

Citizen of the world: recent works by Aung Myint

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There is no questioning Myanmar's difficult post-colonial history. In the years since the military replaced the country's independence-era civilian government, the annulment of the 1990 election, and the subsequent commercial embargo imposed by some nations, Burma has become isolated from the outside world. And though the Internet, increasingly pervasive in urban centres since the new millennium, has helped artists connect with the international art forum, cultural life in Burma, as advocated by a state apparatus dominated by superstition, mock-piety, and ultra-conservatism, remains one of extreme artistic convention. Yet for many years, a coterie of Burmese artists has defied the authorities, producing art outside the boundaries of Burma's officially authorized and closely-scrutinized canon. Yangon-based Aung Myint, a practicing artist since the 1960's, is a senior member of this group.

Born in 1946, Aung Myint, a generation or two older than many Burmese artists working today, remembers life before the generals. A young man at the time of change and optimism when colonial power ebbed after the Second World War, Aung Myint witnessed Burma as she moved into a new era of national independence. However distant, this memory of freedom and promise has coloured his art which, despite Burma's climate of censorship, has retained its individualism.

Because of the length of his career, Aung Myint's practice straddles the modern and contemporary periods in Myanmar art¹. His position regarding both is intuitive, the artist explaining that he does not think about theoretical divides. Though an admirer of abstract expressionism², of which he became aware in his early days of painting, over the course of forty years of art-making, Aung Myint asserts he has remained wary of Western modernist currents³. Absorbing information relating to these international practices – the time lag between the Western currents' inception, and their arrival in Burma would quite plausibly explain the artist's critical distance-, he has deliberately shied away from the 'isms' of 20th century Western painting⁴, developing an expressive idiom able to communicate his ideas rather than merely toying with styles in a search for meaning. Because he is self-taught, his curiosity and openness on the world have proved allies, prompting him to experiment with form, medium and content unhindered. Perhaps too, due to this lack of formal art education with its inherent constraints, Aung Myint, in recent years, has moved seamlessly from literal constructions to the conceptual, sidestepping the much-discussed gulf separating modern and contemporary art.

If Aung Myint's fearless transition from the non-representational to figuration, narrative and allegory, and then onto conceptual terrain, seems startling, his, in some ways, is the quintessential Southeast Asian art-making strategy where layered meaning, sophisticated aesthetics, mixing of media, and content-as-driving-force are constant motifs. His creative process, reminiscent of that of other socially-engaged regional exponents⁵, is rooted in the local while simultaneously finding its place and

voice in a wider world context. Perhaps because he is more interested in meshing a certain experience of being with outward-looking social ideas, Aung Myint, deploying an array of visual languages, is as comfortable with abstraction as he is conceptualizing performance and installation⁶. Though in the early days of his career paint, canvas, paper and ink were his tools of choice, this had as much to do with what was available as any fixed loyalty to medium. He has never abandoned two-dimensional art, but performance and installation, part of his creative repertoire for many years, complete his expressive palette rather than clashing with more conventional modes of communication. In this fluid approach to art-making, Aung Myint's practice is led by concepts rather than media or formal imperatives.

This leap across the divide is not so uncommon for Southeast Asian artists, particularly those whose careers have spanned a similar period, art-historically transitional in the West as it has been in Asia. More significantly, modernism, imported to the region rather than indigenously sown, and thus often adopted merely stylistically, divorced from any deeper cultural connection, must be viewed in the larger art-historical context, its long-term relevance, unlike locally-grown contemporary art, more historical than artistic. Asked about Western modernism's introduction to Burma in the 20th century, and later, the emergence in Burma of contemporary art, Aung Myint makes clear his dislike of labels, his lack of interest in separations and categorisations. On performance, the artist is thoughtful. He became aware of it as a form from elsewhere in the 1990's, yet once practicing it himself, understood it as something familiar⁷, its active, mobile characteristics, and its intangibility once completed, far from foreign. He does not distinguish it from painting in terms of what it can voice and says it feels innate and comfortable to him, pulled out into the open from a deep place within. This very naturalness *vis à vis* a medium often described –even by the Burmese artists who espouse it⁸ – as recent and imported⁹, would instead seem to point to less alien roots. A product of contemporary intent though Burmese performance art is, its relationship with older indigenous cultural expression, unknown in the West, can nonetheless not be ignored. Beyond this keenness on performance, Aung Myint's ability to navigate so competently –and in such an uncontrived manner– between the differing modes, media and goals of modern and contemporary suggests he is tackling these strands of his practice with a single methodology connected to his view of the world as a Burmese.

