

- ART

How a burgeoning Myanmar art scene came to sudden unrest

Just as the landscape is gaining international acclaim, the country's artists have been thrown into chaos and uncertainty.

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NOVEMBER 2, 2022



- In this photograph taken on February 20, 2016, a visitor view paintings "Burmese maiden" by Shwe Thein (left) and "I wanna go to school" by Zay Zay Htut (right) during the opening of exhibition by 53 Myanmar artists made up of modern paintings, sculpture and art installation at Yangon's River gallery. Photo: Romeo Gacad/AFP

There are times when your reality can change in just a few hours. On 1 February 2021, everything shifted overnight for Myanmar contemporary artists – and the country at large – crushing hopes for freedom of expression and for a better future.

The night between 31 January and 1 February, the military toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, and seized control of the nation. Over one year on, the crisis rages still, with 2,300 people killed and over 15,000 arrested.

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The coup immediately began destroying lives, but it also devastated Myanmar's contemporary art landscape just as it was becoming one of the region's most promising art scenes. Artists, intellectuals, and other critics have become targets by the military, as they immediately played a central role in challenging the junta.

Before the coup, Myanmar artists were finally beginning to conquer the art critics, acquiring market value and establishing themselves in the international arena. Examples are the consistent Myanmar representation in recent editions of the Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT) in Brisbane, including the work of Htein Lin, Sawangwongse Yawngghwe, and Soe Yu Nwe, as well as in the Singapore Biennale, which in 2016 featured Htein Lin, as well as husband-and-wife duo, Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu.

In recent years various museums, galleries and fairs in the region have devoted programming to Burmese art and artists, both in Asia and in Europe, one the biggest being the first large-scale exhibition dedicated to the Myanmar Burmese modernist, Bagyi Aung Soe in 2021 at the Center Pompidou in Paris.

After the coup this suddenly changed. Many artists, including Htein Lin, a prominent painter, performer and activist who has been involved in resistance movements for decades, were thrown in prison. But some of the lucky ones managed to escape abroad. In response to the conflict, many exiled artists are raising awareness of the crisis through their art.



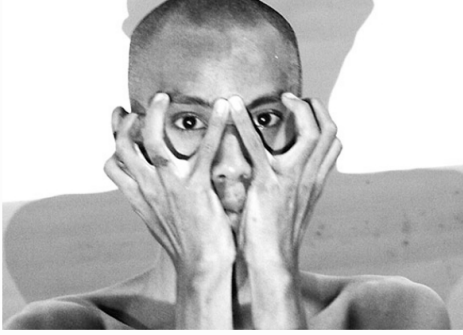
– Myanmar artist Htein Lin posing for photos in front of one of his paintings during an exhibition at a hotel in Yangon. Painted on scraps of clothing with carved soap, cigarette lighters and even syringes, Htein Lin's artworks were his lifeline during years in Myanmar jails. Photo: Soe Than Win/AFP

"On the last day of January 2021, some artist friends and I were painting a huge wall on the side of a furniture factory," recounted artist Kyaw Moe Khine, who goes by the name of 'Bart Was Not Here' or Bart for short. He recalled that he needed to finish the painting early the following day, so the artists bought food for a barbecue and planned to have a cookout.

Calling from Los Angeles, one could easily mistake the former street artist, now an in-demand name in contemporary art galleries, for a second-generation Burmese-American kid. He exudes contagious energy and enthusiasm as he speaks even of the dramatic events that have altered the present and future of his country – and his own life.

"Then we went home, and we slept. And the next day it was February 1st, and the military coup had happened," Bart said. "We woke up with no phone line, no internet, nothing was on TV. Only the radio was on, only one station with

traditional Burmese music playing. It was so eerie. It felt like a horror story.”



– Moe Satt, No Reason, from Face and Fingers.

Image: courtesy of Moe Satt

“I don’t consider myself to be an exiled artist,” said Moe Satt, who moved to Amsterdam for a two year residency with his entire family in September 2022. “I have always fled with the idea of coming back.”

His country’s and his own narrative, which he tells passionately with nervous gestures, are one in his mind. Not far from him, his newborn baby cries in a cradle.

Moe Satt started participating in the protests in Yangon from day one. Gathering with other artists for readings and performances against the junta while raising money through art, he and his fellow demonstrators felt energised, motivated to come together into a common struggle.

Then the police started shooting at civilians, using lethal weapons, live ammunition, grenades, and so-called ‘less-lethal weapons.’ But police and soldiers massacred protesters in cities and towns across the country.

According to Human Rights Watch, the security forces have killed nearly 1,500 peaceful civilians since the coup, armed only with their posters, chants and three-finger salute. One of the most brutal cases was the killing of 19-year-old Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, who joined a protest rally in the Burmese capital Naypyidaw and was shot in the head by a submachine gun.



– Poster with three-finger salute by Moe Satt. Image: courtesy of Moe Satt

Moe Satt was arrested during street protests on 27 March, alongside other artists and poets who organised the demonstrations. He was imprisoned for 95 days.

