

REBEL ART

MYANMAR ARTISTS
RESPOND TO REPRESSION

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What strikes me most about Rebel Art is not only the extraordinary quality of the works it contains, but also the determination of the artists themselves. Many have endured displacement, persecution, imprisonment, or exile. Yet they continue to create. In doing so, they have preserved a living record of Myanmar's struggle for dignity, freedom, and justice. This book reveals how art can become testimony, resistance, and healing all at once. It offers readers a rare insight into the hopes, fears, losses, and aspirations of a generation that has refused to accept silence in the face of oppression.

Sir Charles Petrie Bt. OBE

—Former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations & Founder, The Concert to Connect; music as defiance, bringing together young musicians from conflict-affected areas across the world

The words in rounded brackets in the captions are translations of artwork titles in Burmese

The words in square brackets in the captions are translations of the Burmese words found in the artworks.

Cover illustration: Thoe Htein, *We Need Wisdom and Love in Revolution 2*, 2022, 26 x 37 inches, acrylic on canvas

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42 (PHOE HTOO) | ANNT HMUE MAHR | AUNG KYAW HTET |
DAUNG | HABO | HARRYWHOHEHE | HONEY | HUGO | JASON
TODD | JAY | KUJECOO | KYAR PAUK | LU | MAUNG PHOE |
MAYCO NAING | MYO THAW AKA 666FOTORHYMER | NAY NI
HLAINGKHA | NOVEM HTOO | SAI ■■■ | S.ARTVENTURE | THOE
HTEIN | WOOH

FOREWORD

“The old Burmese values are never coming back, Ko Kyar. Never. The friendliness, the trust, the sense of community—you name it. Gone. All gone.”

Ko Wooh, the comic artist, said this during our Zoom interview. As he spoke, I noticed his voice growing louder, yet weaker at the same time. He lit a cigarette immediately after finishing the sentence and looked away from the screen.

I wondered what lived behind those distant eyes at that exact moment. They were familiar eyes—ones I had seen again and again while interviewing artists in exile, just like myself. Perhaps we all carry the same hidden sadness, hopelessness, and dissociation, leaking quietly through our gaze.

Sitting in the dim 10-by-10-foot dining room of his apartment in Paris, the painter Ko Thoe Htein spoke about the spacious studio he once had in Yangon. I instantly recognized the feeling of losing the place where your art once breathed. I lost my own studio to the revolution too. We left behind the spaces that made our lives liveable.

A few months from now, he and I will share a group exhibition together. Through our friendship in Paris, I’ve witnessed the gradual transformation in his work. When we first met, his family had not yet been able to join him in France. Back then, his paintings felt pale, almost drained of colour. “My life became colourless without my family,” he told me.

Even his brushstrokes carried exhaustion. At times, it felt as though he no longer wanted to complete the lines. Paint

spread unevenly across the canvas—scattered, restless, directionless. Sometimes he would not even bother changing brush sizes. His canvases became diaries filled with rushed, unspoken confessions, as if he never intended to reread them.

But now, his recent works are bursting with colour. The palette is bold. The brushstrokes feel forceful enough to leap out of the painting and bite your face.

Somehow, we adapt. We learn to survive inside unfamiliar conditions and hatch ourselves anew, like newborn birds breaking through their shells.

“I’m tired of painting perfect pieces,” Thoe Htein told me. “Now I can enjoy the process again. I only focus on my feelings, and feelings don’t have to be perfect.”

The courage to continue—and to rediscover oneself within hardship—takes different forms for every artist.

“I couldn’t afford pigskin to practice tattooing,” one tattoo artist and former resistance fighter explained while showing me the permanent mistakes etched across his own forearm. “So I used my own skin.”

These artists continue surviving through impossible circumstances with their art. In the process, subtle shifts emerge in their practices: changes in colour, brushstroke, rhythm, subject matter, and perspective toward their own creations. Exile does not only displace the artist; it reshapes the art itself.

My role in this book was simply to catch fragments of these stories—and that is

exactly why I committed myself to it. I want these stories of living away from home to be heard. I want the lonely brushstrokes spread across canvases, tablets, films, and notebooks to be seen. I want the inaudible words to finally be spoken aloud.

Yet throughout the interviews, I also encountered extraordinary resilience.

“I’m lucky the bullet didn’t hit my right hand,” a photojournalist told me after surviving a battlefield with multiple gunshot wounds across his body. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to press the shutter.”

What united every artist I interviewed was this: somehow, they always found their way back to making art. Whether in jungles, resistance camps, second countries, or third countries, the impulse to create survived. No matter how suffocating the circumstances became, no matter how violently homesickness tightened its grip, the artist continued returning to art.

Like microorganisms feeding off volcanic vents deep beneath the ocean floor, these exile artists evolve through catastrophe. Like penguins shielding their eggs against polar storms, they endure.

At times, I felt like Darwin witnessing artistic evolution after a meteor strike.

For the opportunity to witness these transformations alone, I am deeply grateful—to help bring this book to life, and to become a part of it.

KyarPauk
june 2026

INTRODUCTION

Breaking with a decade of political transition (2011–2021), the military junta seized back power more than five years ago in Myanmar. At that time, Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2020 elections by a landslide. Min Aung Hlaing, then Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, refused to recognize the election results, accusing the opposition of widespread electoral fraud. On 1st February 2021, state television broke the news that a *coup* had taken place and that Min Aung Hlaing had regained control of the country's institutions. For those who—like me—have followed this upheaval of Myanmar's history from afar, the initial shock came from the dissonance in the images: while the junta censored any depiction of the opposition from the first day of the *coup*, conversely, opposition was initially expressed by disseminating the news as widely as possible through digital media to circumvent the official narrative. Now a viral meme, everyone has commented on the image of this fitness instructor teaching her class live on Facebook from a roundabout in Naypyidaw, accidentally filming the column of military tanks rolling down the capital's deserted highways. These images now serve as a record of that moment: proof that the *coup* was unfolding, even as no images were emerging from the capital itself, where the first session of parliament was supposed to take place. Instead, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and numerous high-ranking political officials were placed under house arrest or detained.

The first twenty-four hours were decisive for those opposing the *coup*. 2021 marks a turning point in the forms of mobilisation in Myanmar, as this movement was broadcast almost in real time by digital media. Despite the regime's internet shutdowns, those resisting the *coup* were able to organise through digital platforms and used them to amplify their mobilisation. The resistance movement against the *coup*, soon dubbed the "Spring Revolution," was shaped by this digitalisation and widely embraced by Generation Z protesters skilled in digital tools (Jordt & *al.*, 2021). New forms of mobilisation emerged in public spaces, also designed for their potential for digital circulation, mobilisations that evolved as content was disseminated here and there across digital media¹. These forms of protest were highly symbolic: the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* series², adopted by opponents as a sign of resistance to injustice; the concert of pots and pans every evening at 8 p.m. to protest loudly and "drive away evil spirits" (i.e., the military); demonstrations flooded with placards and messages demanding respect for the vote or recognition of the CRPH, the committee representing parliamentarians elected in 2020 (forerunner to the National Unity

Government formed a few months later); the sarong protest (or *htamein* or *longyi* in Burmese) symbolising the feminist struggle, strikes of all kinds, flash mobs, etc.

Scholars of Myanmar studies have shown that what shaped the resistance movement during the first weeks of protests, was both the public performances in the streets—which allowed the movement to take shape, enabled different groups to engage with one another, and galvanised collective action—and its dissemination through digital media, which amplified the protests far beyond public and local spaces. Combining local forms of mobilisation inherited from past uprisings with innovative tactics adapted to a globalised digital culture, the repertoires of mobilisation has thus become increasingly hybrid (Egreteau, 2023). Digital activism and online coalitions have clearly contributed to the spread of these tactics and the creation of tools for directing collective action. There is no doubt that a dialogue has emerged between the digital and public spaces, as images of the protests circulating on digital media serve to strengthen the bonds of the resistance community, raise awareness, and give rise to new forms of action.

1- Resistance to the dictatorship in Myanmar has a long history. The two best-known failed uprisings are the pro-democracy movement of 1988 and the monk-led uprising of 2007. The role of the media was evident both during the 1988 movement, when media outlets operating from exile covered the movement (see, for example, Houtman, 1999), as well as through the role of citizen journalists in 2007 during the "Saffron Revolution", the name given at the time to the color of the monks' robes (see, notably, Gawthrop, 2009). But nothing compares to the all-accessibility of the digital world in the post-2010 era.

2- The three-finger salute, a pop culture reference from the *Hunger Games* series, first appeared during pro-democracy protests in Bangkok in 2014. The adoption of this symbol by the resistance in Myanmar brings the movement to a global audience (Hui, 2020).

Video and audio clips, street photographs, selfies of protesters holding signs, giant graffiti seen from the sky, posters, illustrations, cartoons, memes: all these contents disseminated across digital media helped establish a politics of attention that served the resistance movement (Khin Thazin, 2022). It was through the diversity of mediums through which the protesters' messages circulated (and not through the number

of likes) that it became possible to grasp this circulation of content, which traversed the resistance groups and allowed them to call out to one another and form a united front in resistance against the military (Prasse-Freeman, 2023). Ultimately, it was images in a broad sense that were central to the formation of the resistance movement and helped shape its collective memory.

Myanmar Artists and Resistance: Intertwined Stories

As producers of images and meaning per se, artists played a significant role in constructing this memory. When the *coup* happened, engaged artists from various backgrounds responded immediately to the brutal seizure of power³. Acting mostly as citizens, those in cities like Yangon took to the streets to participate in the broader ecosystem of resistance. In the beginning of the *coup*, public spaces were brimming with creativity; Yangon's flyovers for example were filled with crowds of people composing music, painting giant murals on the walls, drawing signs, reciting poems, dancing hip-hop, or getting tattoos. Small groups of artists and individuals used their artistic mediums in various ways: photographers began documenting what was happening, aware that their work would serve as an archive and raise awareness of the revolutionary cause. On 6 February 2021, a "Street Art" campaign was carried out over five days on

Pansodan Street in downtown Yangon, to distribute free artwork and help fund the Civil Disobedience Movement, a widespread movement of public and private sector workers striking to refuse to work under military rule⁴. This solidarity art, which later took on a unique form within the networks of the diaspora in exile (see below, Banki, 2023), was a completely innovative approach taken by artists after the *coup*.

It is impossible to exhaustively trace how artists of all stripes, both inside and outside Myanmar, supported the resistance movement following the *coup*. However, certain striking artworks received significant attention and circulated widely through digital media, or sometimes resurfaced as signs in public spaces. One particularly well-known work is the collective mosaic created by numerous artists, each of whom depicted in their own way the three-finger salute from The Hunger Games series, adopted as a symbol of the resistance movement⁵. Art illustrations were projected onto buildings at night to complement the pot-and-pan concerts and nighttime gatherings⁶. Artist collectives emerged online, made up of illustrators, young photographers, and designers, offering their creations for free so that protesters could print

3- Sai, Aye Ko & Moe Satt. 2021. "Beaten Pots, Three Finger Salutes and Car Horns: The Art of Protest in Myanmar." February 17. <https://artreview.com/beaten-pots-three-finger-salutes-and-car-horns-the-art-of-protest-in-myanmar/>.

4- Cascone Sarah. 2021. "After a Military *Coup*, Artists Across Myanmar Are Making Protest Art to Share Their Struggle for Democracy with the World". *Artnet News*, February 16. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/myanmar-artists-protest-coup-1943543>.

5- Coyer, Cassandre. 2021. "Art for Freedom: Artists at Front Lines of Myanmar Protests." *The Untitled Magazine*. March 10. <https://untitled-magazine.com/art-for-freedom-artists-at-front-lines-of-myanmar-protests/>.

6- Beech, Hannah. 2021. "Paint, Poems and Protest Anthems: Myanmar's *Coup* Inspires the Art of Defiance." *The New York Times*, February 17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/world/asia/myanmar-coup-protest-art.html>;

them, giving a new generation of artists a platform to showcase their work. Digital platforms also enabled artists, who had been targeted and had fled into exile or to areas beyond the army's control, to participate. I personally remember the first posters that circulated widely, such as the one by Thoe Htein (in this book), a blood-red poster featuring a raised fist bearing the message '*Fight Against Dictatorship*' designed for the strike of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (February 2021), or those by Kuecool (in this book) featuring the protesters' slogan "You messed with the wrong generation," signifying the resisters' refusal to fall once again under military rule (February 2021), or the poster accompanying the women's sarong (or longyi) revolt, "Our *htamein*, our flag, our victory," showing three female resisters brandishing banners made of *htamein*, a poster that became one of the emblems of the resistance (March 2021). Artists also used their public profile to support the resistance, using their voices to encourage dissent and draw public attention. Three stars of the Burmese rock scene, Kyar Pauk, Novem Htoo (both featured in this book), and the late Raymond, released the song "Headshot" (16 March 2021), to support the movement⁷.

As repression intensified in public spaces starting in March and April 2021, art went underground, and many artists, like other members of the resistance, were arrested, imprisoned, or killed. Some took up arms and joined Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) or the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) in the

liberated territories to train and fight the Burmese army. Others fled the country and went into political exile.

Arts and Artists as Agents of Social Change

No art is without political significance: the arts and artists are agents of social change. In classic approaches, artistic practices have always been conceived at the intersection of politics and aesthetics. Artists "distribute the sensible" within a community; they create meanings, enable dialogue, and transform the shared experience (Rancière, 2000). From an anthropological perspective, art objects are understood as possessing their own agency. They are shaped by the artistic intentions of all the social agents who produce them. As such, they stand at the heart of social relations and shape social structures (Gell, 1998).