Not that Aung Myint adheres to any particular nationalist agenda, especially as exists in today's Myanmar. But like several of his compatriots, despite a regime that would tend to inspire disloyalty to home and nation, he has a strong sense of cultural identity tied to country and its strain of Theravada Buddhism with its philosophical leanings¹⁰. The place of community in public life also looms large, particularly informing his installation and performance.

How then to read recent art by Aung Myint exhibited in this latest solo show in Singapore? Though at first glance at opposite ends of the conceptual and aesthetic spectrum, pieces included in *Citizen of the World* display their unity of vision.

Stylised self-portraits, lines, blotches and scratches scarring Aung Myint's buttery oil impasto, evoke soul and heart as more obvious figuration could not. These canvases' surface treatment, revealing the artist's passion for the sensual side of paint, show Aung Myint both exposing and masking himself, the question of his private persona, blurred with the sometimes heavy role he assumes as an artist, coming subtly to the fore. These paintings, timeless in genre, perhaps harking back to the pre-historic linear renderings of cave paintings¹¹, dialogue urbanely with a chair performance/ installation the artist also dubs *Self Portrait*. Conceptualised in the 1990s, this work involves Aung Myint removing his clothes and draping them on a chair. Simple in action, its intimacy and familiarity of gesture meaningful to all audiences, the piece operates as a contemplation of the nature of being, life, transition, memory and absence.

Another installation, *Creatures Besides Our Society*, is also a reprise of an idea conceived some time ago, in 2000. Tinged with irony rather than the pathos colouring the previously described chair work, this new parasite piece, its columns of bugs on the move hinting at the dangers of conformity as well as the paradox of small, insidious acts of nuisance being responsible for untamable catastrophe, provides a metaphor for many types of contemporary malaises. Initially commenting environmental issues¹², the work, with its accessible iconographic language, lends itself to a much broader, socio-political reading.

Two images of stupas, one, *Black Stupa*, a stylized cartoon in Aung Myint's poised, cursive line, the second painterly, a solid, white sacred place, *White Stupa Doesn't Need Gold*, speak not of the exterior trappings of faith, but of the artist's inner sense of morality and humanity so closely associated with Burmese Buddhism. With this pair too comes obliquely stated dissent, Aung Myint's austere, pure-white religious emblems deliberately contrasted with today's ubiquitous stupas of ostentation that are gaudily gilded by some Burmese in a bid to burnish their image as pious and righteous citizens.

Purely abstract paintings in Aung Myint's provocative¹³ signature palette of black, white and red¹⁴, all movement and tense personality, are also represented here. Though stylistically at odds with the installations and *World Series* paintings, these pictures, contemporaneous to the rest, are coherent within the whole, telling Aung Myint's tale from a different pictorial angle.

Finally, the exhibition assembles various versions of the artist's ongoing *World Series*. A two-dimensional graphic sequence born in the 1990s and featuring images of maps of the five continents, *World Series* gives form to Aung Myint's multi-layered concerns. This snapshot of humanity –here including paintings and a three-dimensional globe work *Thorns Cover The World-*, constantly developing in pictorial idiom, takes the artist beyond Burma's physical and psychological borders out into the world. There Aung Myint finds much that is problematic: ecological meltdown, wars, hate, death and corruption. He paints rivers of red blood flowing down his

images of continents, skulls and crosses pepper his canvases, and torn patches appear, emblems of injury and void. Yet if these works are stories of doom, they are also human stories, the artist using paint to leap out into the fray with zeal, prepared to tackle global issues as he leaves controlled and controlling Burma behind.

