



Photos: Supplied/Soe Yu Nwe

BY LILLIAN KALISH

BY the time she moved to Yangon at the age of seven, Soe Yu Nwe had already called three places home. Her family, new arrivals to the city, spoke almost no Myanmar, having emigrated from Yunnan province in China. Soe Yu Nwe spent the first two years of her life in Lashio, northern Shan State, before moving to the Thai-Myanmar border where her family made a living selling construction materials.

She describes her childhood as a flurry of movements and intermingling of languages – Chinese, Myanmar, a little Thai she picked up on the border.

Now an emerging ceramic artist, the 27-year-old draws inspiration from these formative experiences. Upon her return from studying art in the US, she feared she would be alone in her craft; ceramics is seldom practiced in Myanmar outside of traditional pottery. However, as perhaps one of the only conceptual ceramic artists in Myanmar, Soe Yu Nwe is accustomed to being a stranger.

After spending the past seven years studying at Albion College and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the US, and completing a tour of residences, she has returned to Myanmar eager to establish herself and open a studio.



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Soe Yu Nwe

Though she is now well versed in the language of a trained artist, Soe Yu Nwe didn't always consider herself one.

"Being an artist was not something I wanted to do when I was young. I like to draw, I doodled, I kept sketch books all the time," she said, recalling that she was seldom encouraged to be creative as a child. Rather, her mother had sent her and her siblings to language schools, and often dismissed the arts for more practical vocations.

At Albion College, Soe Yu Nwe intended to pursue a more "practical field", trying her hand at biology and accounting courses before falling in love with art and an unlikely medium – clay.

"I think being in a foreign place is something that was very alienating to me," she said. "Art sort of helped me overcome that ... I thought that if I wanted to give my full energy, I should major in the arts."

What started as an undergraduate project soon developed into a body of work entitled *The Self Reconfigured*, which she submitted for her master's degree in Fine Arts in Ceramics at RISD, and spoke about at Myanmar/art in Yangon on September 24.



"Once you are removed from where you came from and put it in a new place, you start being hyperaware of your identity. Like how are you different from others? What creates that distance?" Soe Yu Nwe said, recalling the beginning of her self-discovery in the US.

"I started taking things apart and rearranging them," she said, referring to her pieces that use a snake as a symbol. She explains the process of taking apart the snake, looking at it anatomically and then metaphorically. "It helped me understand myself and give me a way to look at who I am and what I am struggling with."

While at RISD, Soe Yu Nwe studied under American artists Chitra Ganesh, Simone Leigh and Katy Schimert, known for their socially engaged work which centres on themes of alienation and space, language and femininity – much like Soe Yu Nwe's own work.

Though her work exhibits feminist and political resonances, and in some ways captures a tension between traditional Myanmar life and an uncertain future, Soe Yu Nwe insists that her work defies any definition.

"I don't think my work is specifically Burmese, it isn't traditional Burmese at all and I don't think I should limit my work or approach to just that category," she said.

Much of the content of her work seeks to explore the unanswered questions that have haunted her since childhood.

"Animism was one of the elements I didn't understand in my culture ... I started looking up imagery and was drawn to it. I started using the imagery and making work inspired by it," she said with hopes of doing more research on Southeast Asian animist and folk religions.

Other questions about Myanmar culture only came to her when she worked alongside her mostly American classmates. Throughout her fine arts program, she says she was too shy to draw a full body, especially nudes.


"I'd depict the body in parts but never a whole person. I thought it might be safer ... When you are from another culture, you are always self-censoring," she said, noting Myanmar's more conservative culture in comparison to the relaxed attitudes of her college.

"Being a woman in Burma is a bit restraining ... You are not supposed to go out at night if you are a woman. You have to look at what you wear ... So I think some of the anxieties in my work represent this social anxiety, personal anxiety, sexual anxiety," said Soe Yu Nwe.

Working and studying abroad greatly influenced Soe Yu Nwe's growth as an artist, though, at times, it made it difficult for her to reconnect with the aspects of her life she had left behind.

"The way I work, I work better if I have enough distance from the subject. If you're too close, you're afraid to take things apart ... so I think being away and having the chance to explore was a good thing," she said.

And despite the physical distance from Myanmar, the internet provided her with access to a wealth of digital archives and a way to network with artists around the world.

"I don't even know if ceramics is relevant here in the arts scene. A lot of contemporary work right now is in oil painting and a little bit of sculpture. Ceramics is a niche thing," she said, laughing. "I'm still figuring out what I am in the context of the arts in Myanmar ... I'm just waiting to see how it will be received." 



Soe Yu Nwe works in her studio. Photo: Supplied/ Jungmok Lee

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Jotun Myanmar (Services) Co. Ltd.
Bld. 18, 4th floor, MICT Park, Hlaing Campus,
Hlaing Township, Yangon – Myanmar.
Office : +95 1 230 53 50, +95 1 230 53 51
jotun.com/my