Within the specific context of political and social crisis, one aspect that is particularly significant today is the relationship between art and activism (or artivism). These participatory art forms, which emerged from social movements, open the door to creativity, imagination, and new possibilities. It has been shown, in particular, that during the Arab Spring in 2011, street art helped to subjectivise injustice, thereby enabling the construction of a collective memory of the conflict (Awad and Brady, 2017). A further critical concept that has emerged in the fields of art and activism is aesthetic resilience. Underlying this concept is the idea that there exists a form of aesthetic activism capable of responding to neoliberal, social, ecological, and political violence.

7- Kyar Pauk, Novem Htoo, Raymond. 2021. "Headshot." Youtube. March 16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqSG-6YNQsl>.

During the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, the cumulative effect of the media arts helped both artists and the public to build resilience as a critical tool. In this regard, satire, political humour, absurdity, and non-serious forms of expression are seen as vital for adapting in times of crisis. The arts as a form of resilience also enable, through art, therapeutic approaches, recovery from trauma, and healing (Steinbock and *al.*, 2021).

This can be observed in the situation of politically engaged artists after the *coup*. Another perspective is highlighted by Susan Banki related to transnational activism (2023). Drawing upon the concept of solidarity art, as described in relation to the arts under Pinochet's authoritarian regime in Chile (Adams, 2013), she shows how Myanmar artists send their works abroad, where they are exhibited and sold, with the proceeds then being returned to home. This enables a form of activism through art to support not only resistance artists but also the resistance movement itself, as many artists donate their profits to the movement. She also underlines the role of a new generation of artist-activists who began documenting the *coup* through various media, without necessarily realising the artistic and archival significance of the works now on display. This new generation, now trained in exile, has built their activism through art just as much as their art has turned them into activists (2025).

Artivism, resilience, and solidarity art are integral parts of the repertoire of Myanmar's engaged artists. It would be interesting to take a closer look at the art exhibitions that have been held around

the world since 2021 and explore the artistic practices on display. A few publications are available that offer a glimpse into this artistic and activist scene. Notable examples include exhibition catalogs such as *Fighting Fear #whatshappeninginmyanmar* (Johnston & Kaung Sett Lin, 2021) and *Fighting Fear II: It goes without saying* (Johnston & Kaung Sett Lin, 2023), the exhibition by artist Chuu Wai on feminist art practices and the role of women in the Myanmar uprising (Wong, 2024), and the exhibition *Portraits of Detention. Drawing from Insein Prison* by Maung Phoe (2023, artist featured in this book). Three poetry collections have also been published since 2021, combining poetry with arts by photographers, illustrators, and visual artists. In France, these include *Printemps Birman [Burmese Spring]* (2021) and *Beyond The Trenches* by poet Maung Saungkha, illustrated by Kyar Pauk (also creative coordinator of this book) (2026). A collection of poetry featuring poems written on the front lines has also been released (Freeman & Aung Naing Soe, 2025).

Five Years On: A Collective Memory in the Making

Five years after the 2021 *coup*, this collective book aims to provide a unique glimpse into the testimonies of these enable, through art, therapeutic approaches, recovery from trauma, and healing, whether they are based in Myanmar, Europe, or Thailand, and to create, through their artworks, an archive that reflects the collective memory of resistance. These works of art are nothing less than sensitive visions of

the world that document this period, offer a window into what has happened in Myanmar over the past five years, and reveal the future of today's artistic community. Thus, this book examines the role of engaged artists since the 2021 *coup* and explores how they keep resisting today despite exile and repression. In turn, the book explores how the arts, in the broadest sense, enable a resistance movement to survive.

Kyar Pauk, the creative coordinator

The editors of this book asked Kyar Pauk, in collaboration with *Artists' Shelter*, to facilitate this unique, collaborative project, which brings together a wide range of artistic works. A multi-talented artist, K.P. was the leading singer of the punk rock band Big Bag back in the 2000s. A music producer and former judge on *The Voice Myanmar*, he is also a writer, doodle artist, illustrator, and painter. He is among the celebrities who were targeted from the very first days of the *coup*, particularly because he had written and produced the NLD's campaign video, "The Age of Fear," in 2020, a song criticizing the military. Going into hiding after the *coup*, he initially took part in the protests before fleeing to a PDF camp on the Thai border. When he returned to Yangon a few weeks later, he realized the situation was becoming too dangerous for him and decided to go into exile in France. Leaving Myanmar by air was impossible without being detected, so he crossed into Thailand illegally and settled in Chiang Mai for a while. There, he launched a podcast called "92.omama",

followed by thousands of displaced Myanmar people. In it, he discusses mental health and art therapy, as well as teaches his doodles and the method behind them, which helps him heal. In exile in France since 2023, he recounted his journey in a book, *The Odyssey*, which resonates with the experiences of all of Myanmar's political refugees. Now based in Paris, he is a dissident voice against the military regime, using his art to support the resistance, including donating his paintings to fundraising campaigns.

The collection gathered in this book reflects his personal vision of the artworks that mattered after the *coup*. The twenty-two artists selected are photographers, musicians, illustrators, painters, and cartoonists—five women and seventeen men artists that were chosen for their significant contributions to the resistance movement. This book is a rare testament to this collective memory, a "history without words," as K.P. describes it, and seeks to preserve, through their works and interviews, the evolving state of mind of these artists over the past five years; what it means to be a politically engaged artist and to create despite exile, civil war, and trauma.

Six Thematic Chapters

Each of the twenty-two artists' works is presented throughout the book under six thematic chapters: protest, conflict, trauma, ridicule & satire, heroes & martyrs, and exit. These themes demonstrate the extent to which artistic production has evolved alongside resistance. The artists' journeys mirror those of all resistance

fighters, as their works serve as a mnemonic for the history of the struggle and the movement's continuity.

The first theme, titled *Protest*, focuses on works created during the first weeks of mobilisation following the *coup*. They capture both the energy and fervour of the struggle, the tension, the violence, and at times the lulls between periods of intense protest activity. The artists thus accompanied the mobilisations by documenting them or by producing works that conveyed the messages of the resistance. Many of their illustrations were made available for free and printed by protesters who turned them into signs in public spaces.

The *Conflict* theme focuses on civil war and armed conflicts. In particular, the artists explore the banality of everyday life in the battalions of the People's Defense Forces or armed revolutionary organizations. By documenting life in areas at war, the artists explore further sensitive issues such as homesickness and desolation, linked to the air bombings and the impact of the conflicts on civilian populations.

The third theme, *Trauma*, explores the traumatic experiences of artists and their impact on their creative processes. For many of them, art is seen as therapeutic, offering a means to express suffering and negative emotions. The artworks presented in this section are more spectral, marked by suffocation, confined emotions, and the ghosts that haunt the artists.

Section Four, *Ridicule*, highlights the satirical works of artists who use dark humour, and at times vulgar or blunt language, to ridicule and criticise the military.

Theme Five, *Heroes & Martyrs*, brings together works paying tribute to prominent figures in the opposition to the *coup*. Numerous illustrations have been created of State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, a historic figure in the opposition since 1988. Jailed since 2021, she remains the embodiment of sacrifice and a symbol of the struggle in Myanmar. Hip-hop artist and former member of parliament Phyo Zeya Thaw has also been portrayed by many artists who identified with his fate. Sentenced to death, he has become, like many young people, a martyr of the revolution.

The final theme, titled *Exit*, explores different paths to freedom: leaving the country, deserting the army, and winning the conflict. It brings together the hopes and aspirations of artists as they attempt to imagine their new futures.

Chloé Baills

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1.

PROTEST

The Myanmar military *coup* of 1st February 2021 was met with widespread protest in the days that followed. Thousands took to the streets demanding that the *coup* be reversed and civilian leaders who had been detained be released.

These protests were sites of creativity. Youth from all walks of life—many of whom had come of age from 2010 onward, a period marked by a gradual expansion of freedoms and democratic elections—worked with student groups, previous generations of pro-democracy actors, strike committees and civil society to mobilise against the *coup*. Across the larger cities of Yangon and Mandalay, as in smaller towns, tens of thousands stood up for democracy. Digital platforms mobilised protests and digital art circulated to inform and inspire. Music and chants were accompanied by makeshift banners, many in English to elicit international attention. In a country that struggled with unity since independence, rejection of the *coup* was a unifier, giving rise to the *Spring Revolution*, a portmanteau term for a range of resistance acts.

The street photography of Annt Hmue Mahr captures the energy and tension of early protests. In the artist's words: "The quiet strength of people navigating political uncertainty." For Annt Hmue Mahr, the 2021 *coup* marked a generational shift in political outlook from one of naivety to being "forced to grow up."

The digital art of Honey delicately illustrates instances of everyday non-violent resistance. Her pieces frequently depict

women's power and resilience in the face of repression. Honey's anime style has a deliberate "cute" sensibility infused with messages of defiance and hope, symbolised by the recurring motif of flowers. Also used by other artists, the flower is one of the symbols in the fight for democracy—a symbolism in Myanmar that pre-dates the 2021 *coup*. Equally, depictions of the *Blue Shirt Day*, associated with the call for the release of political prisoners, predates the 2021 *coup* but is frequently drawn upon in post-*coup* repertoire.

Honey's *Flash Strike*, from April 2021, depicts the artist at night adopting the three-fingered salute on her balcony in pink pyjamas, joining others in shining a hand torch (the "flash strike") into the night. It is an evocation of peaceful protest at a time when the Myanmar military was violently repressing protest. Like others, Honey saw the need for protest art to cut through to Gen Z audiences. Digital illustrations in a recognisable cartoon styling, with subtle cultural references combined with #hashtags and messaging (like in *Save Myanmar*) transposed onto stickers did just that.

Illustrator Jason Todd deploys one style reminiscent of darker graphic novels ("Jason Todd" being a DC comics character), while another shows his versatility in creating softer, more optimistic pieces. Jason Todd was arrested in May 2021 and charged with "incitement" by the military. In detention, he notes how he: "withstood torture punishment for five days straight in an interrogation

centre. There, I drew with my own blood. Later [...] I found charcoal and got a pen, given by another prisoner in my cell.” On release, he stayed indoors for six months, resuming his art “to give people courage, motivation and a reality check.” The piece *Longyi Resilience*, from 2024, was produced to highlight the role of women in protesting the military take-over.

Jay, digital illustrator and latterly tattoo artist, seeks to produce art that gives form “to the silence of those who have endured exile and war...shaping moments of truth that refuse to disappear under censorship or fear”. The digital works (created using the animation app Procreate) *Revotober (selected A)* and *Revotober (selected B)* are bold in their message, depicting opposing elements of repression and civil resistance. The piece *Exorcism* shows the everyday resistance act of banging the pots and pans—at that time, a near daily act of peaceful protest against the *coup*, exorcising the military regime from the political life of the country.

S.Artventure’s 2021 piece *Resistance* invokes a gentle, comic styling in its portrait of protesters. The practice of illustrator S.Artventure seeks to explore emotional story-telling and her 2021 work *CDM Towards Democracy* depicts the multiple groups making up the civil disobedience movement (the ‘CDM’ in the title of her piece) in unity in resistance against the military with the three-finger salute prominent.

The work of Kuecool, a street artist turned illustrator, is another highlighting women’s strength and resilience in their roles in confronting the military.

Her piece *Our Longyi, Our Victory* speaks to a Burmese patriarchal view of the women’s *longyi* as somehow impure or inferior. The prominence of the women’s *longyi* as a symbol of resistance was accelerated by Kuecool’s work, coming to represent a powerful message of resistance—the military must get out of politics, but equally, societal norms must be transformed. Her works link symbols of resistance campaign with the movement against negative masculinity. She notes: “Feminism was increasingly important for me and my thinking; I was a female in a guys’ world and I would represent this by NOT showing little girls being scared.”

The Kuecool digital piece *You Messed with the Wrong Generation*, February 2021, shows a diverse grouping with protest placards. The artist received numerous requests from people to print it out for use as a placard in the protests. The embrace of the *longyi* piece is cited by Kuecool as being a driving force for her creatively. The *longyi* image, and Kuecool’s piece, specifically, became an iconic, widely used symbol for resistance and the demand for societal change.

Photographer Mayco Naing’s work captures a different angle on the protests—the *Barricade landscape* series of 2021 shows the desolation of the streets in moments after protest has receded. The makeshift barricades, built by communities to stop military forces entering their neighbourhoods remain. By her own account, the photos seek to be “deeply narrative”—emblematic of the stark division between the military and the Myanmar people, and reminders of the proximity and imminence of military violence.

Mayco Naing noted seeing the military later forcing civilians to dismantle the barricades at gunpoint.

The intensity of thousands of people mobilised in street protests against the *coup* is captured in the photographs of Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer. The angles capture the density of signage and crowded bodies in sync, in protest. Those seeing these images of mass mobilisation, around Sule Pagoda, could be forgiven for thinking that the military would back down in the face of an overwhelming popular response rejecting the *coup*. Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer noted that his photos also sought to show “the more subtle side of resistance”.

Painter, Nay Ni Hlaing Kha’s practice combines traditional fine art painting techniques with digital creation and screen printing. Escaping the military regime to live in areas controlled by revolutionary forces in the southeast of the country, Nay Ni Hlaing Kha’s skills were put to filmmaking and communications. Nay Ni Hlaing Kha’s 2021 piece capturing the protests—2021 *Yangon Views*—is laden with heavy black lines and vibrant colours. Foregrounding a son on his father’s shoulders, the artist highlights the different generations facing trauma from the military’s actions.

