

HOLDING ON

An Interview with Nge Lay and Aung Ko



Top: Installation view of **NGELAY**'s *Printemps 21* series (2022) at "Mémoires," Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC VAL), 2022. Bottom: Installation view of **AUNG KO**'s *Spring Revolution Myanmar* series (2022) at "Mémoires," Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC VAL), 2022. Photos by Aurélien Mole. Both images courtesy MAC VAL.



2022 was a tough year for Myanmar artists. While trying to hold on strenuously after the February 1, 2021, military coup d'état and the government's crackdown on its citizens, many artists eventually decided to leave the country, including the artist-couple Nge Lay and Aung Ko.

Nge Lay's multimedia practice explores gender, time, and memory amid the socio-political backdrop of Myanmar, often involving communities. Aung Ko's paintings, performances, and installations reflect on village life, geography, history, and customs. They stayed in Yangon for as long as they could, actively participating in the protests, until they eventually had to flee a few months ago to protect their daughter and themselves. While carrying on their battle for freedom through art abroad, they elaborated on the situation in the country before leaving for their residency at the Val-de-Marne Contemporary Art Museum (MAC VAL) outside of Paris, where their show "Mémoires" was on view until the end of December.

AK Myanmar art was starting to grow slowly, though not as much as in neighboring countries, and it was still struggling with its market recognition.

Before the coup, would you say that Myanmar art was finally on the rise?

This was due to the fact that Myanmar was closed as a country from 1962 to 2010, and the government's budget cuts in education, health, and economics after 1988, which negatively affected everyone, especially those living in the countryside.

NL The contemporary art scene was very small when I finished school in 2004, but slowly, performance art emerged in Myanmar. I was lucky to access many art books at the French Institute in Yangon, which elicited my curiosity about contemporary trends. That's when

I started to think about the way I could express with my creations. I began with performance and photography because, at the time, I didn't have a space or a budget. Also, we had to be very careful of censorship. Instead of large canvases, we had to make ephemeral works that could disappear, or small works, like photos, that we could hide.

AK I will never forget that morning, when I woke up early and everything was silent around me. There was no telephone line, nothing on TV. I saw my brother on the street and he told me what happened. I was shocked and I said to myself out loud: "Is this happening again?" No one wanted to be in a military dictatorship again. We've experienced it already and we remember it well. In 1988, I was just a boy, but this time I have a five-year-old daughter. The feeling that hit me was: "We have lost our future."

You participated in the protests since the beginning. Could you please describe to me what happened on February 1, 2021, right after the coup d'état?

Many artists joined the protests. We started connecting with each other and organized our fights for freedom. But eventually, when the violence escalated, many had to leave. We were not safe,

mentally and physically. Some of us were blacklisted. Nge Lay and I took a residency at MAC VAL and La Cité des Arts in Paris for six months. These days, it's still hard to sleep at night and we can still hear the gunfire. I know my daughter will carry the trauma from that experience. It doesn't just go away as soon as you leave. As artists, we have no choice but to keep making work, to re-elaborate on and participate in that experience through art-making and other initiatives, like fundraising and providing help from abroad.

NL In Myanmar, we are used to revolutions. During the colonial time, people protested against the British rule, which eventually changed the situation in the country. This gave the Burmese people trust in the power of protest, until later, the military government seized the power in 1962 and bloodily suppressed the opposition. But the public was forgetful even of the student killings and demonstrations followed in 1990, which were again silenced by the government. Control became even more strict, until around 2010 when the country started opening a little. In 2015, with Aung San Suu Kyi's party winning the election, the situation improved and we got used to having more freedom. So when the coup d'état happened again, it destroyed all the hopes we had for a brighter future.

AK The phrase "Golden Land Myanmar" was often seen in the propaganda produced by the military government after 1988. You hear it on the radio every morning, and you see the signboard once you land at the Yangon International Airport. We all hated it. So since 2010, I started creating these golden sculptures as an ironic reference to this slogan. Additionally, Myanmar people abroad address each other as "Ko Shwe," which means "Mr. Gold," as a way to recognize each other and acknowledge their inner value, even when we are doing, for example, very low-paid jobs. This is not necessarily related to the people who fled Myanmar after the coup, since the word has existed for a long time.

Aung Ko, for your recent show "I am Ko Shwe" (9/23–10/28) at Primo Marella Gallery in Lugano, you chose the color gold to create statues. What does it represent?

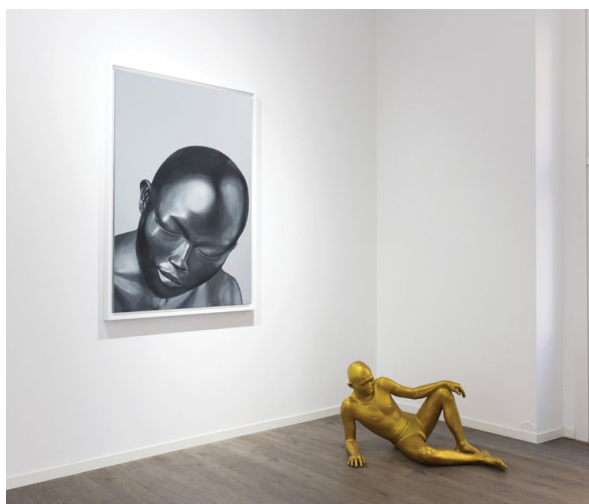
Nge Lay, your memorable performance at Paris's art fair Asia Now (10/20–23) focuses on the absurdity of the bureaucratic machine. How does that speak to your own experience of fleeing the country?

NL The performance at Asia Now encapsulated my current feelings for my country and featured the symbol of the stamps. You know, something as small and simple as a stamp can determine the direction of one's life. Sometimes it can decide between life

or death. In my performance, I stamped different papers with a red stamp, sometimes with a violent gesture, sometimes reluctantly. Various regions of Myanmar are printed on the series of sheets to signify the internal division within the country itself.

I'm aware that I'm not an activist or a political artist, per se. But being in Paris now and mourning deeply for my country, I have a responsibility to let international audiences know what's going on in Myanmar.

NAIMA MORELLI



Top: Installation view of **AUNG KO's** *I am Ko Shwe #1*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 114 × 145 cm, and *Ko Shwe*, 2013, fiberglass and golden paint, life-size dimensions, at "I am Ko Shwe," Primo Marella Gallery, Milan, 2022. Courtesy Primo Marella Gallery. Bottom: Photo documentation of **NGELAY's** *Fragile*, performance: 20 min, at Asia Now, Paris, 2022. Courtesy A2Z Gallery, Paris/Hong Kong.