



karin weber gallery
Contemporary Fine Art



MYANMAR VOICES

WE

ARE

STILL

HERE

A VIRTUAL EXHIBITION
15 July - 15 August 2021

Curated by Melissa Carlson

MYANMAR VOICES: WE ARE STILL HERE

A Virtual Exhibition by Myanmar Artists

Aung Myint, Bart Was Not Here, Chaw Ei Thein, Htein Lin, Kaung Su, Khin Thethtar Latt (Nora),
Min Wae Aung, Myint San Myint, Myint Soe, Soe Yu Nwe

Curated by Melissa Carlson

15th July to 15th August 2021

cover image

KHIN THETH TAR LATT (NORA)

Losing Identity Series, 2

digital print on archival paper, 76.2 x 91.4cm, edition 1 of 10, 2021

back cover image

KHIN THETH TAR LATT (NORA)

Losing Identity Series, 4

digital print on archival paper, 76.2 x 76.2cm, edition 1 of 10, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Karin Weber Gallery is proud to announce 'Myanmar Voices: We Are Still Here', a virtual exhibition which highlights the resilience and fortitude of Myanmar's contemporary artists. Curated by Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art scholar Melissa Carlson, this exhibition is another milestone in the gallery's twenty-plus year history of showcasing art from Myanmar.

'Myanmar Voices: We Are Still Here' celebrates the high-quality artistic production from Myanmar that is ongoing despite the current political turmoil. The show elevates the voices of Myanmar's creative community, and reminds viewers that life and art prevail and evolve, regardless of the current news cycle. Each of the artworks in the show are records of transactions between individuals and a nation, a push and a pull of expectations and big dreams, and each piece reminds us that creativity abounds, and artistic production perseveres in times of adversity.

Participating artists rank amongst Myanmar's most compelling and work across a range of mediums, including painting, drawings, graffiti, and photography. The artists, including Aung Myint, Min Wae Aung, Soe Yu Nwe, Khin Thethtar Latt ('Nora'), Kaung Su, and Bart Was Not Here, represent multiple generations of creative voices who push the boundaries of visual representations for Myanmar's past, present, and future.

Today, artists in Myanmar face renewed challenges in both creating and exhibiting their artwork. Artists must overcome daily infrastructure obstacles, such as power-cuts, to more extreme issues of personal safety. Nevertheless, these artists continue to create and produce artwork in despite of adversity.

Karin Weber Gallery acknowledges the challenges artists face in joining our exhibition during this unprecedented time. Some of them have expressed a wish to remain anonymous amid renewed restrictions on freedom of expression. We remain in awe of their resilience. We are also grateful for the support of a gallery and curator in Yangon; this show would not be possible without their dedication to promoting the best of Myanmar's modern and contemporary artists abroad.

It is our responsibility to support our long-standing gallery artists from Myanmar at this time, and to also welcome new talents in this exhibition, such as Bart Was Not Here and Soe Yu Nwe. What resonates with us is how each of these artists, even under conditions of instability, produce such meaningful work that speaks to a defiant vision of Myanmar's future.

Karin Weber Gallery, July 2021

MYANMAR ARTISTS AS A FORCE OF RESILIENCE: REALISM, ABSTRACTION, AND THE UNIQUE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Study the paintings in this exhibition as if learning a new language. At first glance, the mix of artistic styles, such as realism, abstraction, and semi-abstraction, might appear incongruous, but the colors, forms, and format depicted on each canvas are pulled from a visual language developed by Burma's¹ first generation of avant-garde artists in the 1960s and 1970s. These artists rejected the rigid curriculums of art schools that encouraged students to paint pristine landscapes, romanticized notions of village life, and elements of traditional Buddhist culture—all conjured from imaginations of a pre-colonial utopia.

In 1962, General Ne Win's bloodless coup d'état and his "Burmese Way to Socialism" triggered the onset of a near half-century of isolation in Burma. Through his Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) he began imposing restrictions on expression, including a 14-point guideline on permissible content for art exhibitions that favored imagery based in Burman, Buddhist, agrarian cultural identity. However, avant-garde artists in Rangoon and Mandalay rebelled against these guidelines and began to produce canvases that employed abstraction, semi-abstraction, and the artistic form of realism to process traumas, to flag injustices, and to signal solidarity to their fellow artists and citizens through a unique visual language based on symbolism, colors, and form.

This visual language then carried forward across decades, artist-to-artist, from the Socialist era (1962-1988) to the military era (1988-2011) to the semi-civilian era (2011-2021), and into the aftermath of the violent and deadly 1 February 2021 coup d'état. Generations of artists, including those featured here, deployed this visual language in response to each decade's social and political forces. Their brushes dipped purposefully into black and red paint and deployed the language of abstraction across canvases to register protests through colors or frantic brushwork that protested the country's downward spiral. Or, artists reached for the artistic format of realism to record in oil or acrylics a parallel history, in utmost clarity and precise detail, so that a social injustice could be exhibited for all to see in the absence of accountability.

Yet what can account for the aesthetic choices of Burma's avant-garde artists, such as opting for realism but using brash colors, two-dimensional forms, and flattened perspective? In one sense, censorship pushed artists toward a form of coded realism to evade prohibition. Interactions with the censorship board

¹ General Than Shwe's military government (junta) changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. I will use the name that corresponds to the time period.

involved a series of negotiations with censors that permitted artists to provide explanations for imagery within their canvas, a task more complicated for abstract or semi-abstract work. However, realism also proved to be an effective means for artists to hide subversive subject matter through symbolism while also allowing the imagery to register with but evade censors.

