

## Reflections of an artist in exile

This text is adapted from a conversation between Nge Lay and curator Khai Hori on 28 Sept 2024 in Paris. Khai Hori is Director and Partner at Chan + Hori Contemporary Singapore, former Deputy Director at Palais de Tokyo, France.



### Nge Lay:

It has been nearly three years since we arrived here at the end of August 2021, just six months after the military coup in Myanmar. Yes, we began our residency at Mac Val upon our arrival and stayed there for almost a year. Following that, we moved to a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts from July 2022 until the end of August 2024.



After six months under the military coup, it became increasingly difficult to remain in Myanmar. The situation was complex and rapidly deteriorating. When we received the offer for the residency at Mac Val, we decided to accept it immediately. We had little time to consider the decision. Within two weeks, we had organised our move to France. We were unprepared but felt we had no choice; we simply had to move forward, no matter how uncertain the outcome might be.

Returning to Myanmar after the Mac Val residency was not an option. There was a real possibility we could be arrested upon arrival. Given our involvement in various activities back home and our vocal opposition to the coup, we feared the consequences. Many of our friends who protested alongside us had already been arrested. We were certain we had been identified by the police and military. While it's true that this fear could be seen as speculative, we could not dismiss the very real risks.

Not only would it be unsafe for us, but also for our families and anyone associated with us. If we were arrested, we might simply disappear or even die, as has happened to others. We did not know what fate awaited us, and this uncertainty weighed heavily on our minds.

Aung Ko and I decided that we needed to stay alive, believing that, in our freedom, we could help others; our friends and families, by various means. The residency at Mac Val had been discussed for some time, but once the invitation was confirmed, we accepted within days. At that moment, we thought that perhaps the situation in Myanmar would improve after a year, but it did not, and so we decided to stay.

Before the coup, we never considered emigrating to another country. Every time we participated in exhibitions or residencies abroad, we knew that we would return home, even if the residency lasted a year or more. Everything we had was in Myanmar; our home, our land, our family, and friends. Life felt more stable and secure there. We were confident in our livelihoods.



Now, people refer to us as refugees. We aren't sure what that truly means, but we have been given a 10-year residency card here in France, although we don't know if it can be extended. For the next 10 years, we can work, live, and go to school here, provided we can afford it. It feels surreal, like living in a dream. We never expected to find ourselves in this position; suddenly having to choose this life.

Starting again from nothing has been a significant challenge. Our life here is uncertain. We have no home, no income, no permanent job. We often wonder whether we can continue with our art practice, but even that feels tenuous at times. There are many challenges.

Yes, starting from zero offers an opportunity to reinvent ourselves, as no one here really knows who we are. But age is a factor. If we were in our twenties or thirties, it might have been easier to rebuild. But now, in our forties, it feels more daunting. Deciding to attend the Beaux-Arts and becoming students again felt like a return to the starting line. This has been part of the restart of our practice.

In Myanmar, as you know, artistic freedom is limited. We did everything ourselves. There, we organised exhibitions, created works, and navigated a restrictive environment. Sometimes things went well, other times they didn't, but we kept pushing forward. Here, the approach to art is entirely different. The way of thinking and the philosophy around art is unlike what we experienced in Myanmar. We are working with new materials and a new visual language.

As established artists, we had already developed a particular style, but now it feels as though we must start again. We are combining the ideas and concerns we carried with us with this new environment.



Before, our focus was on Myanmar, its politics, religion, and everything centred on Asia and Southeast Asia. Now, we must view these ideas from a global perspective. I finished my studies in 2003, but back then, I wasn't entirely sure what kind of art I wanted to create. I knew I wanted to be an artist, so I began experimenting, searching for subjects and approaches that resonated with me. There wasn't much happening in the art scene in Myanmar at that time, and internet access was restricted, so I had limited exposure to what was happening elsewhere. That led me to explore photography.

In 2008, I met Patricia, a curator from the Singapore Art Museum who had seen my work and invited me to exhibit in *Transport Asia* at SAM. That was my first international exhibition, and it was also the first time a museum acquired my work.

Before this, Aung Ko and I had been running a project in his village, inviting local artists to create works with the villagers.

After my experience at SAM, I began meeting other curators who invited me to participate in various projects. This marked a turning point in my career. With the funds from these projects, we were able to buy our own camera, which had been a significant challenge until then.

Despite being here in France, we think of Myanmar every day. We stay connected with friends and family there and continue to help in any way we can. Artistically, I have been trying to create works connected to the political situation in Myanmar, but I am now rethinking whether this is the right direction for me.

I have gradually distanced myself from directly addressing Myanmar's politics in my art. Here in France, people seem detached from what is happening in Myanmar. When I speak about it, many people lose interest after just a few minutes. It has made me reconsider how I approach these topics. Perhaps I will continue to touch on politics, but in a more nuanced way, without directly referring to Myanmar.



We also don't want to be defined solely by our political stance. It isn't fair to those still living under the current regime in Myanmar. Some of our friends might suffer if we speak too openly about these issues here. While we are deeply invested in the political developments, we are not politicians.

Being in exile inherently makes our bodies political, yet we try not to focus too much on our refugee status for the safety of our families. As you know, Aung Ko's family lives very close to a militarised zone. We only mention our refuge in our artist biographies when necessary, preferring the term 'exile' over 'refugee'. Living in exile was not our choice, but we made the decision to survive. Declaring oneself a refugee feels like confronting those in power head-on.