Artistic expression of resistance continued to vary. Musician and visual artist Kyar Pauk arrived at the symbolism of the bull in his 2022 piece *Now You’re in Trouble* representing the strength of those resisting the regime—a departure from his abstract, self-described *doodle* style.

Thoe Htein’s protest pieces were designed for use on posters, such as *Fight Against Dictatorship* with a clear message of “Down with the military dictatorship” accompanied by a clenched fist of resistance, recalling 20th century liberation struggles. As news of the detention and torture of protest organisers spread, Thoe Htein sought to raise awareness of the human rights violations on-going in prisons. In the 2022 piece *No Torture in Prison*, Thoe Htein, in English language, quotes Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, under his illustration of bodies being subjected to torture; its power lies in its simplicity, only reds and blacks are used.

The work of Wooh, a comic artist and graphic novelist, deploys a dramatic, dark graphic novel style in his pieces. As the military turned its guns on peaceful protestors late March 2021, artists like Wooh captured the violence being unleashed. *The Direction of Those Bullets* shows the zeal of Myanmar military soldiers shooting those in opposition to the regime. Wooh also captures the energy of protestors—while highlighting the parallels with the 1988 uprising against the then military junta—in the piece *History Repeating Itself: 1988; 2021*.



Annt Hmue Mahr, 3 March 2021—*Ye, Mon State, Police and soldiers advance toward anti-coup demonstrators during a protest in Ye, photography*

“When the *coup* happened in 2021, I went into the streets. The people were there with protest signs. The soldiers and police were there with guns. I was also there. They shot at us. I had nothing to shoot back with, not even a toothpick.”

All pictures of Annt Hmue Mahr are from their
Without Address series (extract), 2021-2024,
photography

Annt Hmue Mahr, 12 February 2021—Ye, Mon
State, Indigenous Karen people participate in
an anti-coup demonstration in Ye Township,
joining nationwide protests against
military rule, photography





Annt Hmue Mahr, 22 February 2021—Ye, Mon State, Ko Kyet Min addresses protesters during an anti-coup demonstration. He later joined the armed resistance and became a commander in the Ye Belu Column, People's Defence Force (SOF), photography





*Annt Hmue Mahr, 9 March 2021—Ye,
Mon State, Police open fire while dispersing
Frontline Defenders at the head of an anti-coup
protest, photography*



Annt Hmue Mahr, 5 March 2021—Ye, Mon State, Frontline Defenders march with homemade shields to protect protesters. The man in the helmet is my father, Ko Zin Min. My reflection can be seen in the shield, photography

“I photographed my father during the Spring Revolution. He stood at the front of the protest, holding a steel shield. He stood between bullets and people. I stood between history and forgetting. The shield did not only reflect my image. It reflected our shared risk.”



Honey, *Nico Robin in Myanmar*(fanart), 7 February 2021, digital illustration

Honey, *A Burmese Witch supporting CDM*, 2 March 2021, digital illustration

Honey, *Save Myanmar*, 20 November 2021, digital illustration

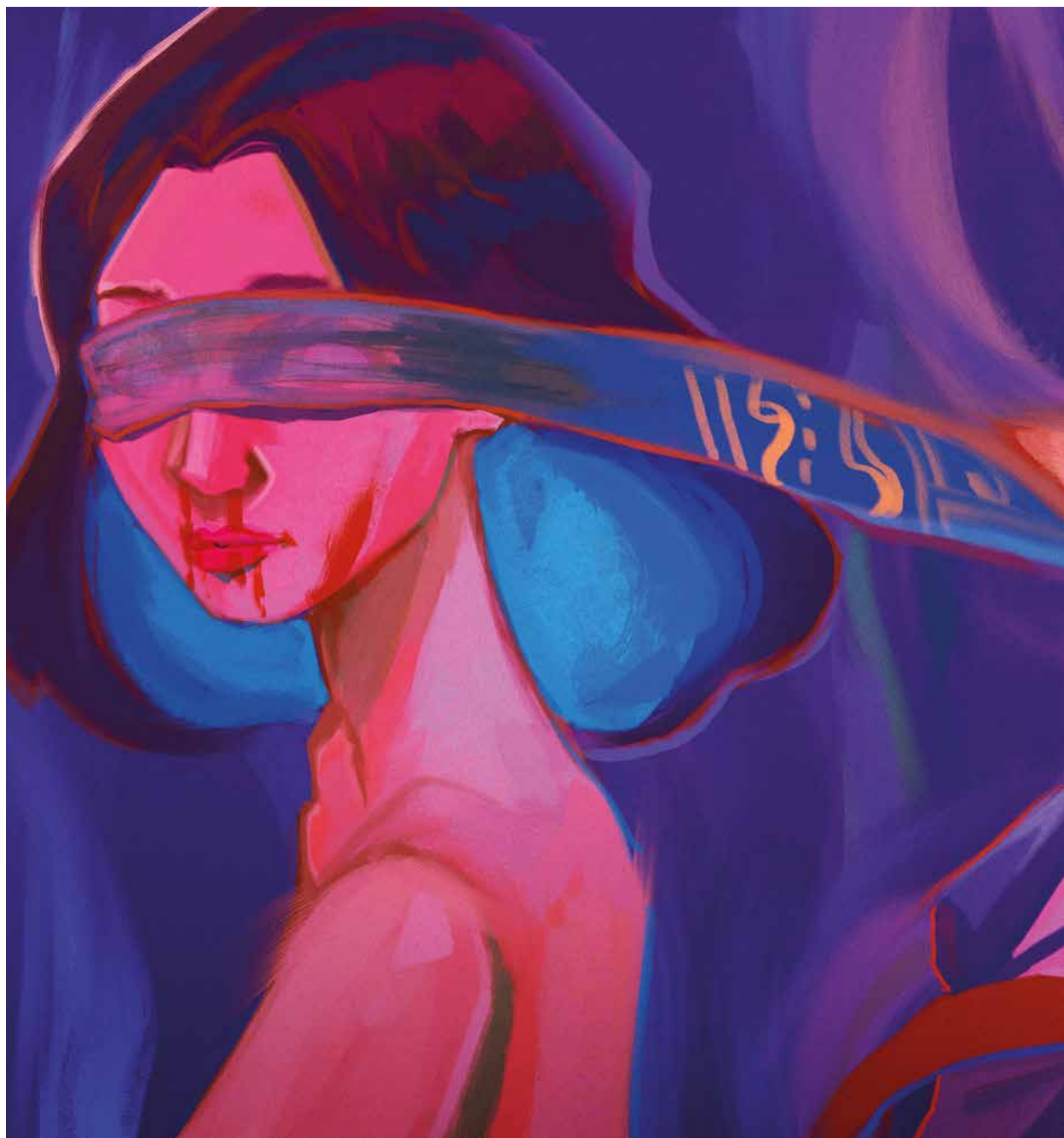
Honey, *Flash Strike*, 11 April 2021, digital illustration

“This is my favourite piece. It is me, in my pyjamas on the rooftop at my house. My cat passed away, sadly.”

Honey, *Blue Shirt Day*, 21 April 2021, digital illustration

U Win Tin, a founding member of Aung San Suu Kyi’s political party, the NLD, was imprisoned for 20 years for his political views. The day he passed, 21st April, became the annual day of commemoration of political prisoners, where protesters wear a blue shirt—reminiscent of jail uniforms—in remembrance of U Win Tin’s choice to wear them in raising awareness of the conditions in Myanmar’s prisons

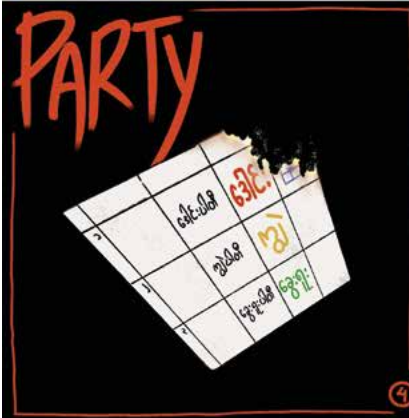
Honey, *Marching Shoes Strike*, 8 April 2021, digital illustration





Jason Todd, *Longyi Resilience*, 23
May 2024, digital illustration

“I draw when I feel something, normally. After I finish drawing, I don’t even know what I just drew, or how I drew it. But this one, I clearly remember. I wanted to highlight the contributions of women in the revolution. Even in revolution art, they still think that women have to live a bad life. I wanted to highlight women’s participation, for it to be acknowledged.”



Jay, *Revotober (selected A)*, 1 October 2022
- 15 October 2022, digital illustrations



Jay, *Revotober (selected B)*, 1 October 2022
– 15 October 2022, digital illustrations

“In October 2022, we organized these social media challenges for illustrators with prompts for the theme of the day. [...] I did it for artists who are young and can draw, but don’t know how to be active in the revolution.”



Jay, *Exorcism* [Keep banging],
9 February 2021, digital illustration

Jay, နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး
(The Spring Revolution),
24 February 2021, digital
illustration

“Since the morning of 1st
February, I joined
casually the anti-*coup*
movement, the protests
in the streets and the
banging pots in the
night. But then, I got the
idea to start an
illustrators’ group to
fundraise.”



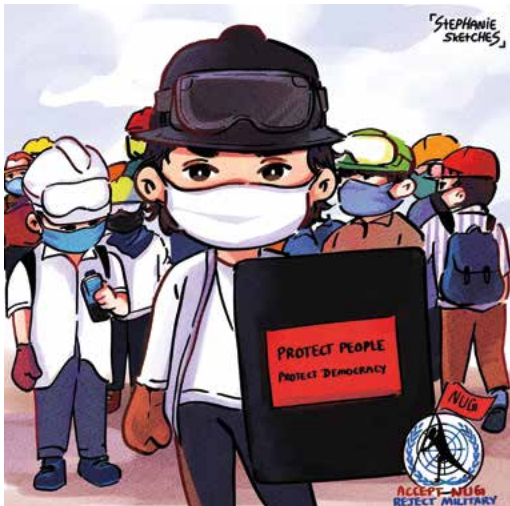
Jay, ငြိမ်းချမ်းစွာ ဆန္ဒပြ
နေသည်။

[We are peacefully
protesting], 3 May 2021,
digital illustration





S.Artventure, *CDM towards Democracy*, 2021, digital illustration



S.Artventure, *Resistance*, 2021, digital illustration

“The CDM-ers confront military power through unity rather than weapons. This work depicts democracy as a people-driven struggle sustained by persistence and mutual support.”

Thoe Htein, *No Torture in Prison*, 2022, 60 x 80 cm, digital poster

NO TORTURE

IN
PRISON



**NO ONE SHALL BE SUBJECTED
TO TORTURE OR TO CRUEL,
INHUMAN OR DEGRADING
TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT.**



Kuecool, *You Messed with the Wrong Generation*, 5 February 2021, digital illustration

“There are only two types of people in a revolution. Those who are quiet and those who cannot tolerate it. I honour every human being who cannot tolerate the military junta. This artwork states with humour that we are not going to bow down to the military *coups* we face again and again..”

ငါတို့ထမီး ⚡ ငါတို့အိမ် ⚡ ငါတို့အောင်ပွဲ

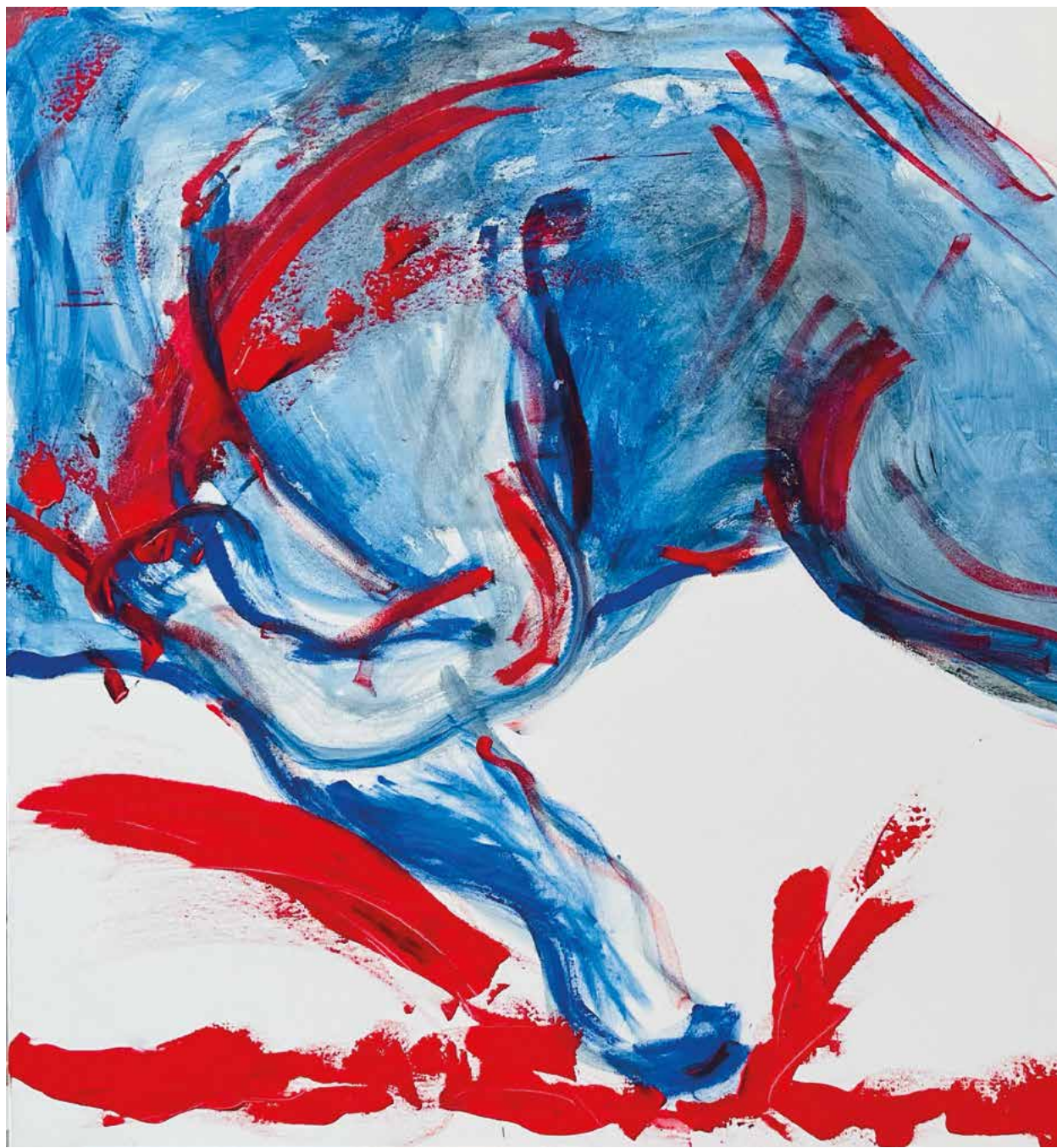


Kuecool, *Our Longyi, Our Victory*,
[Our longyi, our flag, our victory],
12 November 2022, digital illustration