By contrast, abstraction and semi-abstraction offered seemingly limitless possibilities to use colors like black, red, or white to express sentiments or represent traumas that could not be conveyed freely in the artistic format of realism or even in literature, poetry, or the press. The censors feared that the color black symbolized commentary on government policies; that the color red (in particular, in the aftermath of the 8 August 1988 crackdown on protestors) stood for bloodshed; that the color green pointed to criticism of the military; and that white represented the flowers worn by the opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi in her hair. Furthermore, freed from the precision of realism, yet adhering to the increasingly understood boundaries of acceptable content for exhibitions between artist and censor, the unbounded brushwork of abstraction could be unleashed across canvases with satisfying freedom. Therefore, brushstroke and colors in abstraction spoke volumes, or at least reached further depths than realism permitted them. Yet in navigating the blurred boundaries of the censorship board they soon learned censors targeted abstraction for increased scrutiny for its perceived ability to hide content, so artists moved between styles.

Today, this visual language resurfaces. Veteran painters Aung Myint and Myint Soe deploy abstraction in black, white, and red alongside frenetic brushstrokes to mirror the unfolding social and political changes around them. Another veteran but anonymous artist continues this language with images that incorporate distorted figures that reflect the artist's lifelong battle with censorship. He says, "I am almost 80 now. I have been asking and shouting throughout my life that we want democracy and that we need human rights. Although I keep dreaming, democracy and human rights keep fading away in Myanmar." History in Myanmar repeats, he notes, and so this visual language persists.

Min Wae Aung's bright colors and unique application of realism depicts a fragment of a population, displaced, and on the move. Myint San Myint echoes Min Wae Aung's color and form with detailed paintings referring to Myanmar's lottery system. Numbers fall from the sky and symbolize the misguided aspirations of a population with few jobs or economic outlets available to them and only a lottery that offers access to dreams. Nora's digital photography presents snapshots of intimate settings – families and the comfort of interior

spaces. Yet her images are altered to reveal people stripped of their identities as a population rushes to remove their faces and names from social media platforms as anonymity, like in decades past, becomes the safer option. She asks the viewer to imagine what it would be like to have your safety, identity, future, and freedom taken from you.

Christopher Pinney, in his study on visual culture proposed using printed images to understand the political and religious struggle in modern India. He advised, "Conventional notions of aesthetics will not get us very far. Of much more use is an appreciation of the concern with images' efficacy. The relevant question then becomes not how images 'look', but what they can 'do'."² In the exhibition spaces of postcolonial Burma, artists activated their canvas to challenge censors, and, most importantly, to connect with their community.

Their canvases are part-in-parcel with the Myanmar environment; their paintings are meant to be viewed against the backdrop of Burmese society and politics with both image and domestic landscape (the sounds of Yangon, the heat of Mandalay) communicating back-and-forth with all the familiar cues embedded in both canvas and innate knowledge in the viewer. Therefore, the viewer, standing in the sweltering exhibition spaces in 1970s Rangoon, read the image and knew that they are not isolated in their thoughts, despite isolationism, censorship, or, a life-upending coup d'état. The paintings in this exhibition, are hard-working. They flex with the weight of a greater purpose. In Myanmar, art spaces are community centers where artists talk, smoke, drink, seek solidarity, write an alternative history, and perhaps leave behind a painting or two to sell or to continue the conversation.

Melissa Carlson, PhD Candidate
Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies
University of California, Berkeley

² Pinney, Christopher. *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion, 2004. P. 8

