to work within the 'family' structure; such as those people they have had connections with over one's lifetime. Ideas are therefore seldom exchanged or transmitted much further than outside predetermined networks. Foreign researchers who depend on recommendations and introductions, thus typically get a narrowed selection.

In response to the growing need to bridge the local with regional and international practices, local artists and groups have attempted to collaborate with foreign artists and cultural organisations to facilitate exchange. One example was the recent symposium and workshop named Collaboration, Networking and Resource-sharing: Myanmar, featuring workshops on Art Criticism, Interdisciplinary Art, Digital Art, Video Art, Installation and Performance Arts, Painting and Sculpture. From this event evolved a non-profit space to promote human resource development through the fields of culture and the arts.

Despite a relatively isolated environment, or perhaps because of this, one gets to enjoy personalised expressions, created in immediate,



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economical, and simple ways. One such event took place recently at Lokanat – the stalwart venue of modern and contemporary practices in Yangon – where one could enjoy performance art afternoons on

the last day of a contemporary art exhibition. There, poet, artist and aspiring filmmaker Zaw Wai, made an *Installation Art Show* in which he showed his poems written in dedication to his mother; his paintings in oils and acrylic; installation works and performance art, executed with a fusion of common everyday material and formalistic expressions. This free and uninhibited use of materials, mediums and styles will definitely push Myanmar art ahead, but it could benefit from further thought and knowledge of exhibition curation and presentation. For now, the Myanmar art scene offers a lively mixture of styles and mediums.

JAERA HAN IS AN ARTS MANAGER BASED IN YANGON