“Our Longyi Our Victory” was adopted and loved by many people in the Spring Revolution. This tagline inspired a movement in Yangon, a high-risk area. We wrote on the longyis and our longyis became our banners. Later, many Burmese people around the world started wearing longyis as protest signs. It became a symbol of resistance. The intention in this piece was to link the campaign of resistance with the movement against [negative] masculinity. That we [in the feminist movement] were not going to go under. We wanted to show the societal structures that needed to be over-turned.”

“My political development was a learning process. At first, my street art was just for fun. Then, I thought, ‘why not put more political messages in it?’ Graffiti and street art are good for political messages. An early piece that I used was of a flying shoe—this was a representation of freedom.”

—Kuecool





Kyar Pauk, *Now You're in Trouble*, 2022,
83 x 106 cm, acrylic on canvas



Thamine, Yangon,
6 AM, March 2021.

Morning calm over an empty street showing the aftermath of a defense with garbage bag barricades.



North Dagon, Yangon,
7 AM, March 2021.

Makeshift barricades of sandbags, logs, and tyres set up during the Spring Revolution.

Mayco Naing, *Barricade landscape* series,
(extract from *Landscape and Portrait* series),
2021, 75 x 100 cm, dibon prints

The barricades built by citizens to stop soldiers from entering their neighborhoods became powerful symbols of resistance and the collapse of public safety.

“Most of my work is related to politics. My photography is deeply narrative. I listen to many people, learn about their emotions and behavioural changes regarding certain issues, and then reflect those experiences through my photographs so that others can see them and connect with them.”

Mayco Naing, *My Hair is Everywhere* series
(extract), ongoing,
8 x 10 inches,
magazine print

Applying for a visa to leave becomes a secret mission during the crisis. Meanwhile, a protester writes their blood type and emergency number on their wrist due to daily risks of injury and police attacks.







South Dagon, Yangon,
6 AM, March 2021.

Empty barricades and
shattered bricks stretch into
the morning, showing a
landscape of broken peace.



Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer, *Untitled #1 to #3*,
February 2021, photographs



“When I first saw this image on my camera screen, I genuinely believed the military would eventually back down after witnessing such an enormous crowd rejecting the regime. Never in our history had so many people taken to the streets at once.”

—Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer



Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer, *Untitled*,
February 2021, photography

“When the *coup* happened and I saw thousands of people taking to the streets in protest, I realized I was witnessing a once-in-a-lifetime historical moment. I decided to document it in my own style. The call of the streets was impossible for me to resist.”

—Myo Thaw aka
666Fotorhymer



Nay Ni Hlaing Kha, *2021 Yangon Views*, 2021,
90 x 90 cm, acrylic on canvas

“Right after the *coup*, I was part of the protests. I took a picture of a father with his son on his shoulders. The military caused generational trauma. There are spikes in our hearts because of the SAC.”



**FIGHT AGAINST
DICTATORSHIP**

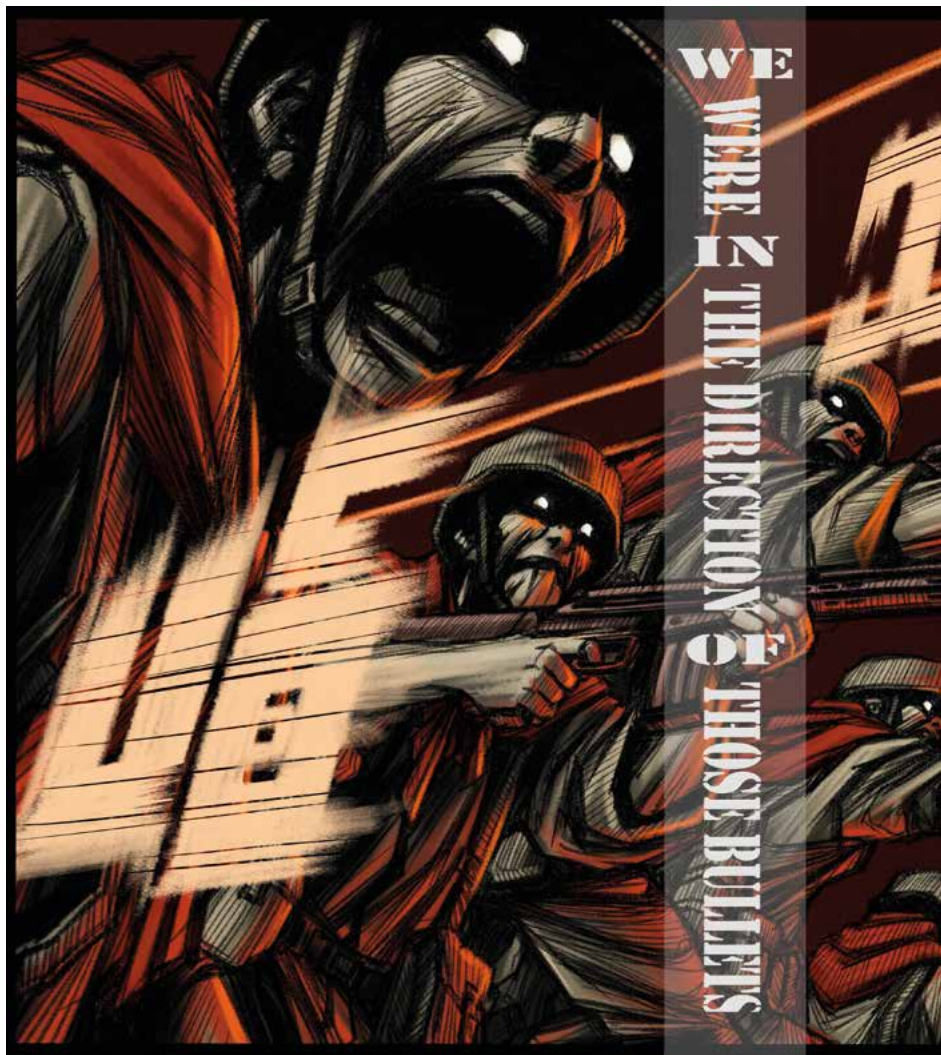
“Other groups had already adopted the ‘Three Fingers Salute’ as a protest symbol. We chose to use the ‘raised fist’ instead because we believed this was not just a strike—this was a revolution.”

—Thoe Htein



Thoe Htein, *Fight Against Dictatorship*
[Down with the military dictatorship],
2021, printed on stickers and papers

Thoe Htein, *Fight Against Dictatorship*,
2021, printed on stickers and papers



Woooh, *The direction of those bullets*, July 2022, digital illustration

"I never had the chance to finish my studies because of my involvement in the 1996 and 1998 student uprisings. I have always considered myself a student political activist. When the *Coup* happened, the student activist spirit inside me came back immediately."

—Woooh



Woo, *History Repeating Itself*: 1998; 2021, 2019 (colourised version), 2022 (colour retouch, added b&w version), digital illustration

“I am especially proud of this piece because it represents every generation of student uprising—1988, 1998, 2007, and 2021. It still feels relevant today. The image feels timeless...

Like an old black-and-white film returning to theatres in colour. We are trapped in a cycle of repeated events.”

2.

CONFLICT

Myanmar has endured on/off internal conflict since not long after its independence in 1948. The military's violent crackdown on those protesting the 2021 *coup* ignited armed resistance in areas that had hitherto not been at the front-lines of conflict between the military and an array of largely ethnic armed organisations. People's Defence Forces emerged, by some counts several hundred, scattered across the country, as with the protest movement, comprised of young men and women drawn from every walk of life, with little or no military experience. Most of the artists in this book had a front row view of life in the PDFs. Their works capture the banality and impact of conflict and on-going hopes for peace and for the resistance to prevail.

42 (Phoe Htoo), a digital illustrator and ex-political prisoner, who views "art as a weapon against the military," uses the symbolism of a flower in place of the head of an armed PDF member. Beauty and human dignity remaining in the midst of conflict are recurring themes.

The illustration of the jug of beer being poured on a coffin encasing an AK47-type rifle alludes to the military-owned beer companies boycotted by the civil disobedience movement in order to deny the military funding for its war on its own people. 42 (Phoe Htoo)'s digital piece *Ma Ma, I'm Coming Home* is in 42 (Phoe Htoo)'s own words: "Expressing homesickness, memory, and tenderness while suggesting a continued choice to resist injustice."

Annt Hmue Mahr's photographs of conflict depict the comradeship and solidarity in the PDFs, but also the sense of "waiting—for news, for safety, for a version of life that does not yet exist".

Aung Kyaw Htet's photographs of conflict are ones of desolation. His *Buddha Statue on Let Khat Taung* in Karen State, captures a moment of serenity as conflict persists off-frame. *A House burns*, recently struck by shrapnel from an adjacent air attack viewed through a frame of barbed wire, presents a bleak depiction reliant on vivid colours. The photo of a partially destroyed Myanmar military outpost in Karenni State centres on an anomalous, over-sized yellow, fallen curtain. All show the destruction and desolation of conflict.

Illustrator and tattoo artist, Jay, in his digital piece *Our BLOOD!! Our VICTORY!!* depicts a comic-styled young PDF-er, tattooed and holding an automatic rifle. Jay, like others, views these works—seeking to inspire—as their contribution to the resistance to authoritarianism.

The illustrator, Hugo, in his 2025 digital painting of a bomb shelter *A Glimpse of Blue* shows the acute need for protection from Myanmar military air strikes: a dark bunker is contrasted with an open, blue sky. Hugo notes that this piece reflects "the tragic reality of numerous school children losing their lives to the military's incessant bombings".

The painter Maung Phoe, known for his drawings when incarcerated in Yangon's infamous Insein prison, offers a gentle take in his portrait of a resistance fighter. In his painting *Thanat Kine Tayaww Sayar* (Armed Violinist), the fighter (a friend of Maung Phoe's) is depicted playing the violin, gun to one side, conflict ensuing in the background. His other paintings foreground the impact of conflict on civilians; the forced displacement of whole communities and the fear of on-going airstrikes. The painting *When We See the Planes* was a prominent piece in a 2024 *A New Burma* exhibition of the same name that sought to draw attention to the frequency and impact of air strikes by the Myanmar military.

Painter Nay Ni Hlaing Kha gives a different angle on the PDF soldier's experience in his piece *Parrot Sings*—a light-hearted take on what he describes as the “parrotness” evident in military resistance culture. His similarly styled piece *Ozi Dobot* (Drums) depicts resistance soldiers, in military fatigues, but in their downtime from the frontlines, setting-up for a musical or cultural event.

The photographs of singer Novem Htoo show everyday scenes of resistance with soldiers snatching a meal or on parade. In his words, photography: “become a way to speak when free expression is denied. It preserves truth and collective memory in a context where official narratives are controlled by force.”

Thoe Htein's conflict-focused work is intended to rally and inspire. His painting depicting a young woman holding aloft a book entitled *Wisdom & Love* speaks to the role women fulfil in the resistance. Poster style pieces, *All Power to the People* showing a shirtless resistance fighter with fist held high, *Silence Means Security*, and *We Can Do It!* depicting a young woman resistance fighter holding an automatic weapon, all echo the style of information campaigns of World War II.

In contrast, the graphic comic style of Wooh in the piece *A Farmer's Homeland* depicts the pain, fear, and destruction of conflict; its impact on civilians in stark, dark stills. This reality of conflict, its profound human cost, is one Myanmar's rebel artists have not shied away from.