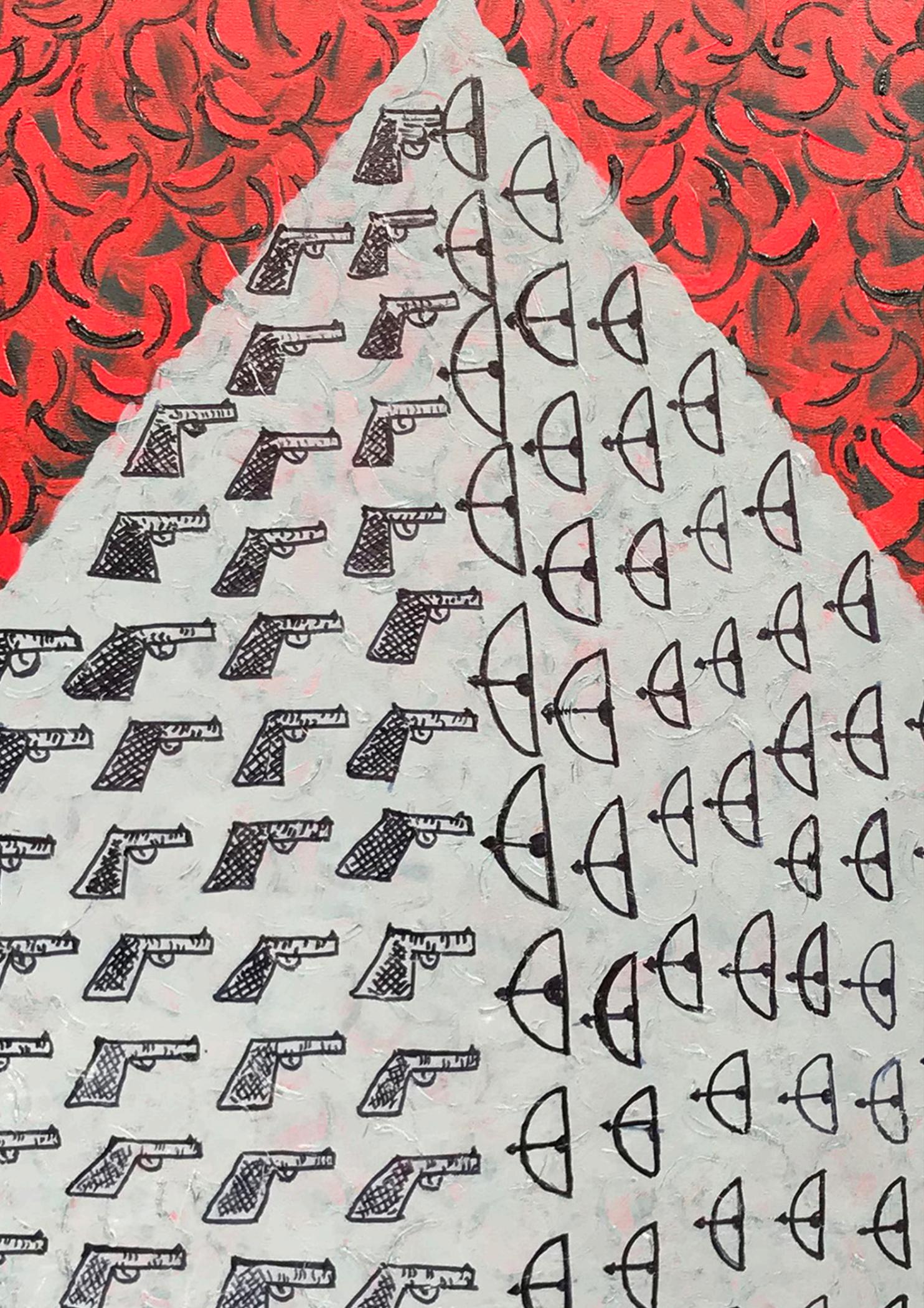


[Red-Dots Are] In the Trap
acrylic on canvas
122 x 90cm
2020

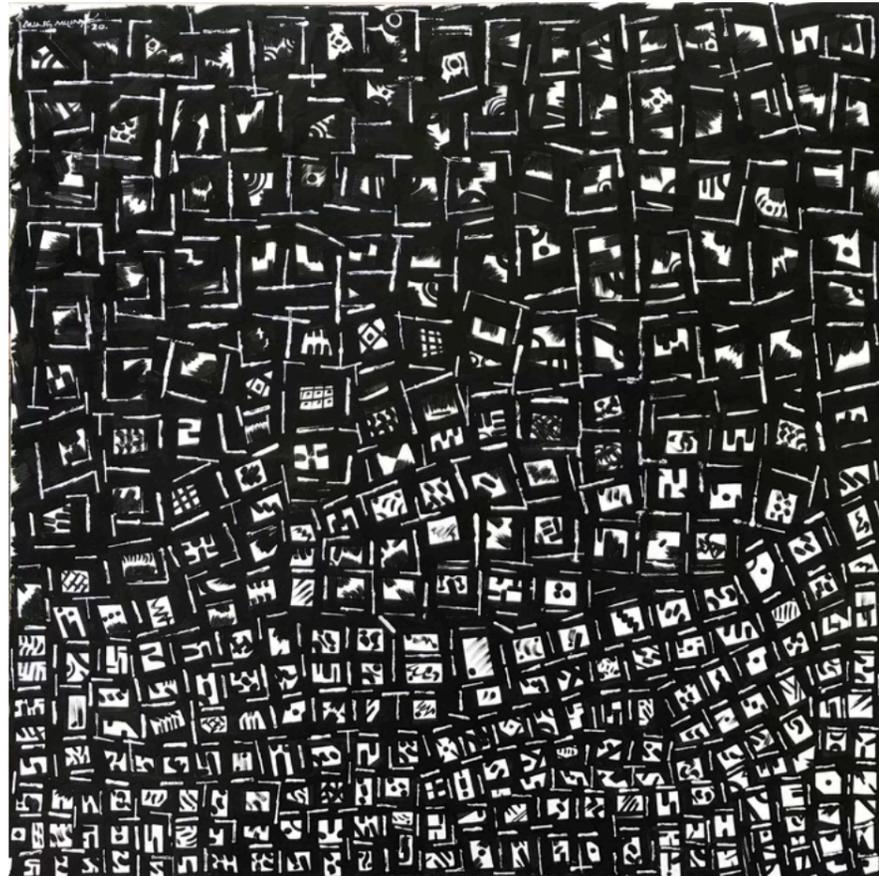


Battle Field
acrylic on canvas
122 x 90cm
2019

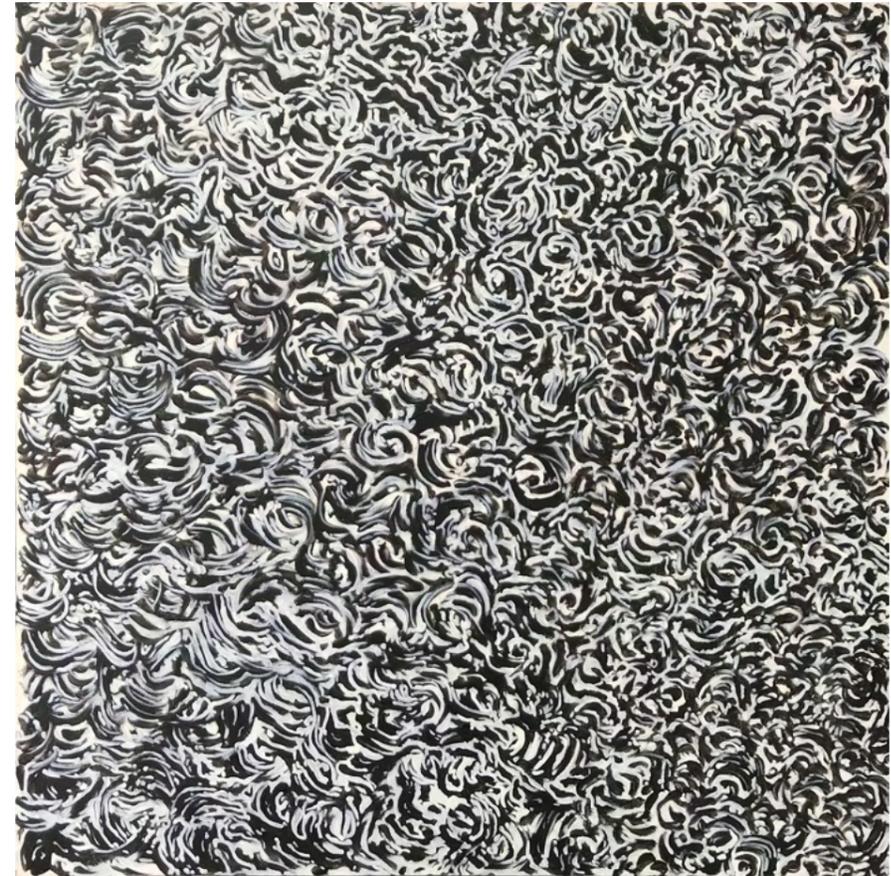




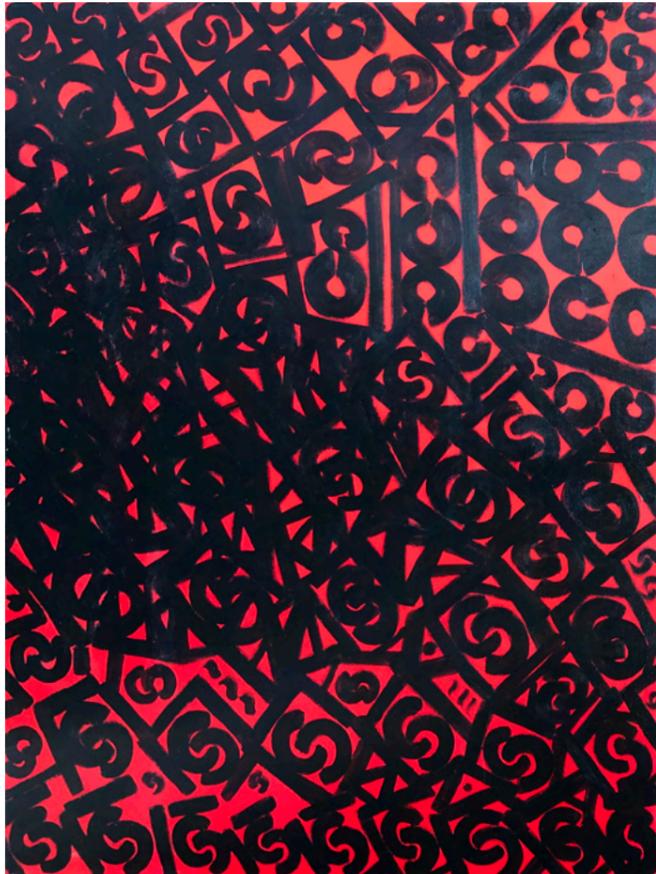
Guns & Arrows
acrylic on canvas
122 x 90cm
2021



Know Or Not
acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 122 cm
2019



The Parts Of Ogres Faces
acrylic on canvas
122 cm x 122 cm
2019



Which Is More Powerful
acrylic on canvas
122 x 90cm
2020



Dancing On Your Grave
acrylic on canvas (synthetic polymer on canvas)
61 x 100cm, diptych
2021



Everything Will Be OK!
acrylic on canvas
