

# MY PAINTINGS ARE NOT BEAUTIFUL

*Born in 1951, San Minn emerged as a mature artist in the seventies, going on to become a pillar of the Myanmar and Yangon modern art movement. San Minn, who studied art not only through his masters degree but also through road-side bookstores, experienced first-hand the evolution of the most exciting period of the country's artistic essence in the past decades. Borbála Kálmán unravels the bumpy path of a senior contemporary artist still loyal to his original vision.*

In early March 2015, at Yangon's Think Gallery, San Minn's final artistic vision was assembled- a selection of his 'banned works'. It was his 12th solo exhibition, the first opened in 1980 where he did not sell one work. Amongst the thirty pieces displayed in the latest exhibition, there were some prints that replaced the original works. The labels underneath read, 'Collection of National Gallery, Singapore', 'Collection of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan'; these paintings could not be transported to the show. These are almost the only works that have left San Minn's studio.

The reasons leading to the organisation of this unusual 12th individual exhibition were multiple: besides the will to display works never seen together before, San Minn had the intention to reveal to the 'free to create' younger Myanmar artist generation, how forty years ago a 'different kind of art' was possible, even under the toughest censorship. All the selected works

displayed in March 2015 were at one time banned from the public, there were many others as well.

#### Becoming a pillar

San Minn had an interest in art since a very young age. He was lucky enough to attend a Yangon school that had regular art courses, even in the summer holidays. Kids today get very little education related to the visual arts - it is no wonder that the contemporary scene struggles to draw attention to its own significance. Following the will of his parents, San Minn started Yangon University in 1969. Eventually, he became a member of the Art Centre, created the same year he was born, and later on its Secretary. Even then he co-organised shows, like the groundbreaking 'Wild Eye' exhibition. Then came 1974, where the Art Centre contributed to the poster campaign during the U Thant crisis and several of the University students got arrested during the riots. San Minn was put in jail for three years and one month. This experience has



The print version of 'Age of Full Bloom' today in the collection of National Gallery, Singapore as exhibited at Think Gallery in March 2015.



San Minn had his first solo show in 1980 - in 2015, it was the twelfth to open at Think Gallery.

haunted him since: from time to time, a work might suggest an atmosphere of confinement, revisiting the notions of solitude and injustice. These topics, hand in hand with other subtle allusions to current issues, economic and social, reflect the artist's approach stating the power and relevance of art within society.

In 1979, wanting to create an exhibition uniting a new wave of artists outside the university, San Minn co-organized the first Gangaw Village Group show. Out of this innovative climate grew a series of group exhibitions that became milestones in recent Myanmar art history - 'Period' (1984), followed by 'Rectangular Lantern' Part 1 (1985) and 2 (1994) to just mention a few. These exhibitions gathered together the most progressive artists in the country at that time. Mean-





A double page of the folder guarding the 80s works from San Minn's personal archives, Yangon - March 2015.

while, San Minn also focused on his personal oeuvre. Working during the day, and painting at night, it took him sometimes six months to finish an art piece.

**Sealing the paintings' fate**

Long years ago, San Minn decided to reorganise his archives. Using his background as an engineer and a botanist (classifying), he photographed each of his works, developed the films, then chronologically sorted the prints into different folders. A red-star sticker marked those that had been banned. 'The Age of Full Bloom' was first exhibited in 1979. Before the opening, the censorship board, as usual, arrived on the spot and demanded one of the paintings be brought to their office. They returned it two months later: by then, the artwork had suffered badly. A stamp had been impressed on the painting's surface several times, stating that the work was not allowed to be shown in public. This unfortunate 'administrative act', while ruining the painting, also contributed to its inclusion in a museum collection 35 years later. Ironically, the 'verdict' was based on a misinterpretation. The board considered the dress of the depicted woman too much in cor-

relation with the national flag in use before 1974. San Minn in fact had no intention to this allusion. It was not the only time that one of his works was banned for the same reason. The converse was also true: some works managed to make it through the official check although they carried ambiguous messages.

**A Surrealist in Yangon**

San Minn mostly refers to his art as Surrealist. He chooses personal concerns and ideas, and mixes them with references to current political, social, economic or cultural concepts. But, most importantly, he escapes Realism, an 'abject notion' in the eyes of the Moderns. His use of direct colours and mixed media, paired with a hint of irony and with compositions interweaving reality and fiction, makes his art multilayered. Even in his early period (1970s-80s), in certain pieces one might unravel unconventional elements that indicate a second reading.

"Back then, it was rare to find art books in Myanmar. So I went to hunt the roadside bookshops in Pansodan

Street. I was looking for *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines. They had articles on art," remembers San Minn. These issues were usually the ones foreign embassies would randomly throw out, hence they were two years old or more. However, they were 'treasures' to the artists who would pay attention to their specific information. San Minn also encountered some of the international art movements through these articles, and often decided thereon to experiment in new ways of creating. If he happened to find his temporary enterprises unrealised, he moved on. 'Pony-cart' and 'Food-Stall' were attempts to immerse himself in Hyperrealism. In the early '70s, he would experiment with the shapes of Cubism, and later the dynamism of Futurism. These observations were merely formal, as access to the theoretical side of these movements was quite impossible. These personal 'studies' resulted in completely singular interpretations and visual conclusions.

San Minn is an artist from a generation in Myanmar whose art was for too long only appreciated by a handful of people, but who kept alive an approach to art very different to the conventional one. This was a contesting, inner-driven art, searching beyond its capacity to depict the visible world because it has a meaning to convey. "My paintings are not beautiful. Most collectors are not interested in buying paintings that are not beautiful," said San Minn, referencing the Myanmar art market's recent tendency. But for a few years now, thanks to slowly elaborated contacts with the international art scene, the substance and weight of these artists working in the shade for so long has started to surface; through museum exhibitions, and participation in festivals and biennales. Without any infrastructure in this country for the arts, recognition from the public materialises only gradually, and the lack of researchers, critics or experts does not speed thing up. Even so, the art of San Minn proves that the will of creation and going against the mainstream might eventually become a fruitful artistic attitude in the long term. ■



Interior of San Minn's exhibition at Think Gallery, Yangon (March 2015).