**“Resistance becomes
the only tool
for survival in
this living hell”**

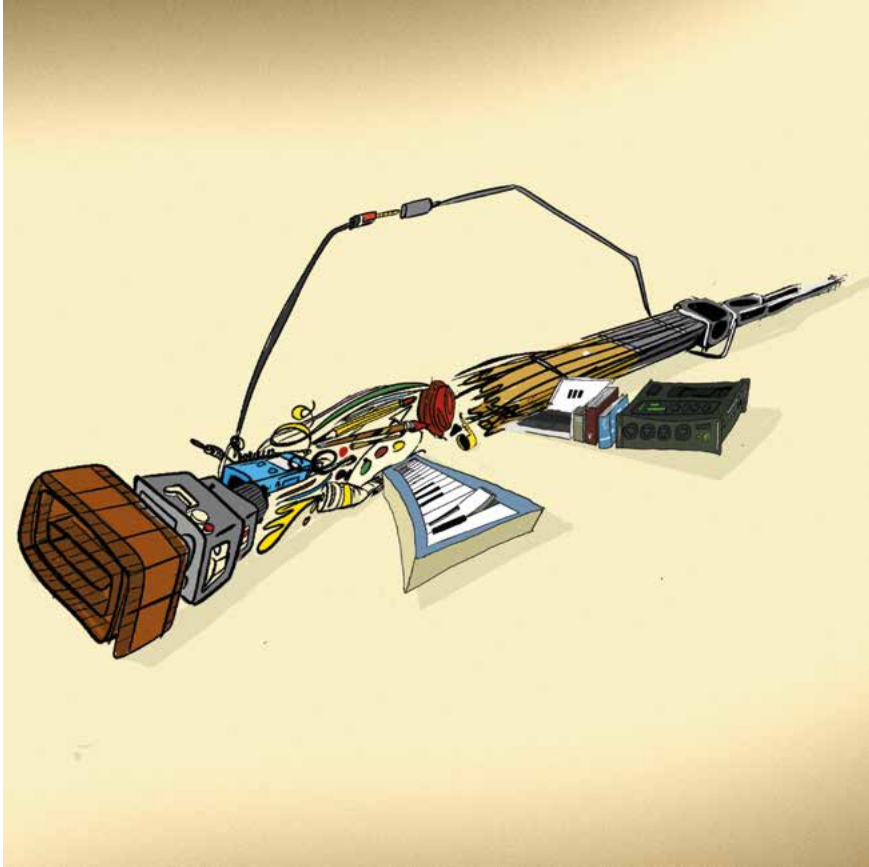
—Mayco Naing

**“I consider myself a
messenger within this
resistance movement.
Through my photographs,
I want to put my country
back on the map.”**

—Myo Thaw aka
666Fotorhymer

**“This is all I can do in
the revolution. I don’t
consider myself an artist,
just a comrade.”**

—Hugo

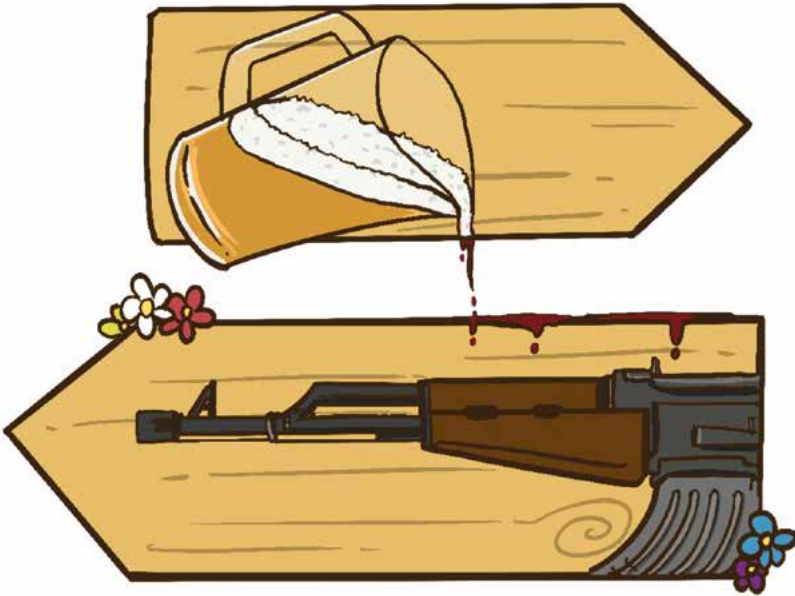


42 (Phoe Htoo), *Ak-3*,
8 April 2023, digital illustration



42 (Phoe Htoo), *Everyday Migraines*,
16 October 2023, digital illustration

42 (Phoe Htoo), *Crossroads*,
25 October 2025, digital illustration





42 (Phoe Htoo), *Ma Ma, I'm Coming Home*,
28 July 2025, digital illustration

“On this People’s Defence Forces soldier’s
helmet, he carries what he holds dearest,
tied with a traditional *longyi*.”





Annt Hmue Mahr, *8 December 2021—Ye, Mon, State Members of the Mon State Revolutionary Organization (MSRO) gather around a fire during the winter season, photography*

“We were not relatives, but we lived like brothers. We had never met before. But we were all exiles.

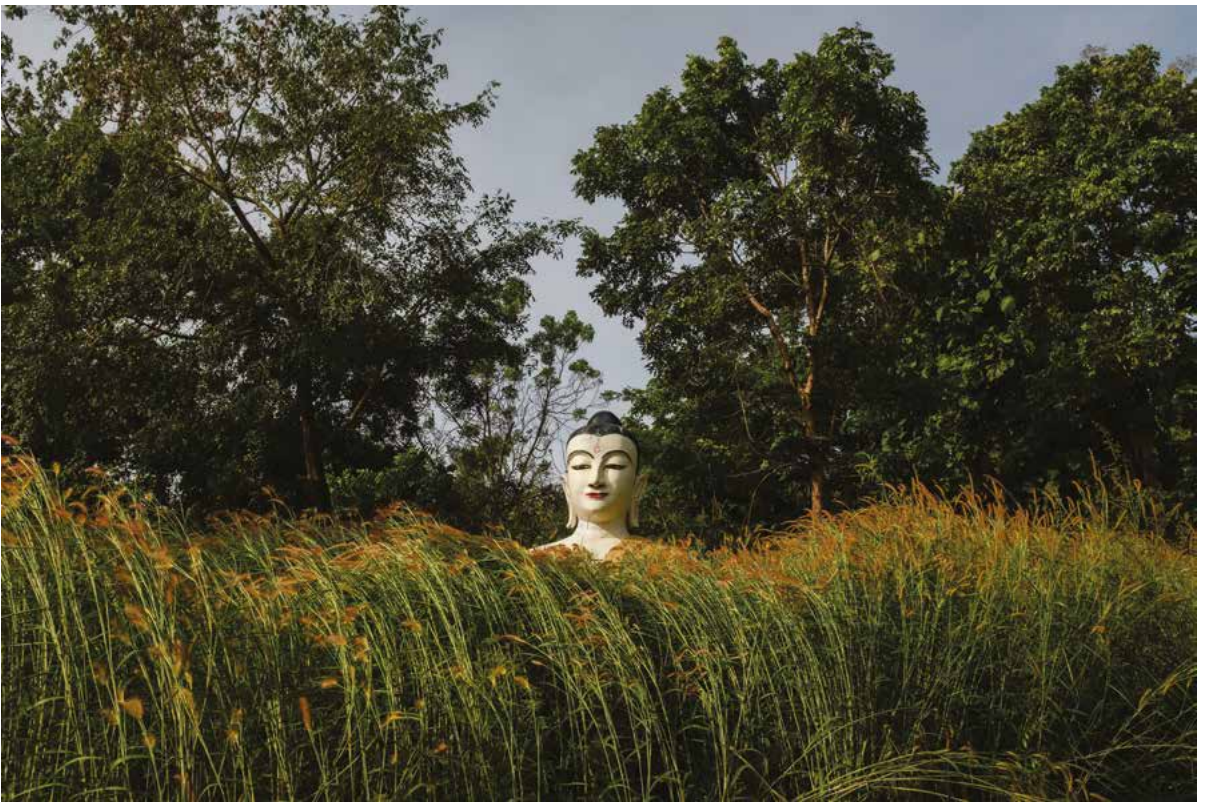
Annt Hmue Mahr, *3 January 2026 – Demoso Township, Karenni State, KNDF soldier Joseph, who lost a leg in battle, continues to take part in the revolution, photography*

“Moving across uncertain landscapes, they are met not with opportunity, but with constant negotiation for survival. Each place offers only temporary ground, never a sense of belonging. This project reflects on a generation caught in transition unable to return, yet, unable to fully arrive anywhere else.”

Annt Hmue Mahr, *21 September 2025—Karenni State, Flooding damages roads and bridges in resistance-controlled areas amid ongoing conflict in Karenni State, photography*

“Waiting became our daily work. Waiting for news. Waiting for safety. Waiting for a version of life that does not exist yet.”

Annt Hmue Mahr, *Without Address series (extract), 2021-2024, photography*



Aung Kyaw Htet, A Buddha statue stands on Let Khat Taung near Myawaddy Township on November 17, 2023. In addition to targeting civilian areas, Myanmar junta forces have continued carrying out artillery and airstrikes on locations where Buddhist monasteries and religious sites are situated, photography

“Soldiers seem overtly religious, always making pagodas, but in reality, they are bombing indiscriminately.”

Aung Kyaw Htet, A house burns after being hit by artillery shelling from Myanmar military forces during clashes between junta troops and resistance forces near Thingannyinaung, Myawaddy Township, on April 1, 2023, photography

Aung Kyaw Htet, *Is Silence a Form of Loudness?* series (extract),
December 2021 - ongoing, photography

“Every scene I witnessed was filled with sound. The shouts and curses from the battlefield, the noise of gunfire, the cries of grief at funerals for those who lost their lives to the war, and the urgent warnings exchanged whenever an aircraft was heard overhead—all of these sounds continue to echo in my ears.

The events may have ended, but the sounds have not faded away. Even within silent photographs, those sounds continue to resonate.

I hope viewers can hear the voices that live inside these images.”





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Aung Kyaw Htet, A hall inside Battalion 134 in Hpasawng Township, Karenni State, is seen after resistance forces seized the military base during clashes with Myanmar junta troops on August 13, 2025, photography

“This was a place SAC soldiers used to be so proud of, but the curtain has fallen the same way as the SAC—taken over by the PDFs.”

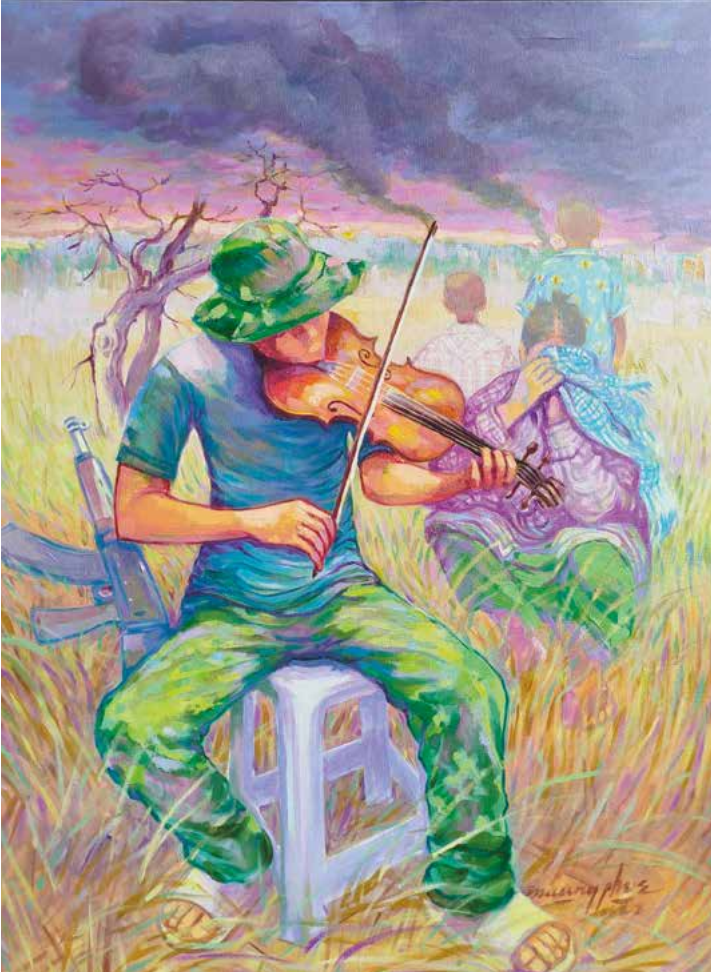


Jay, *Our BLOOD!! Our VICTORY!!*,
25 September 2021, digital illustration



Hugo, *A Glimpse of Blue*, 7 February 2025,
digital illustration

“This is the poignant perspective of gazing out from a bomb shelter, deeply reflecting the tragic reality of numerous schoolchildren losing their lives to the military dictator’s incessant bombings.”



Maung Phoe,
သေနတ်ကိုင်တယောဆရာ,
(Armed Violinist), 50×70 cm,
acrylic on canvas



Maung Phoe, လွတ်မြောက်ရာလမ်း,
(Road to Freedom), 190×380cm,
acrylic on canvas

Maung Phoe, လေယာဉ်တွေမြင်တဲ့အခါ
(When we see the planes) by Maung
Phoe, Tarmalar, Saw Tun and Edo
Vader, 197×386cm, acrylic on canvas



Nay Ni Hlaing Kha, *Ozi Dobat*
(Drums), 2025,
60 x 50 cm, acrylic on canvas



Nay Ni Hlaing Kha, *Parrot Sings*, 2025,
107 x 92 cm, acrylic on canvas

“When I first got into the jungle, I had intended to join army training. But when I saw the culture there, I felt that I didn’t resonate with their likeness to parrots —the regurgitative nature. This is just an observation— not a serious criticism.”