50.8 x 40.6cm
2021



Woman With A Sewing Machine
fibre tip pen on canvas board
25 x 20cm
2021



Forever Strong

pastel, charcoal, spray paint, and oil-based paint on canvas

122 x 130cm

2020-2021





Forever Young (Star Boy)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 135cm
2020



Ending (Cosmic Poetry Series)
pastel, charcoal, and spray paint on canvas
122 x 135cm
2021



Pink Galaxy (Cosmic Poetry Series)

pastel on paper

43 x 48cm

2021

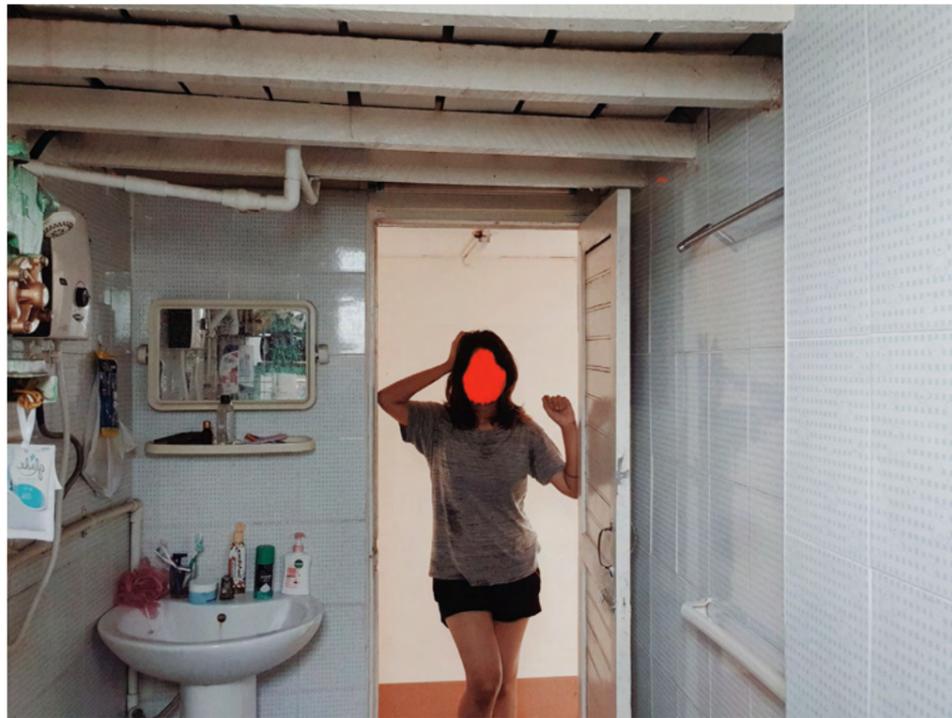


White Star (Cosmic Poetry Series)
pastel on paper
38 x 43cm
2020



White, Red (Cosmic Poetry Series)
pastel on paper
56 x 61cm
2020

KHIN THETHTAR LATT (NORA)



