

Ceramic artist snakes into Myanmar with debut show

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A WELDER of myth, memory, and most foremost, clay, Soe Yu Nwe knows just how challenging it is to bring together fragmented parts. As a ceramic artist, she draws on the memories she has accumulated moving from Lashio in northern Shan State to the Thai-Myanmar border and eventually to the United States, where she first began to translate her experiences into clay.

Back in Yangon now after spending seven years studying and exhibiting in the US, Soe Yu Nwe is preparing for her debut solo show in country, which opens at Myanm/art Gallery on February 3. She will exhibit three works, *Feminine Wound*, *Nature Intimated*, and *On Ghost*, all of which were shipped – not without great difficulty – from the US.

In addition, Soe Yu Nwe will also display one new work, an unfired sculpture she made

using materials she found in Myanmar in the days leading up to the opening of her show.

Due to the size and nature of her works – which are fragile and skeletal, depicting female, tree and snake-like forms – she was only able to ship works from her last residency in the US at California State University in Long Beach, as well as works from her thesis project at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design.

Though shipping art internationally was a nightmarish bureaucratic battle, the

process is somewhat of a metaphor for Soe Yu Nwe's own body of work. In her artist statement, she points to her experiences of alienation as a "cultural outsider" and being a "fragmented self" as some of the driving themes in her work.

Feminine Wound, for example, which is one of her most iconic pieces, embodies these cross cultural tensions in the depiction of a serpent. In the Chinese zodiac, the serpent represents wisdom, agility, and also greed. But in Judeo-Christian mythology, the serpent stands in as a symbol for deception and most

prominently for the dangerous sexual desire and female sexuality that led to the Fall of Man.

Other works like *On Ghost* use saggar firing – a process of firing clay in a boxlike container – to create a haunting scorched aesthetic.

Blackened from the kiln, clay chains imprison disembodied limbs to symbolise what Soe Yu Nwe calls the "imprisonment of 'ghosts' of the past".

Much like her own journey, Soe Yu Nwe's fragile and mythological works had to move across cultures, in fragments, and pass through customs – state run as opposed to cultural – before gaining entry and finding a homeland.

"The process was stressful because it was my first time shipping internationally," she said. "I have learned many lessons in the business of shipping

art. A piece I shipped to the Philippines wasn't released from customs for many months even though it only took two or three weeks to get there."

Despite the challenge, Soe Yu Nwe is excited to show her work in Yangon before she moves on to her next residency in China's ceramic capital, Jingdezhen.

"This is my first show in my hometown," she said. "So it is a very special show for me." Soe Yu Nwe hopes in the coming years to make Yangon her permanent home, and setting up a ceramic studio is a necessary component.

As she continues to exhibit and participate in residencies across Asia, with an expected exhibition at Singapore's Yavuz Gallery in April, Soe Yu Nwe is already looking to widen her understandings of mythology in both Buddhist and Animist traditions in her work.

Just last month, she returned from a residency in Yogyakarta, Indonesia where she came across the fertility goddess Dewi Siri who has a rice stalk sprouting from her navel.

"I tend to be interested in mythologies related to female figures, their role and destiny in these myths," she said. "They tell you how women were perceived at the time and what kind of messages we internalized hearing these myths. I plan to visualize these ... figures cross-culturally and work on creating some kind of hybridised beings."

Soe Yu Nwe's debut show in Myanmar signals not only the beginning of the establishment of herself as an artist in Southeast Asia, but it is also a rare opportunity for conceptual, folklore oriented ceramic art, rather than traditional pottery, in Yangon's contemporary art scene. **W**

Soe Yu Nwe: A Solo Exhibition is on view from February 3 through February 16 at Myanm/art Gallery located at 98, Third Floor, Bogalazay Road in downtown Yangon.



Photos: Supplied