Nay Ni Hlaing Kha, *60mm*,
2025, 29,7 x 42 cm,
inks & digital colors

"I want to change those thoughts accepted in people's minds as givens. I want them to question themselves: 'what do I believe?' 'is this true?' 'why do I even believe this?'"

—Kyar Pauk



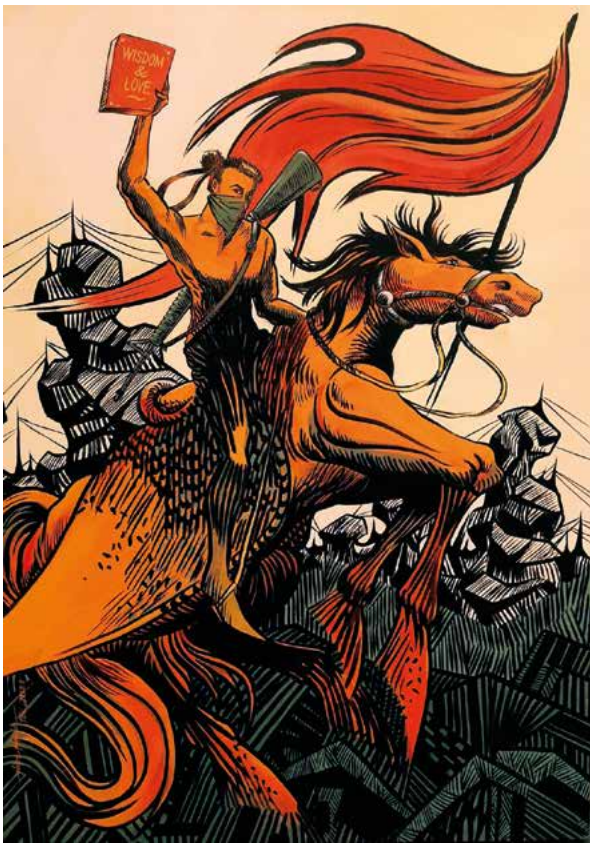
Novem Htoo, *Eating Lunch Together at the Frontlines*, September 2023, photography

"I was worried about my safety, but I was used to it since it wasn't my first time in conflict areas. This is something I learned on the job—you can't learn this from the books."

—Aung Kyaw Htet



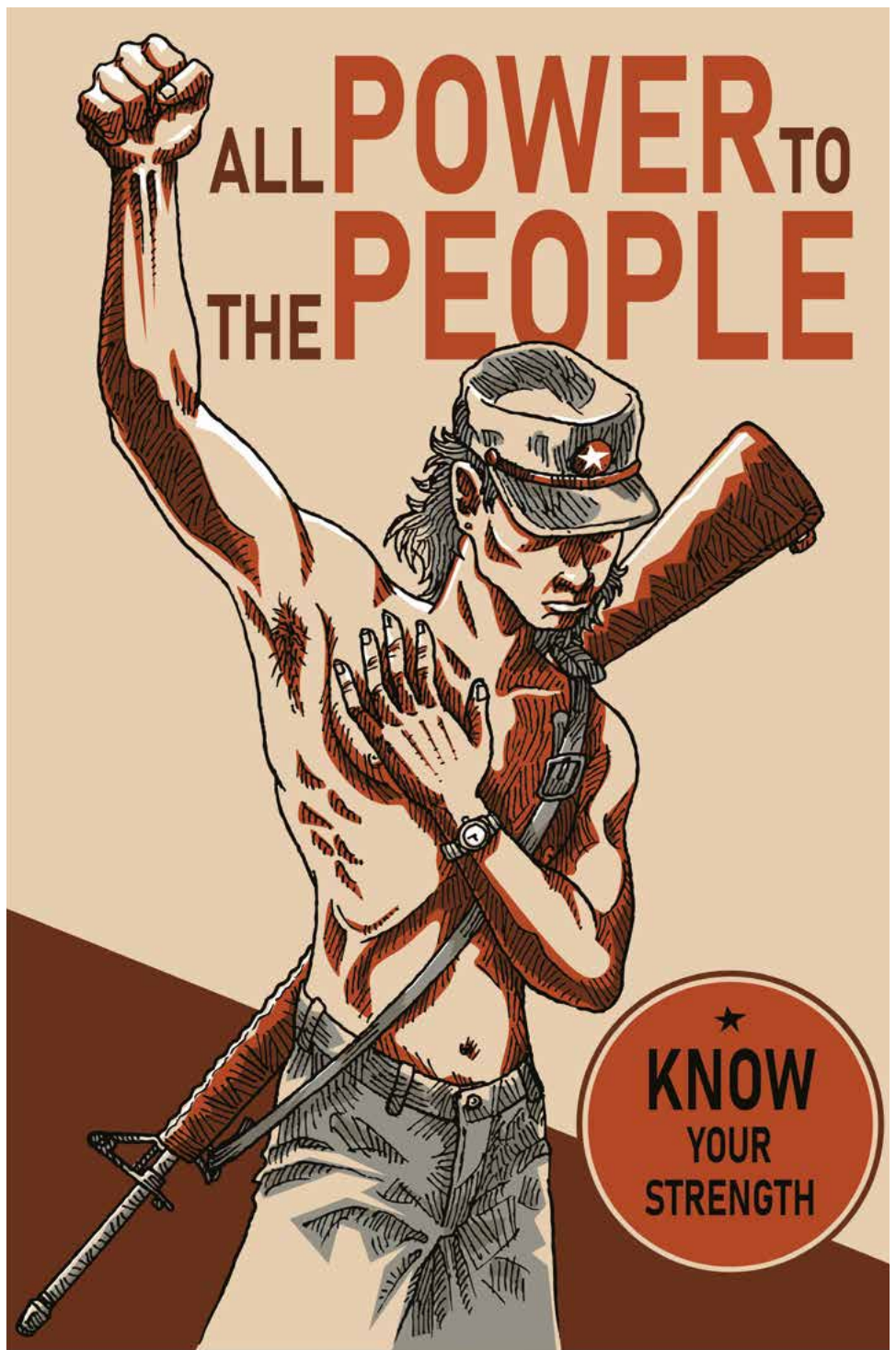
Novem Htoo, *Greeting at the Assembly*,
December 2024, photography



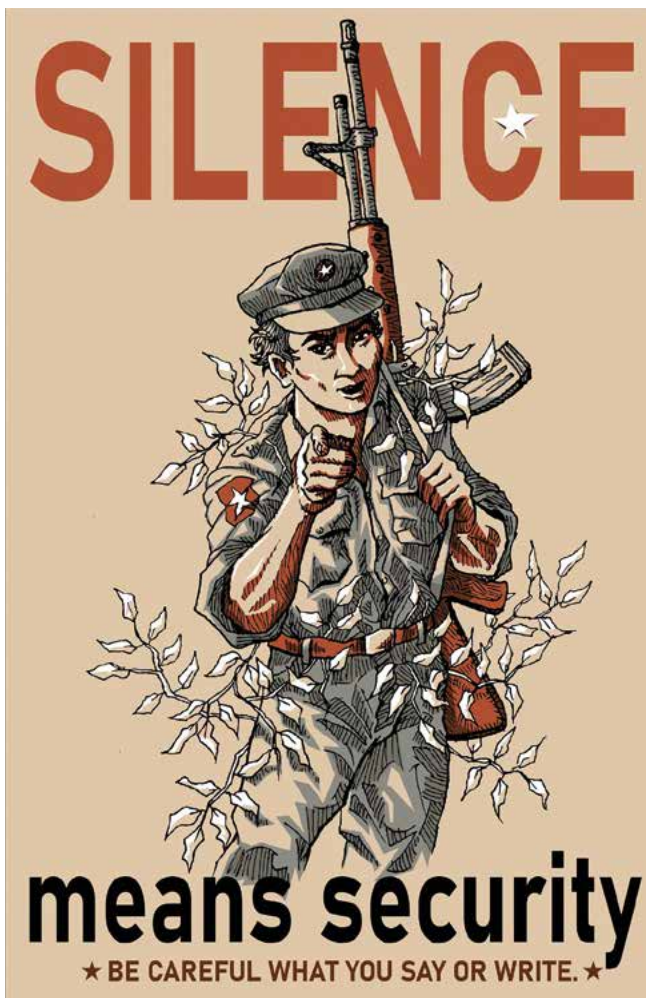
Thoe Htein, *We Need Wisdom and Love in Revolution 1*, 2022,
26 x 37 inches, acrylic on canvas



Thoe Htein, *We Need Wisdom and Love in Revolution 2*, 2022,
26 x 37 inches, acrylic on canvas



Thoe Htein, *All Power to the People*, 2021, 20 x 30 inches, pen drawings and digital colours



Thoe Htein, *Silence Means Security*,
2021, 20 x 30 inches, pen drawings
and digital colours



Thoe Htein, *We Can Do It!*, 2021,
20 x 30 inches, pen drawings and
digital colours



Wooh, *A Farmer's Homeland*,
2024, digital illustration

“I hide nothing beneath
my paintings—there are
no grand meanings beyond
them. What did you see in
them? What did you feel
from them? Those are the
things I wanted to present.
Simple as that.”

3.

TRAUMA

Artists engaged in protest against the regime, living through its violent crackdowns, its bombings and air strikes, were compelled to respond to the lives lost and traumatised. The creative practices of the artists in this book capture the hardship, pain, and trauma endured but also how they serve as coping mechanisms. The therapeutic benefits of art are well recognised in response to psychological trauma, an understanding shared by the artists. Their work serves as both remembrance and a response to the pain and trauma wrought by conflict.

42 (Phoe Htoo)'s digital piece *Eye of the Storm* depicts falling into a cyclone (a natural hazard Myanmar is prone to) while portraying the psychological weight of being surveilled. The digital piece *Ode to Sleep* shows a female figure on an IV, in a hospital bed but dreaming of art, of beauty—a stark contrast to the circumstances she is depicted in. The simple but powerful digital piece *Sea of Sorrow* with a single flower in a flood is noted by 42 (Phoe Htoo) as representing young lives struggling in the on-going conflict.

Daung embraced painting more fully after having moved to Thailand following the 2021 *coup* with works that have a haunting sensibility. The 2021 piece *Black Glasses* is an example, as is the piece *Explosion*, created at a time he notes he was “filled with anger and frustration”. By the artist’s account, painting it sought to release the artist’s own painful emotions.

The exiled photographer HABO’s work also has a surreal sensibility. HABO notes that her work is rooted in intense feelings, seeking to capture not only what is seen, “but what is carried, what is faded”. These feelings are found in her reflection-altered scenes of everyday life: *Sometimes I ask myself if I truly exist. Not even sometimes.*

Harrywhohehe, arrested for resisting the *coup*, is likely to speak for others when he notes “as a Gen Z kid, I also didn’t know that the military would actually shoot protestors. I was too naïve. Like many other Gen Z, I believed that the revolution would be over within a year”. Harrywhohehe’s *A Young Flower* was created in response to an airstrike by the Myanmar military. In the artist’s words, “the piece exists as an act of remembrance. It holds space for a life taken too early and stands as a quiet refusal to let such violence fade into statistics”. A spiritual dimension is prominent in his piece *I Just Want to Go Home*, created to accompany a similarly themed poem.

The digital artist and illustrator Hugo was also facing arrest in Myanmar for his involvement in the protest movement when he fled to Thailand in 2022. The intention behind his digital piece, *Soul* is empathy for the loss of freedom on the part of “innocent citizens and public

leaders who have been unjustly imprisoned”. In this piece, a dove is seen, presented as being unable to fly. Hugo’s digital painting *The Window* hints at loss, of being trapped; in the artist’s description, “A reflection on the experiences of confined souls”.

The digital painting *Zay Thel* depicting figures against an orange backdrop collecting their belongings in what is presumed to be forced displacement is described by Hugo as “created to express the profound sense of weariness, relentless struggle, and daily efforts for survival”. A similar sentiment is found in his digital painting *Until When*.

Illustrator Jason Todd seeks to: “...draw most terrifying events to let people know it’s happening, and still happening.” His *Dear Sister* digital illustration portrays snakes representing the constant threat, fear, and psychological pressure of being imprisoned by the military regime for resisting the 2021 coup. He describes the similarly themed work *Ghost—20* wherein “the ghost represents me. My loneliness. As I took part in revolution, I started to feel it’s difficult to deal with people...It is hard to be happy. It is hard to accept”. His digital representation of a child crying in *I Don’t Want to Go Back Home* reflects the trauma and fear of an internally displaced child living through a Myanmar military airstrike.

The painter Lu is clear that his returning to drawing after the 2021 coup was a way “to search for and reconnect with parts of myself that felt lost”. In his own words: “In every corner of daily life—I see the chaotic side of this. In order to resolve these nodes—from trauma—to resolve

these, I draw to reverse the knots and to revert the conflict—I needed to turn it inside out and put it on the paper.”

His interpretative style seen in the piece *Everybody is Michael K.* reflects how people are caught in endless accusations (from the regime), a context where any concept of justice has lost its meaning. The piece *Not Here, nor There, nor Anywhere Seasonal Thoughts* was an illustration for an essay and, in Lu’s own description, “reflects the mind moving through doubt, memory and unanswered questions. The red forms carry weight, emotion, longing, anger, attachment, but they don’t explain themselves. They stay there, heavy and unresolved”.