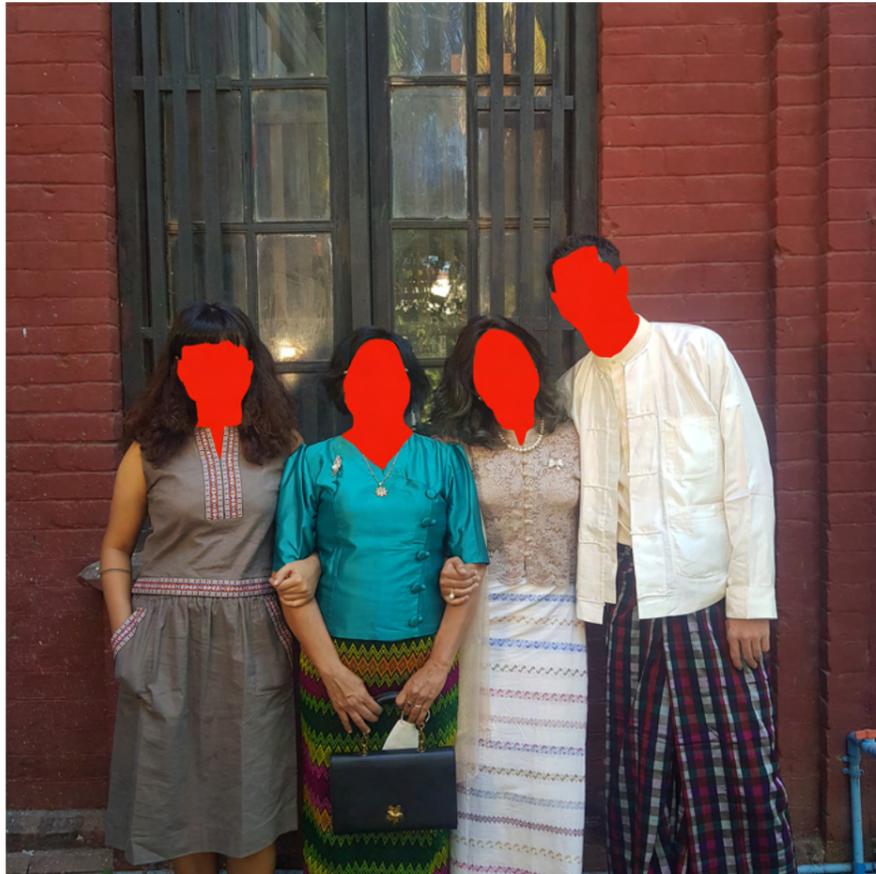
Losing Identity Series, 1
digital print on archival paper
76.2 x 91.4cm, edition 1 of 10
2021



Losing Identity Series, 2
digital print on archival paper
76.2 x 91.4cm, edition 1 of 10
2021



Losing Identity Series, 3
digital print on archival paper
76.2 x 91.4cm, edition 1 of 10
2021



Losing Identity Series, 4
digital print on archival paper
76.2 x 76.2cm, edition 1 of 10
2021



Losing Identity Series, 7
digital print on archival paper
76.2 x 91.4cm, edition 1 of 10
2021



On The Road
acrylic on canvas
167.6 x 106.6cm
2018



Traveller 14
acrylic on canvas
153 x 183cm
2018



Flying Numbers (21)
silkscreen and acrylic on canvas
91 x 122cm
2020





Flying Numbers (22)
silkscreen and acrylic on canvas
91 x 122cm
2020



Let Yourself Go (1)
acrylic on canvas
91 x 122cm
2020



Let Yourself Go (2)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 91cm
2020



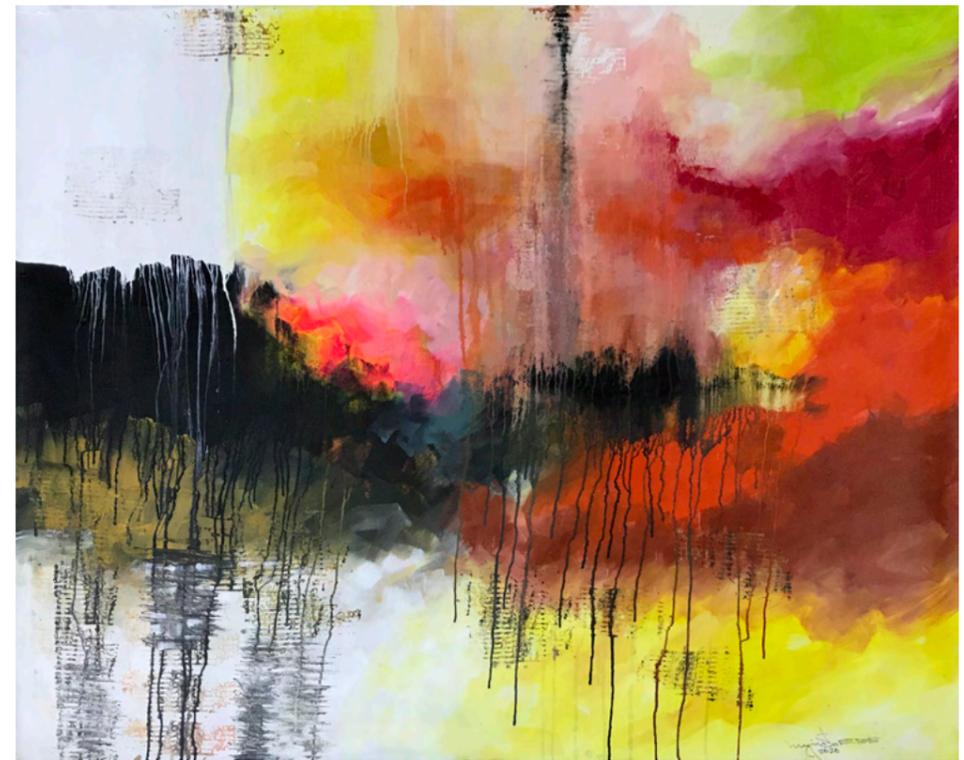
Let Yourself Go (3)
acrylic on canvas
91 x 122cm
2020



