

SAWANGWONGSE YAWNGHWE

Teaser

Sawangwongse Yawngghwe develops the new series to voice a dissent against the Burmese military Junta. He uses feminist and ethnographic narratives to dissect the political situation in Burma.

Description

Actuated by the current turmoil in Myanmar and the background of escalating global refugee crises, Sawangwongse Yawngghwe developed a new series of work to strongly and urgently voice for the ethnic nationalities of Burma.

To many people, Burma, which was renamed Myanmar in 1989, is merely the name of a country; however, for most of the Burmese people, it connotes the nation's long-time struggle for democracy. The name itself is a painful reminder of the 8-8-88 Uprising, blood-shed protests against General Ne Win's regime. Yawngghwe experienced the struggles firsthand. Born in a rebel camp in the Shan State of Burma in 1971, Sawangwongse comes from the Yawngghwe family of Shan. His grandfather, Sao Shwe Thaik, was the first president of the Union of Burma (1948–1962). After the 1962 Burmese coup d'état, Yawngghwe's family was driven to exile. They stayed in Thailand, then escaped to Canada, where he grew up and received an education. He currently lives and works in the Netherlands. In 2015, he founded the Yawngghwe Office in Exile in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Counter-historiography and the discourse against Burman-centric narratives from a localized, non-Burman perspective have always been the core of Yawngghwe's artistic practice. His artwork always starts from the need to archive the Shan State's disappearing history, a reaction against nationalist chauvinism of Myanmar's regime.

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Yawnghwe's work interweaves reality and fabrications from historic scenes, family photos, and notes his father has left behind. He employs a research methodology that draws on philosophical discourses, reflecting upon the validity of history when ethnic minorities' narratives are dissolved, oppressed, and eradicated. His work depicts the paradoxical political contradiction as well as its political fluidity and aftermaths.

Through painterly rhetoric, his works suggest that existing and available archives cannot reveal a nation's history in its entirety.

In this new series, Yawnghwe uses the image of a woman as an apparatus to dissect the current political structure in Myanmar. It is a photograph of Louisa Benson Craig, an inspirational minority community leader, and former Miss Burma. Benson was a pro-democracy armed rebel and an icon of unity during a time when national politics is marked by diversity. Her image acts as a metaphor for the artist who advocates for a future Myanmar, where ethnic diversity will have been achieved. The painting 'Angle' conveys his tribute to a young lady, who was the first protester to die in the anti-coup demonstrations in Myanmar. The geometric patterns repetitively appearing in his brand-new series of paintings are inspired by the currently ongoing events in Myanmar where the protestors were seen hanging Longyis in hope of shielding themselves from the approaching army.

By applying motifs from Burmese woman's clothing, Yawnghwe deliberately provokes the very essence of the overwhelming macho system in Myanmar and celebrates the idea of diversity and female power. The colour stripes and patterns, are elements inspired by the day-to-day wear fabrics for Burmese and by decorations of the palaces he used to see. They are exhibiting the artist's affirmation of his ethnic identity as a Shan, a vital but undesired and chanceless ethnic community in Burma.

Painting to him is the most radical action he can embark upon to record the disappearing and manipulated history of the oppressed. He sees painting as the language imposed on him as a result of his exile. Referencing Zizek, he once mentioned that painting is a thing that emerges out of its own loss. What he ends up with are compositions that cut up and block off photographic images, such as old family snap shots. This is a mechanism of dealing with and coming to terms with loss,

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new codes, and new languages. As his root was ripped out from underneath, Yawnghwe's paintings, intuitively composed, are always instill a feeling of wandering, of perpetually being rootless with a sense of nostalgia.

Yawnghwe's works repeatedly evoke historical figures and/or past events. His paintings seem to freeze a moment in time and appear blurred, reduced or camouflaged in some way. They are often based on family photographs, reports or film stills, which the artist non-psychically appropriates from his family archive and memory or finds in his research process. Like a form of political currency, they critique the existing power structures rather than simply representing or describing them.

Yawnghwe employs painting technique to deal with the image on the canvas. He has its parallel in the apparent flat vibrant colour stripes or motifs, a result in the visual clashes with distressed finishes providing the cultural semiotic dimensions in his works, which instills a degree of freshness. His inclusion of ethnographic narratives to explore the hybrid manifestations presents the new language of painting. In the end, the truth he attempts to depict is beyond those representations.

Dialectically mediating and translating images through the mass media, and through the processes of painting, Yawnghwe presents one of the most relentless voices to reinventing the significance of the matter. His genuine investigative approach complementing with meticulous researches results of the work acting as a forum where the content and political positions are presented as historical references.