The painter Maung Phoe’s 2024 piece *Ma Nyein Chan Tat Gabar Myay (Yan Phyt Tat Gabar)* translates from Burmese to *A Tumultuous Earth (A World in Conflict)*, depicts an angry ogre wrapped by a snake. Maung Phoe wanted the work to record his observation that “the entire world seems to be fighting; neighbours, couples, friends, villages, religions, states”. He has noted that it represented his outlook on life: “...this is not a happy world.” His other works do recognise that alongside fighting there exists compassion.

The photographer Mayco Naing sees crisis as inspiration: “Being Burmese and witnessing human beings born into countless crises inspires me to create art and to live with art.” In her *Freedom from Fear* black and white photo series (its title taken from Aung San Suu Kyi’s book), she represents “...the experience of living under military oppression in Burma for over 60 years. We all live with something

hovering above us, overshadowing our potential, dragging us down, and leaving us unable to breathe freely”.

The *Captive Residence* photo series of the visual artist, curator, and human rights advocate Sai ■■■ have a poignancy derived from being taken—at significant risk—by the photographer returning to the family home after his father, formerly the Shan State Chief Minister, was arrested and detained by the military regime and his mother was placed under house arrest. As with others’ work, colourful flowers made with fabric provided by families of political prisoners are used against grey tones to invoke a sense of hope. Sai ■■■’s other photos and art works, widely exhibited (but not featured in this book) resulted first in him being targeted by the military regime and then subject to censorship by neighbouring countries; his flight into exile was, like others, circuitous and fraught. “Art has a funny role. Art has a role of endurance. Culture is unstoppable. That’s the strength. You might be able to stop justice, but it’s really hard to stop culture,” he notes.

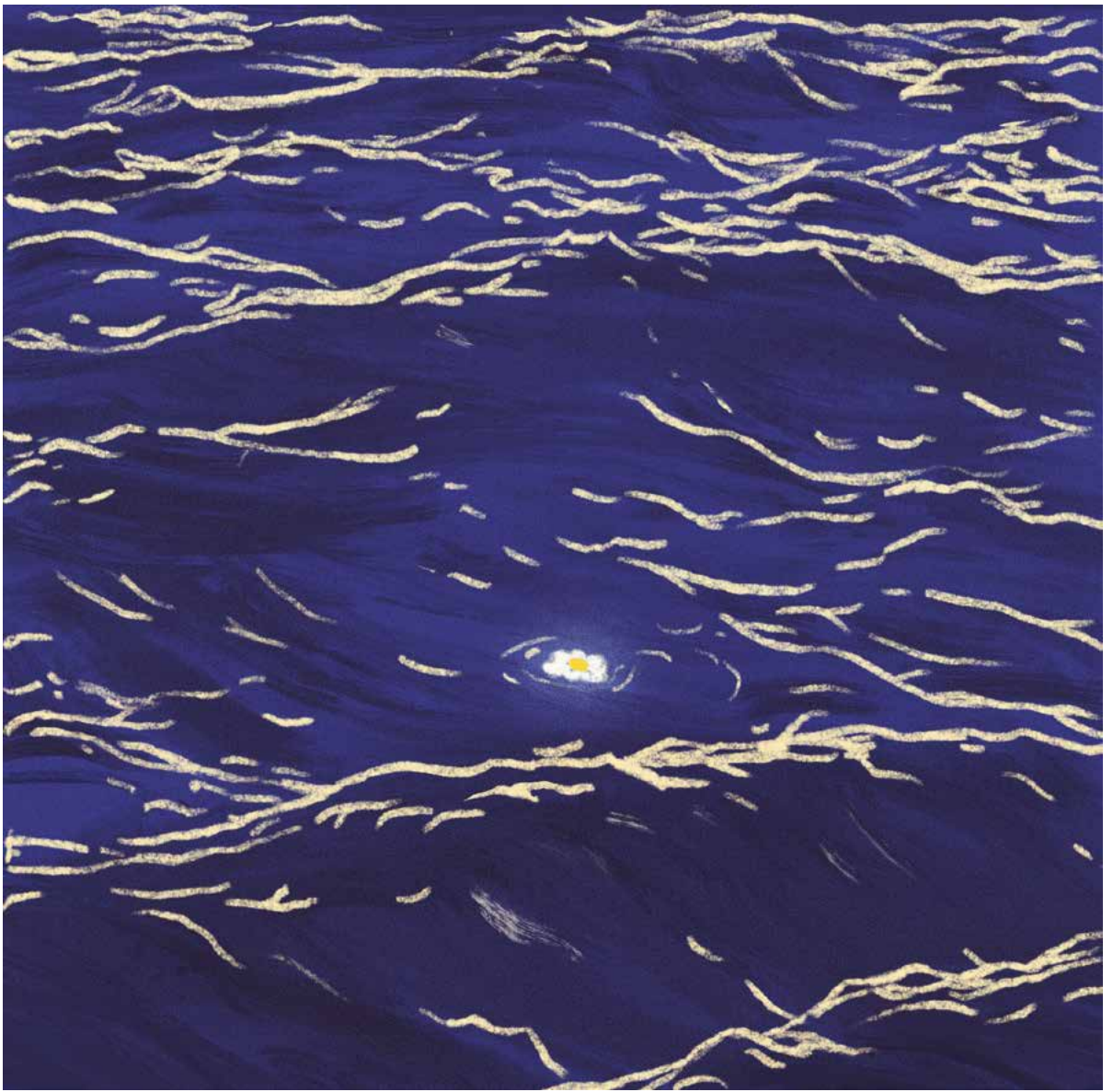
Thoe Htein’s *The 3 Wise Monkeys Censored Each Other* subverts the normal depiction of “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” by having the monkeys cover each others’ eyes, ears, and mouth. In front of a traumatised naked body in foetal position, they speak to being denied the opportunity to openly discuss politics. He explains: “All our lives, we were never given the chance to openly discuss politics. We couldn’t clearly see or hear the truth because we were blinded by endless propaganda. And now, even today, people still try to stop others from seeing, hearing, or speaking about things

that are forbidden.”

The artist and musician Kyar Pauk’s 2022 piece *Bloodied Door* represents bleeding inside spilling to the outside. Kyar Pauk composed the photograph when in Chiang Mai, a time he describes as one when he faced depression: “my bleeding.” The abstract style seen in many of Kyar Pauk’s paintings and drawings have their origins in his efforts to use art and creativity to aid his mental well-being when in hiding from arrest by the Myanmar military regime. He has become a much-followed online proponent of art as therapy. An advocate for the positive potential of art and the creative process, he remains concerned about the on-going trauma of young people under protracted conflict.

The backstory to his 2024 piece *Drunken Paris Nights* resulted from the frustrations the artist experienced in seeking to secure work after having found refuge in France. This was composed after a night’s drinking in response to those frustrations.

Graphic artist Wooh’s comic strip piece *1st February 2021* articulates what the artist describes as “the suffocation of emotions’ and the realisation that another realm of hell had just begun”.



42 (Phoe Htoo), *Sea of Sorrow*,
15 June 2023, digital illustration

42 (Phoe Htoo), *Ode to Sleep*, 13
August 2025, digital illustration



42 (Phoe Htoo), *Eye of the Storm*,
24 August 2024,
digital illustration

“We have to make Myanmar’s
audience notice that there
are sensible artists in the
revolutionary community.”





Daung, ကလေးများ(၁) (Children (1)), 2023,
50 x 70 cm, acrylic on canvas

“I used to be a very calm and patient person, but after the *coup*, I became different. I was no longer as patient as before. (...) Suddenly, I felt very small and afraid of being alone. I worried that I might harm myself if I remained isolated for too long. My mental health deteriorated.”



Daung, *Explosion*, 2024, 60 x 80cm, acrylic on canvas

“Among all the artworks I created during the revolution, my favourite was the *Explosion* series. I was filled with anger and frustration while painting them. I wasn’t thinking about figures, composition, or aesthetic value when creating those works. I simply wanted to release all my pain and negative emotions.”



Daung, မျက်မှန်အမဲ (Black glasses), 2021, 40 x 50 cm, acrylic on canvas



HABO, 7 September 2025—*Sometimes I ask myself if I truly exist. Not even sometimes*, photography

“These questions—‘do I really exist?’ ‘what am I feeling?’ ‘what do I want to do?’—they exist in me all the time. [...] So instead of talking to somebody, kids like me (only child) spend most of our time in our thoughts. They just think. And sometimes they overthink.”



HABO, 14 March 2024—*Sometimes I ask myself if I truly exist. Not even sometimes, photography*

All pictures provided by HABO are from their *My Surreal World* series (extract), January 2024-ongoing, photography

“I lost my future on the very first day of the coup. I felt completely hopeless.”

– Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer



Harrywhohehe, *A Young Flower*, 27 April 2023, digital 2D

“In response to a tragic airstrike carried out by the military, this is an act of remembrance.”



Harrywhohehe, *I Just Want to Go Home*, 30 May 2025, digital 2D



Hugo, *Soul*, 17 October 2025,
digital illustration



Hugo, *The Lost Vendor*,
3 November 2025,
digital illustration

“This artwork reflects
the devastating
impact on the
livelihoods of honest
street vendors,
tragically brought
about by the
military *coup*.”

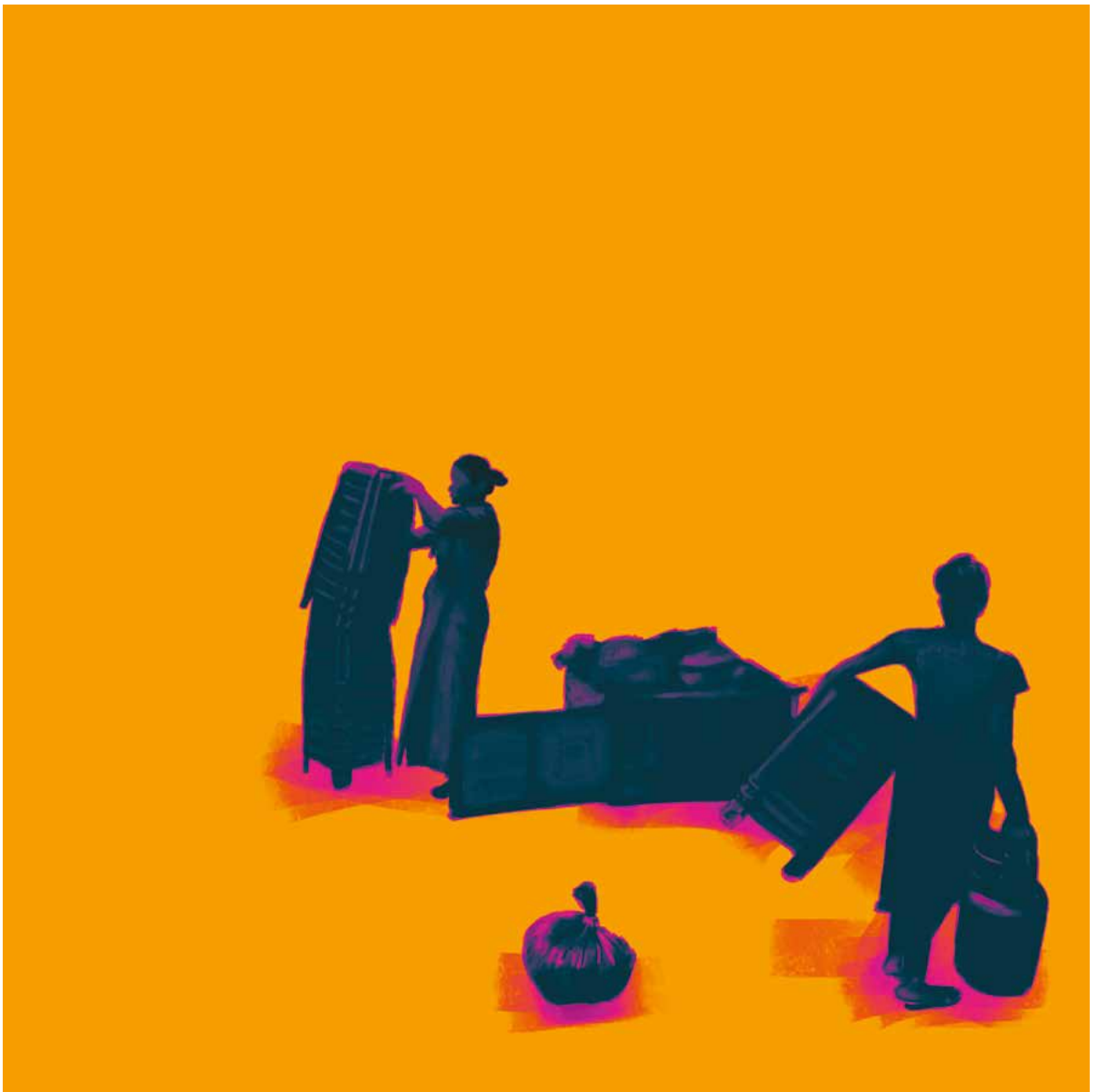


Hugo, *The Window*,
7 October 2025,
digital illustration



Hugo, *Until When*, 19 September 2025,
digital illustration

“This reflects the immense hardship and loss endured by an elderly mother in the Anyar (central area) region, whose whole life and family were tragically shattered by the *coup*.”