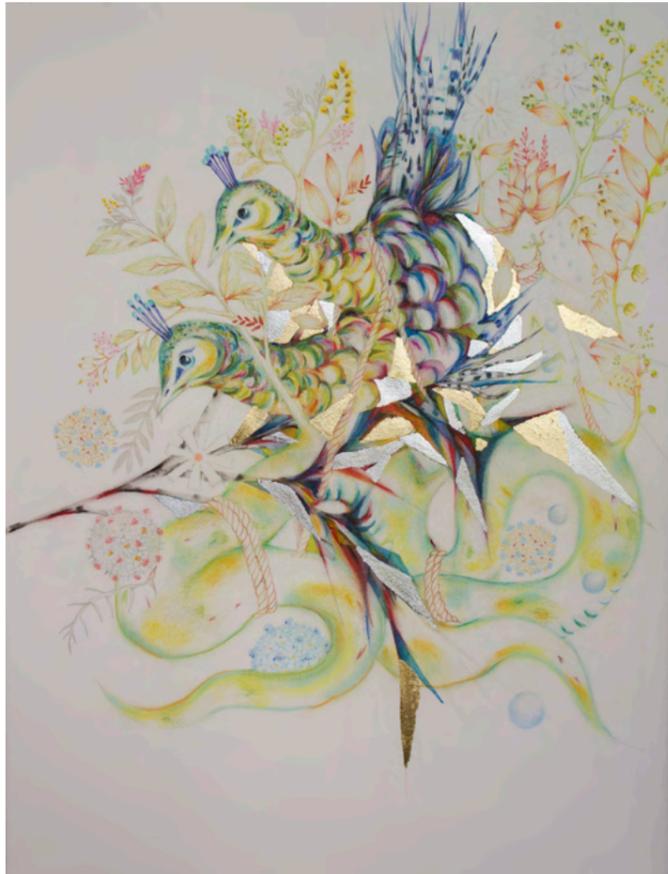
Let's Fly Together (3)
acrylic on canvas
91 x 91cm
2021



Let's Fly Together (4)
acrylic on canvas
91 x 91cm
2021



Missing Home
acrylic on canvas
122 x 152cm
2020



The Tree Of Sorrow: A Pandemic Universe
colored pencils, pastel, watercolor, gold and silver leaf on Arches paper
76.2 x 56cm
2021





Naked Truth (21)
acrylic on canvas
89 x 61cm
2017



The Readers (17)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 183cm
2018



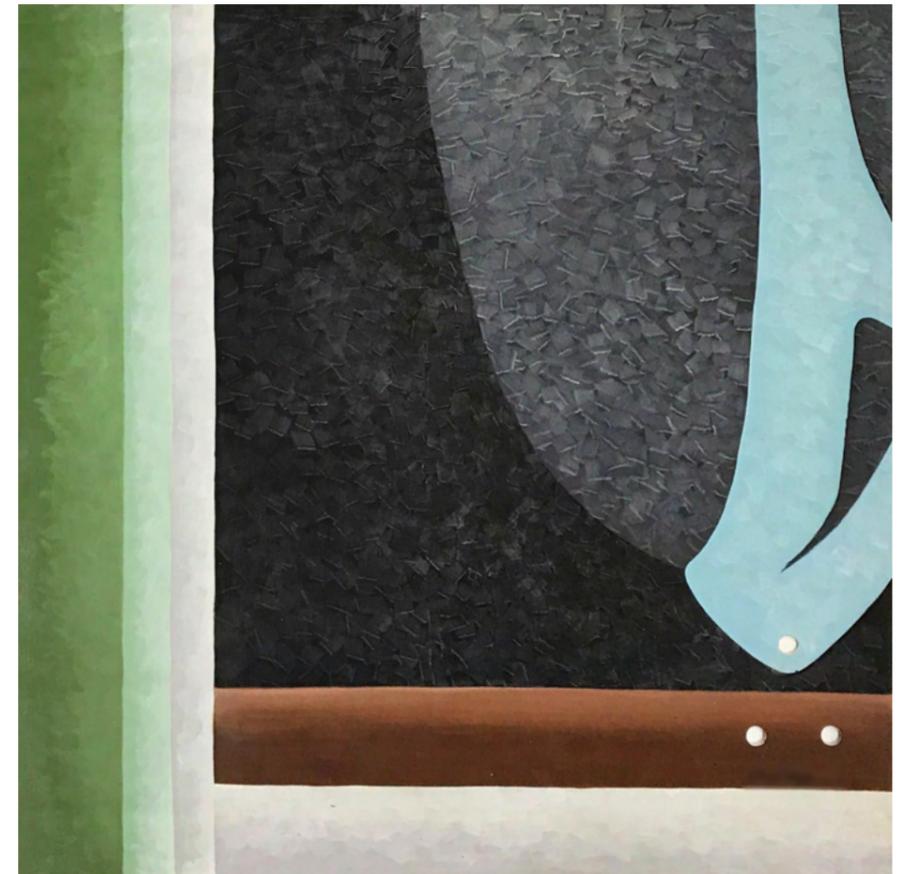
Handtrick (1)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 91cm
2020