People might think that we enjoy complete freedom here, especially in terms of political expression, but that isn't true. We are constantly censoring ourselves, whether in public or on social media, to protect our loved ones back home. While we are physically safe here, our mental safety is another matter entirely.

I try to separate the personal from the professional, particularly when it comes to my political voice. I cannot change my Burmese identity, it is my root. But I also need to adapt, to absorb the French psyche and ways of art-making.

My daughter was born in Myanmar, but now she is here and attends school in France. She even speaks French now. At the same time, I remind her not to forget where she comes from. Though she may adopt the culture here, I want her to remember that her family and roots are in Myanmar. We still speak Burmese at home, and I try to learn everything she is learning alongside her.

Adapting to our new reality has been difficult. I make efforts to connect not only with my daughter but also with other young people here, to understand their experiences. I know





that she will soon be a teenager. I have also had many conversations with other migrant women about their lives in this environment.

In these interactions with other migrants, I find new directions for my work. My mother passed away while I was on the flight to France, and I didn't get to see her before I left. I still feel a deep sense of guilt for that. Every day, I live with these emotions.

When I look at my daughter, Dahlia, I'm reminded of my own relationship with my mother, which was fraught with misunderstandings. I don't want that for myself and Dahlia. I try to be closer to her, but I know that my anxieties sometimes come through in our interactions.

I often wonder about my mother now that she's gone; what her new existence is like...

As an artist, I am fortunate to have an outlet for my emotions. When I work with clay, for example, I let my feelings flow through my hands, shaping the material into something that reflects what's on my mind. It has become a form of self-therapy for me.

I also walk a lot, especially outside Paris. These walks help, but they don't entirely ease the pain. Still, they are part of the healing process I've designed for myself.

I find myself in an in-between zone, navigating the life of an immigrant while seeking an artistic path. My reflections on life have deepened, especially as I engage with other migrants and listen to their stories. I am incorporating these stories into my upcoming works; they are significant to me. Ten of these stories will feature in my next project.

Yet, I'm not sure I've found the central thread of my practice again. Before I left Myanmar, I worked with migrant communities on the border between Thailand and Myanmar. Many of them have been caught in civil wars and live in refugee camps, unable to return to either country. Over the years, support from NGOs has dwindled, and many of these



people remain in limbo. Some were even born in these camps and have never known life outside them.

I remember asking them about their sense of hope. To my surprise, they didn't even know what the word meant. They had no concept of it, no vision for their future. They simply existed in the present. I tried to introduce them to the idea of hope, believing it might offer them something to hold on to.

Now, I find myself in a similar situation. As a migrant, I am questioning what hope means for me. I am still searching for my own resolution of hope. Although my situation is better than theirs, I often feel helpless, with my future shrouded in uncertainty.

I spend much time thinking about how I might help those back home. Perhaps one day, after gaining more experience here, I will be able to return and make a difference. Perhaps Dahlia will have her own life here, while I work to support those still in Myanmar.

As I had mentioned, I began to build relationships with migrants here last year. I am not exactly a therapist to them, nor am I only an artist, I am simply human, like them. My priority is to listen to their stories. In many ways, they are helping me piece together my own perspective, both as a person and as an artist.

We need each other, and the simplest way to help is through conversation. Many of them have no one to talk to, and sometimes, that's all they need, someone to listen.

The challenges I face now with regards to access to resources remind me of the project Aung Ko and I did in his village. I was an outsider there too, and resources were scarce.

I don't know if I will return to Myanmar, though I do want to. Whether or not I succeed here; I'm not sure what that even means anymore. Every decision feels difficult.



Sometimes, I wonder if there is any point in returning. I've lost so much; my mother, my land, my house. Everything is broken. Even though I still have siblings there, some friends now see us as traitors or cowards for leaving. I am still processing these feelings. It's complicated.

Myanmar's society has changed. Many people we knew have died, especially during the Covid pandemic. That sense of loss was profound, but we had tried to rebuild after the pandemic ended. We thought Covid was the worst we would face, but then the military coup happened. Living there, we've lost and regained hope many times. It's been exhausting, but we must find hope again.

Dahlia is the primary reason we stayed here. We didn't want her to endure the same violence and upheaval that we experienced since we were her age.

During the coup, we witnessed five protesters being chased by police and military, and rather than surrender, they leapt from the fifth floor of a building to their deaths. This was the reality we faced. And if the authorities came to your home and you weren't there, they would take whoever was, your mother, your father.

Considering all this, we realised that if we died, especially in unspeakable ways, we wouldn't be able to do anything for anyone.

To think only of myself?

No, I refuse to live as a coward. I refuse to carry that guilt for the rest of my life.





Endnotes:

- a. Nge Lay arrived in France with Aung Ko, her husband and fellow artist, and her daughter Dahlia.
- b. Mac Val is the first museum entirely dedicated to the French art scene from the 50's up until today located in Vitry-sur-Seine.
- c. Nge Lay was still living in Yangon, Myanmar at the time of the coup d'état, orchestrated by Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) took place on 1 February 2021.
- d. École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts is a French grande école whose primary mission is to provide high-level fine arts education and training. The art school, which is part of the Paris Sciences et Lettres University, is located on two sites: Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, and Saint-Ouen.
- e. Nge Lay studied Fine Art Painting at University of Culture, Yangon (1999 – 2003) and received a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art Painting (2003). She also graduated from the Yangon East University with a Bachelor's degree in Economics (2004).
- f. Patricia Levasseur de la Motte
- g. Thuye` dan Village, Pyay, Myanmar - 260 km north-west of Yangon.