“I’m not scared to be back to jail, that’s not the reason why I left,” he said. “I just couldn’t make any art in Yangon anymore, first with the pandemic, and now with the coup. I needed a break.”

When contemporary art from Southeast Asia began to attract global attention in the 2000s and early 2010s, the spotlight was on Indonesia, later the Philippines,

moving in recent years to Thailand and Vietnam.

“Myanmar has always appeared to be the forgotten son, until the last decade,” explained Singaporean curator Louis Ho, who curated exhibitions on Myanmar Burmese contemporary art at Richard Koh Fine Art.

“Learning about the country’s art and visual cultures came in a much heftier package of self-education: about its history, its ethnic and communal politics, its food. Like so much else in life, an initial curiosity, and pleasure of discovery, led to a sustained engagement.



– Myanm/art gallery in Yangon. Image: supplied

Curator Nathalie Johnston, who founded the seminal space Myanm/art in Yangon feels that the scene had only just started taking off.

“It’s true that the Myanmar art scene never reached an incredible commercial success, but pre-coup there were a number of practising artists, and an incredibly rich art scene, though less well known compared to neighbouring Indonesia, Thailand or Vietnam,” she said. “When we opened in 2016, the art scene started to bloom, after years of censorship and restrictions.”

Ilaria Benini, a curator and publisher who managed the artistic platform Fluxkit in Yangon from 2012 to 2015, witnessed a time of great optimism.

“An overwhelming transformation was happening in front of our eyes, people changing their clothes, building roads, opening art galleries, documentary photography centres, something that was unimaginable just a few years earlier,” she said.

In those years when Myanmar was opening up to democracy, a certain level of censorship was still present, but there were spaces for freedom. ‘Myanm/art,’ as well as other spaces, started approaching risqué themes like queerness, politics, and sexuality, testing the boundaries of what was allowed and what wasn’t.

“At the time we had events that could have been censored and openly discussed political topics, but we sneaked through rules and luckily those actions weren’t really prosecuted at that time,” said Benini. “While now we know that it is impossible to publicly do activities that have the slightest critical spirit.”



—
Richie Htet, 'Goddess'. Image: courtesy of
Richie Htet

Richie Htet joined the art scene right before the coup, in 2020, with his first solo at Myanmar/art.

In addition to that, he notes that a sort of self-censorship was always present: “Even before the coup, you couldn’t really talk with absolute freedom about gender issues, because of Burmese cultural norms,” Htet noted. “But it seemed that the scene was opening up more and more. Sadly, this came to an abrupt end.”

Having experienced a coup previously, the people of Myanmar thought they had to take the streets immediately, to stop the new junta to consolidate power. There was a sense of urgency and meaning drawing the population in the streets.

“The response was incredible. Myanmar people really know how to protest,” said

Johnston. “There were events and rallies everywhere, so much energy of rebellion, the internet exploded. But after a while, the military started shooting and killing people, and this surge waned down.”

Johnston was forced to leave Myanmar in April, but Myanmar/art’s team managed to reopen the space a few months later. “You know, life goes on even after a coup, schools reopen, people still have to buy groceries, work, and fill their time. But we are all very aware that people and artists are killed.”

Writer and activist Kyaw Min Yu, known as Ko Jimmy, and hip hop artist and former member of Parliament, Phyo Zaya Thaw were executed on baseless charges of terrorism along with two other activists. The killings were the country’s first use of capital punishment in decades – which came as a shock to the world.

“We couldn’t believe they actually did it, we were so angry,” said Chaw Ei Thein, a political artist, mostly working with performance since entering the art scene. “These were friends, and they were also artists just like us.”



— Myanmar-born artist Chaw Ei Thein. Image: courtesy of Chaw Ei Thein

Exuding calm fierceness, Chaw Ei Thein, has been living in the United States since 2008 as the military has refused to renew her passport. She was able to return home only when Aung San Suu Kyi’s party came to power. Today, her

name is on a junta blacklist.

While she strongly believes in the power of art to create awareness, at the same time, she understands the practical needs to deliver help to the Myanmar population. Fundraising is one of these modalities, she said.

“Myanmar is talked about more and more in the news, and this has raised the value of art. The rest of the world is suddenly paying attention and they want to learn more through the art,” she said.

In terms of market value, after the coup Myanmar fine arts has achieved the highest rate ever. Art is also seen as an investment, so Burmese people themselves are buying art also in response to changes in currency due to political instability.

While there is growing attention towards Myanmar, inside the country political artists are worried for their safety.

Htein Lin and his wife, former British ambassador Vicky Bowman, were both sentenced to one year in prison. This traumatic event further disbanded a scene of local and exiled Burmese artists, who worried their social media platforms would be controlled.

“It’s the third time in their lifetime that this has happened, and they understandably have enough and fled. Those who decided to stay are doing less political work, but the subtle cues for rebellion are often still there,” Johnston said.

Yet even as many Myanmar artists move abroad, they still must balance drawing attention to what’s happening in Myanmar with the necessity to keep their families back home safe.

“Before the coup, my work wasn’t political at all,” said Richie Het. “It became so when I moved out of the country, to put under the spotlight what is happening in Burma at the minute.”



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