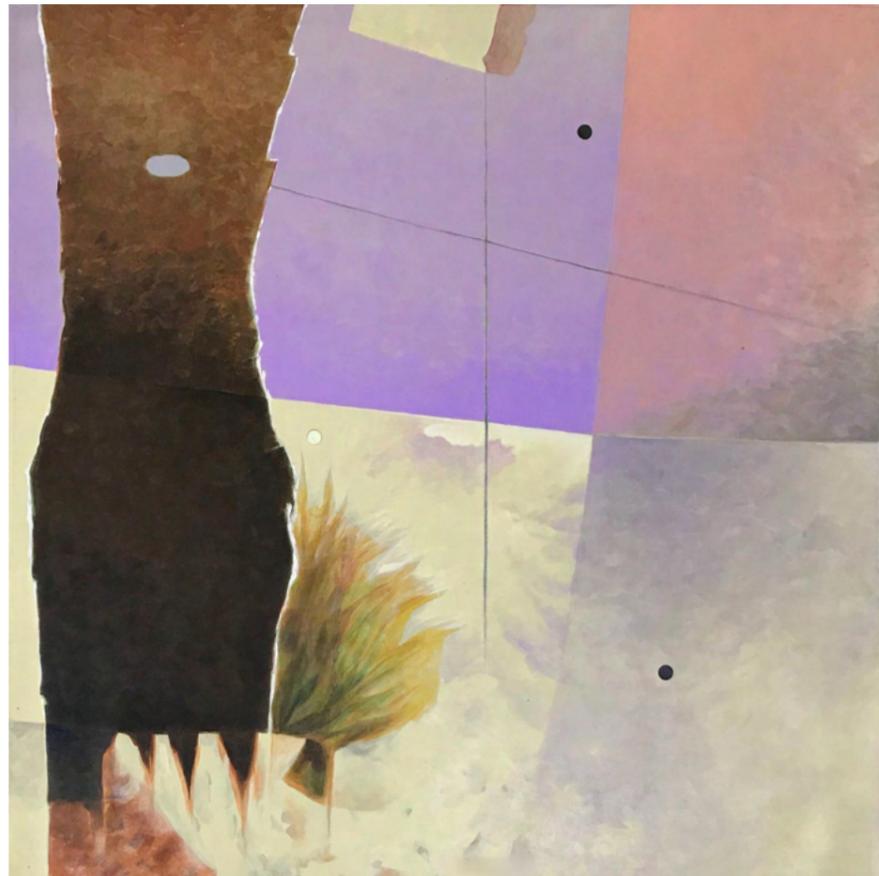
Handtrick (2)
acrylic on canvas
122 x 91cm
2020



Things We Should Know About The Universe
acrylic on canvas
130 x 124cm
2015



Untitled
acrylic on canvas
91 x 91cm
2015



Untitled
acrylic on canvas
142 x142cm
2017



Far From The Village
acrylic on canvas
91 x 122cm
2021



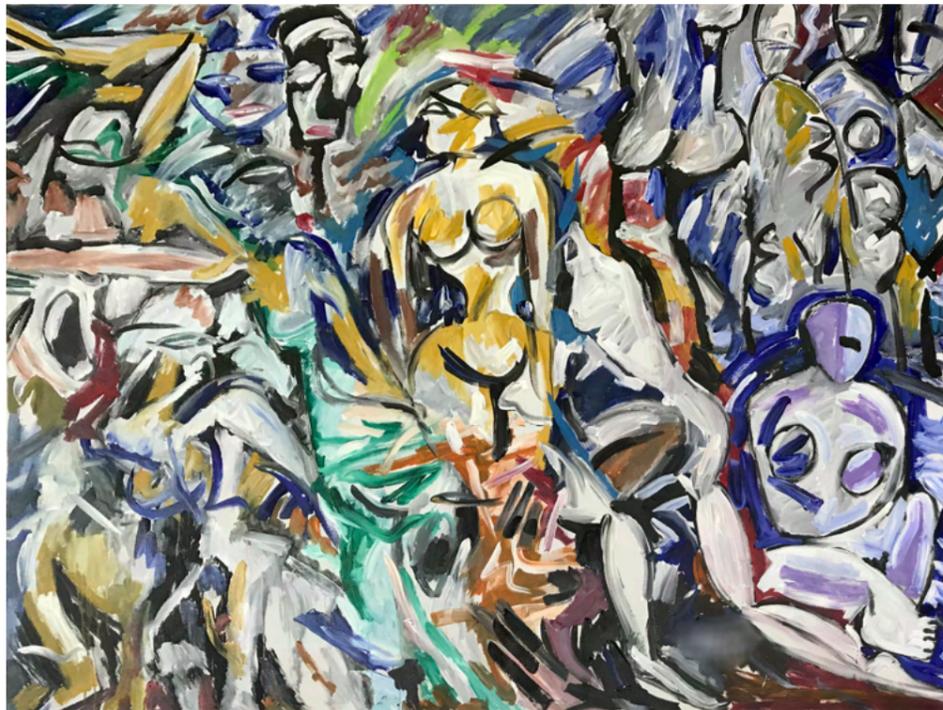
Homage To Evolution
acrylic on canvas
122 x 91cm
2021



We Are Hungry
acrylic on canvas
122 x 91cm
2021



We Need Human Rights
acrylic on canvas
183 x 244cm
2021



We Want Democracy
acrylic on canvas
183 x 244cm
2021

Aung Myint (male, b. 1946) is considered the pioneer of Burma's experimental art movement and addresses social commentary through performance, installation, and abstract and semi-abstract paintings. His works are in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, the Singapore Art Museum, and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan.

Bart Was Not Here (male, b. 1996) is a graffiti artist who mixes text and image from Burmese and global pop culture. His 2019 solo show at Myanm/art Gallery in Yangon sold out, and he will be an artist-in-residence at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, France for 2021-2022.