On a less literal level, the series also describes Burma's relationship with the world: on one hand the mapping a reassuring image of inclusiveness even as Burma has spent recent decades as an international pariah; and on the other, the sequence commenting the contradiction of the country's simultaneous exclusion from the world community, and her power of attraction as a supplier of timber, mineral wealth and other raw materials. This latter idea was particularly well evoked in a performance staged in Singapore in May 2010¹⁵, the artist using the monotony of repeated gesture, deliberate prolongation over several hours, and silence, to construct a mute, steadily-building-but-never-climaxing-tension as he piled his rice-drawn outline of Burma's cartography with material symbols of economic and mass-market cultural invasion.

Yet *World Series* is not didactic, and instead argues for Aung Myint's nuanced, multi-prismatic vision of nation as the artist scrutinizes his country from insider and outsider perspectives –viewers will note that Europe remains at the centre of Aung Myint's cartography, as it would have been when the world map first made its way into Colonial Burma in the 19th century–, pondering her new centrality in a world that ironically, in recent years, has been off-limits to most Burmese. An outward looking meditation on greed, ecological rape, changing global power structures, and art as a tool of popular empowerment, as much as the artist's personal catharsis, Aung Myint's *World Series* offers a powerful but easily understood icon representing the complex and changing Burma/outside world paradigm.

While parts of Aung Myint's oeuvre, springing from the purely personal, reflect the artist's emotional state, other bodies are infused with messages and narratives reaching out past self. *Citizen of the world: recent works by Aung Myint*, presents these two facets of the artist's creative persona, showing how Aung Myint's message of humanism transcends formal and theoretical orthodoxies.

October 2010

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Exhibition Curator Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based critic and researcher specialising in the contemporary visual practices of Southeast Asia.

¹Aung Min, *Spirit-Myanmar Contemporary Art*, Beikthano Art Gallery, Yangon, 2008, p. 9 for art critic Aung Min's dating of the beginning of contemporary art in Myanmar to the 1990's.

²interviews with the artist in Singapore, September 2010, reveal Aung Myint's interest in the work of New York school painters Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock

³ibid September 2010 interviews

⁴ibid September 2010 interviews

⁵Southeast Asian contemporary artists who successfully take local issues to an international audience include Vasan Sitthiket, Lee Wen, Manit Sriwanichpoom, Arahmaiani, Heri Dono, Mella Jaarsma, Sutee Kunavichayanont, Dinh Q Le amongst many others

⁶artist Po Po is widely regarded as Myanmar's first practitioner of performance art

⁷ibid September 2010 interviews

⁸a finding of Nathalie Johnston, researcher of Myanmar contemporary art, currently preparing her MA thesis on performance art in Myanmar

⁹Taylor, N., "Art in Space: Reflections on the Rise of Performance Art in Vietnam", *Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, Singapore Art Museum (May 2008 Symposium papers, in conjunction with 'Post Doi-Moi Vietnamese art after 1990'), SAM, 2009, p. 174 for comments relating to how the Vietnamese perceive the roots of Vietnamese performance art.

¹⁰This is a common attitude amongst Burmese artists. Cf. Lenzi, I., "Myanmar Artists-In conversation with Nge Lay and Aung Ko", *C-Arts*, Singapore, vol. 15, summer 2010, pp. 60-64 for comments by Aung Ko and Nge Lay

¹¹ibid September 2010 interviews when the artist discusses his particular interest in ancient cave paintings and sand-sculpture

¹²ibid September 2010 interviews

¹³ibid September 2010 interviews, Aung Myint asserts that the Burmese government dislikes the use of black and red in painting because of their respective connotations of death and blood.

¹⁴Khin Maung Nyunt, U Sein Myo Myint, Ma Thanegi, *Myanmar Painting From Worship to Self Imaging*, EPH, Ho Chi Minh City, 2006, p. 16 for a discussion of the colours used for 12th century Bagan wall frescoes, principally black, white and red

¹⁵Aung Myint presented his performance/installation *The Intruders* in the exhibition 'PLAY', Osage art foundation, Singapore, May 2010