Chaw Ei Thein (female, b. 1969) often makes bold social and political statements in her work. Her paintings appear across canvases, wind around wood pieces, and even cover various sculptures. She has collaborated on performances with Htein Lin.

Htein Lin (male, b. 1966) is a versatile artist (painting, installation, performance) and writer. He has also worked as a comedian and actor. Arrested in 1998 and jailed on spurious accusations of opposition activity, he spent almost seven years in jail (1998-2004). During this time he developed his artistic practice, using items available to him like bowls and cigarette lighters in the absence of brushes to make paintings and monoprints on cotton prison uniforms. After his release, he moved to London in 2006, and then returned to Myanmar in 2013. Inter-twinning personal, communal and national narratives, Htein Lin's works are a unique commentary on the challenging times and experiences he has lived through.

Kaung Su (male) lives in Yangon where he participates in exhibits and teaches curatorial art practice and art history. His intricate canvases incorporate a variety of material, including enamel, ceramics, and organic matter. Myanmar's first and only neon light artist, he has participated in residencies in Berlin, London, and New York.

Khin Thethtar Latt ('Nora') (female, b. 1990) is a multi-media artist working in painting, performance, and photography. Nora studied with the New Zero Art Space collective in Yangon. Her work focuses on issues impacting her generation, including gender and the environment.

Min Wae Aung (male, b. 1960) studied landscape and portrait paintings at the State School of Fine Arts, Yangon, and later developed his unique style, which has been met with considerable international success. Min Wae Aung often captures Buddhist monks and nuns performing their daily rituals, with their burnt orange and maroon robes contrasting against striking gold backgrounds to create dramatic effects of light and shade. His works are held by the Singapore Art Museum, Standard Chartered Bank in Hong Kong, National Museum in Myanmar and Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan.

Myint San Myint (male, 1965-2021) started painting as a child with the roots of betel nut fruit as a makeshift brush. He used silkscreen and painting to focus on social commentary. He held solo shows at Yangon-based Pansodan Gallery in 2011 and at Lokanat Galleries in 2014, plus participated in shows in Hong Kong in 2014 and 2015.

Myint Soe (male, b. 1953) Born in Paungde, he studied drawing and painting at State Middle School from 1965 to 1968. His 2014 show 'Bridge and a Nyeit Dancer' expressed how the government has used simple solutions to mask big problems. He is best known for beautiful abstracts, but on occasion he makes pointed social commentary through realism.

Soe Yu Nwe (female, b. 1989). After earning an MFA degree in Ceramics at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design in 2015, Soe Yu Nwe has been participating in numerous residencies in the United States and across Asia. Through transfiguration of her emotional landscape by poetically depicting nature and body in parts, she ponders the complexities of individual identity in this rapidly changing globalized society. Her exhibitions include the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Australia), 2018 Dhaka Art Summit (Bangladesh), The New Taipei City Yingge Ceramic Museum (Taiwan), Yavuz Gallery (Singapore), ZieherSmith in Chelsea, New York (USA), and The National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta (Indonesia). Recently, Soe Yu Nwe has become an invited member of IAC (International Academy of Ceramics) as the first member from Myanmar. Her work has been acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia.

Artist A (female, b. 1971), working in charcoal and acrylics, is the lone female artist that paints nudes and uses live models, often her family members. Decades of strict state censorship prohibited depiction of nudes. Her emphasis is on tightly framed compositions to a liberated female figure.

Artist B (male, b. 1981) was born in Myitkyina, Kachin State. He studied for a Bachelor degree in Painting in Yangon, graduating in 2004. He has participated in many group shows in Yangon, including the 2018 A Beast, A God, and A Line.

Artist C (male, b. 1954) lives and works in Yangon and Pyin Oo Lwin. In 2015, he became the first Myanmar artist to create an on-site installation at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. A self-taught artist, his paintings incorporate the iconography of Myanmar cave and mural paintings, as well as elements of Western art, which he studied from books borrowed from secret libraries during the censorship era. His art examines the various states of life's existence, and engages with the dualities of material and immaterial forms. He has exhibited in Singapore, Germany, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Korea, India, Thailand, China, USA (New York), and UK (London).

Artist D (male, b. 1945) started painting in the late 1960s and experienced intense censorship due to his use of abstraction, color and nudity. His first attempted solo show in 1984 resulted in all 120 works being censored. He waited 29 years for his first solo show in 2013.

KARIN WEBER GALLERY

Melissa Carlson is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, focused on the development of Southeast Asian modernism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Her dissertation examines the development of Burmese modern art and postcolonial national identity under the constellation of authoritarianism, isolationism, and censorship. As a Fellow in the 2019-2020 program Modern Art Histories of South and Southeast Asia (MAHASSA), funded by the Getty Foundation, she presented on forms of artist collectives and biennales at the 2020 Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh. Publications include a chapter in the edited volume *Ambitious Alignments: New Art Histories of Southeast Asia* (National Gallery of Singapore, 2018).

Established since 1999, Karin Weber Gallery is one of Hong Kong's oldest contemporary art galleries. Situated on Aberdeen Street, in the heart of SoHo, the gallery presents a year-round program of curated exhibitions, talks, and collector events. A unique network of partners based in London, Mumbai and Berlin allows it to source emerging and established contemporary art from around the world.

Karin Weber Gallery is equally passionate about presenting works by local artists. The gallery assists artists through exhibitions, art fairs, and residency programs throughout the world. Small in size, yet global in outlook, Karin Weber Gallery is one of Hong Kong's truly international boutique galleries.



karin weber gallery
Contemporary Fine Art

C/F, 20 Aberdeen Street, Central, Hong Kong
+852 2544 5004

karinwebergallery.com
art@karinwebergallery.com

© 2021 Karin Weber Gallery
All Rights Are Reserved