Hugo, *Zay Thel*, 6 September 2025,
digital illustration

“The 2021 *coup* profoundly impacted my life; I closed my business to join the protests and the resistance movement. Facing arrest, I fled to Mae Sot in 2022. It was there, that I rediscovered my artistic voice through digital art. Today, I actively contribute my illustrations to revolutionary fundraising campaigns and educational channels, leveraging my art as a tool to continue the fight against the military dictatorship.”



Jason Todd, *Dear Sister*, 24 August 2023, digital illustration

“The jail poles are portrayed as snakes surrounding a girl to represent the constant threat, fear, and psychological pressure inside prison. It reflects how imprisonment is not only physical confinement but also a quiet, suffocating presence, especially for those who are detained unjustly.”



Jason Todd, သရဲ - ၂၀ (Ghost - 2၀),
 1 May 2024, digital illustration

“This poetry illustration was created based on Ko Tha Yell’s poem because I personally relate to its emotions. The ghost figure represents inner fear, confusion, and emotional heaviness that slowly builds inside a person. Through simple shapes and dark tones, the work reflects mental struggle, isolation, and the feeling of being unseen, turning the poem into a visual expression of emotions I felt deeply connected to.”

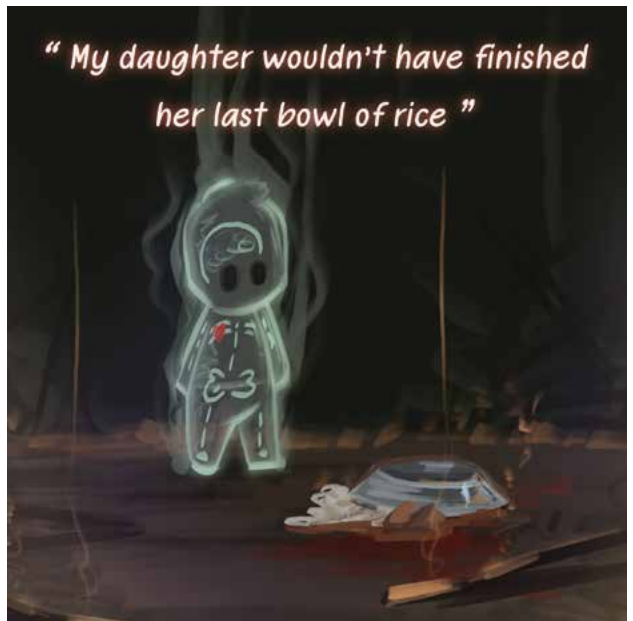
Jason Todd, *I Don't Want to Go Back Home*, 22 September 2024, digital illustration

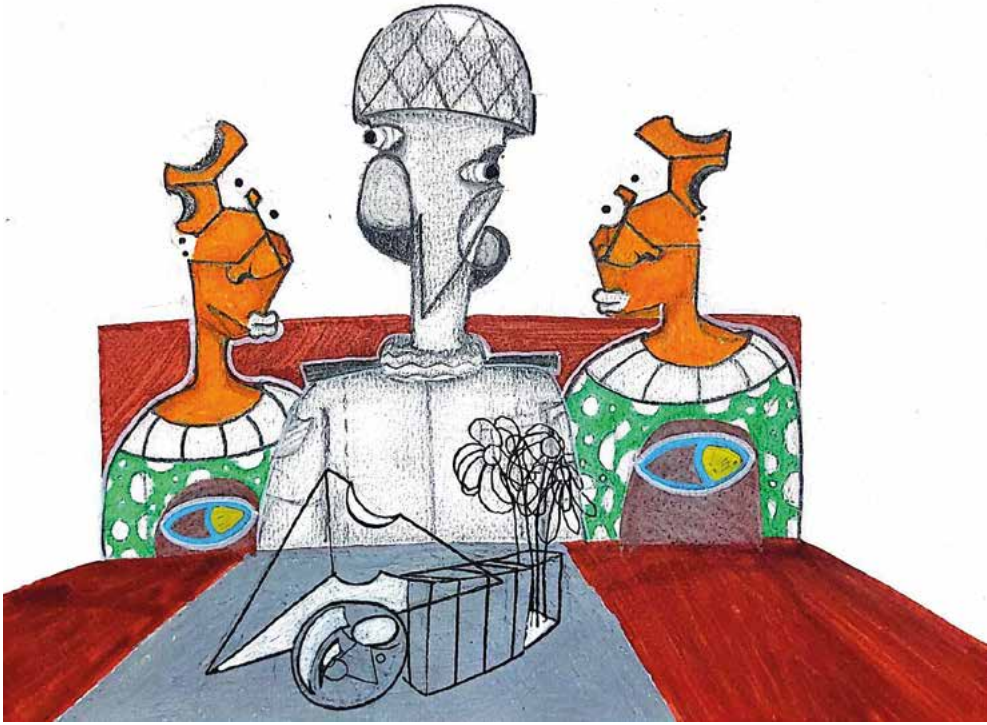
“This is a young child living in a refugee camp after an airstrike. The child’s expression and tears reflect trauma, fear, and loss that remain long after the violence ends. It highlights the quiet suffering of children in conflict, showing how displacement and trauma take away the feeling of safety and home.”



Jason Todd, *The Unfinished Meal*, 16 April 2023, digital illustration

“This illustration was created in response to heartbreaking events where innocent civilians, including children, were killed during an airstrike. The ghost-like child figure and the unfinished bowl of rice symbolize lives interrupted too soon and ordinary moments that were never meant to last.”



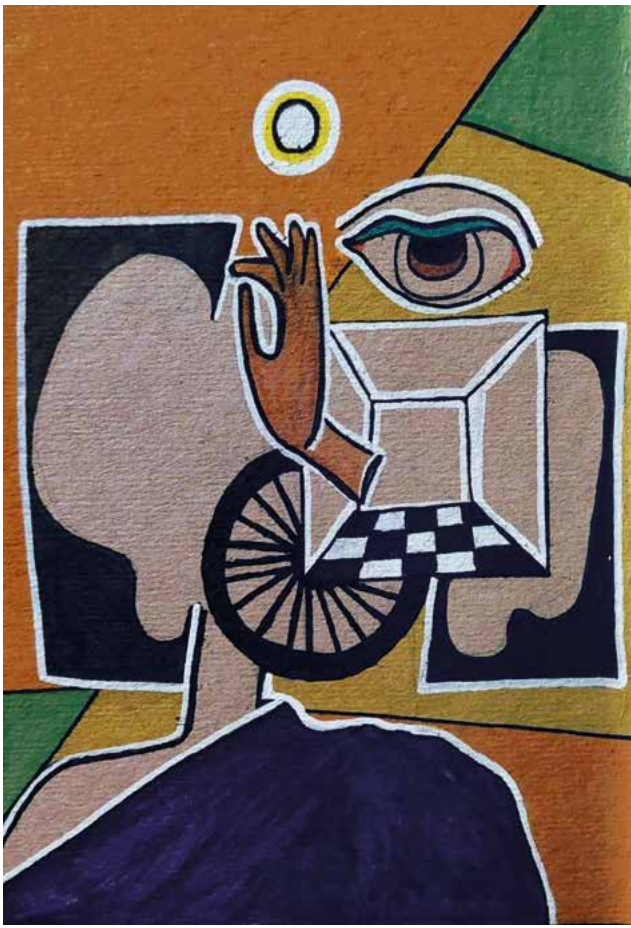


Lu, အားလုံး မိုက်ကယ်ကေ (Everybody is Michael K.), 19 May 2025, pencils, acrylic and watercolour marker on watercolour paper

“This illustration relates to a story where identity becomes unstable. The figures reflect how authority, guilt, and judgment circulate without a clear source, trapping a person in endless accusation. Instead of escape, survival comes through imitation becoming another version of the same figure. The work sits with this quiet absurdity, where justice loses meaning and identity turns into a mask worn to stay alive.”

Lu, *Personal Testimony*,
23 August 2025,
4 x 4 inch, line pen,
acrylic and watercolour
marker on paper





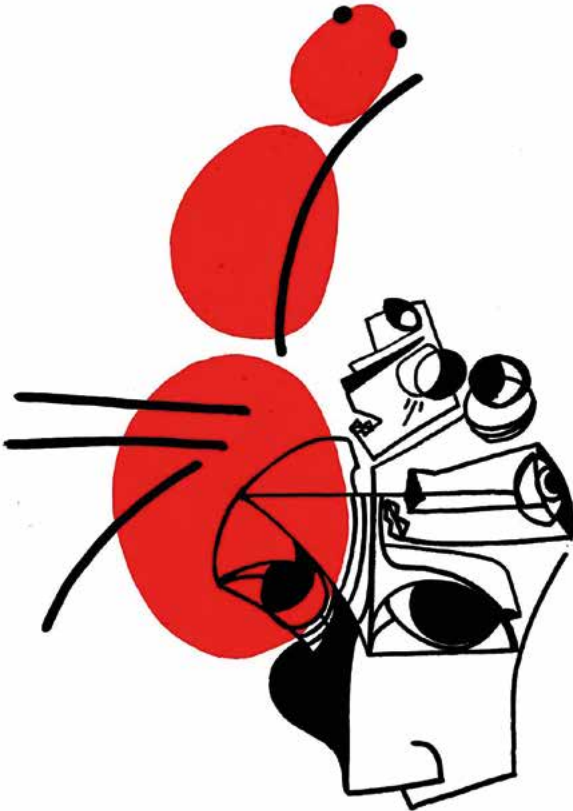
Lu, ဗုဒ္ဓကို မီးလောင်ပြင်မှာ ငါတွေ့ခဲ့တယ်
(I saw Buddha at the burning plains),
24 January 2025, 5 x 7 inch, acrylic and
watercolour marker on sketchbook cover

“This illustration was made from the feeling of encountering faith in a place where it is least expected. Instead of finding the Buddha in calm or sanctity, the figure appears within destruction, silence, and uncertainty. The fragmented body and divided spaces reflect a world that is broken and unsettled, where questions are heavier than answers. The single eye represents witnessing seeing suffering directly and being unable to look away. While the circular form hints at repetition: loss, violence, and displacement that continue without resolution.”



Lu, *Interregnum*, 23 November 2024,
acrylic on watercolour paper

“This work sits in a moment of suspension a time between before and after, where nothing is settled yet nothing has ended. The forms drift, overlap, and hesitate, like thoughts caught between movement and stillness. Figures appear but don’t fully arrive; directions exist but lead nowhere clear. It reflects a state of living inside uncertainty—when meaning hasn’t disappeared, but hasn’t fully formed either. What remains is the feeling of passing through, holding questions without answers, and learning to exist inside that in between space.”



Lu, *ဟိုမရောက် ဒီမရောက် ရာသီကူး
အတွေးများ* (Not Here, nor There, nor
Anywhere Seasonal Thoughts),
9 November 2024, acrylic on
watercolour paper

“The figure doesn’t feel whole. Some parts are missing, others are crowded together, and some don’t quite belong.”



Maung Phoe, လေကြောင်းတိုက်ခိုက်မှုကြောင့်
 သေဆုံးခဲ့ရသူကျောင်းသားငယ်တစ်ယောက်
 (A Young Student Claimed by Airstrikes),
 50 x 70 cm, acrylic on canvas

Maung Phoe, မငြိမ်းချမ်းတဲ့ကမ္ဘာမြေ
 (ရန်ဖြစ်တဲ့ကမ္ဘာ) (A Tumultuous Earth
 (A World in Conflict)), 2024, 120 x
 120cm, acrylic on canvas

“My painting is to record this observation of mine. Two beings are fighting in that painting and they become ogres or demons while they are at it. It is like the snake that swallows its own tail; it documents destruction. That is my outlook on life and the world. This is not a happy world. But that is the way it is, and people can't break the cycle.”

"The *coup* completely changed my desire for what to paint. I couldn't paint flowers anymore. I no longer had that sense of tranquillity within me. I wanted to paint explosions, starving children, and war victims, especially after I visited refugee camps to make donations and saw the faces of the children with my own eyes. Those scenes wouldn't leave my mind. They became deeply rooted in my memory."

—Daung





Mayco Naing, *Freedom from Fear* series,
75 x 100 cm, matt paper photo prints,
image courtesy of the artist.

“It took me three years to complete the series. Fear was the central theme. During the process, I also wanted to confront my greatest fear—drowning—so I photographed myself underwater as well.”



Kyar Pauk, *Bloodied Door*, 2022, photography

“This gallery is bleeding. The frame of the wall is black. I wanted to show that the gallery is bleeding and spilling to the outside. I wanted to show that I’m bleeding and that I’m in pieces on the inside. I was having a very hard time in Chiang Mai.”



Sai ■■■, *Anaut Yat (The Rear) of the Captive Residence, Taunggyi, Shan State*, 2021, 213 x 142 cm, fabric installation, photography

Sai ■■■, *Ah-Shei Yat (the Front) of the Captive Residence, Taunggyi, Shan State*, 2021, 213 x 142 cm, fabric installation, photography



Sai ■■■, *Air Khan (Parlor) of the Captive Residence, Taunggyi, Shan State*, 2021, 142 x 213 cm, fabric installation, photography

“Portraits of arrested President U Win Myint (left) now held in Taungoo Prison, and Aung San Suu Kyi’s Father, General Aung San (right). This is what the living room looks like after Father was taken hostage. Mother started to pack while under house arrest.”

“I only took photography because it was the last medium I had for the truth.”

—Sai ■■■



Thoe Htein, *The 3 wise monkeys
censored each other*, 2024, 60 x 80 cm,
acrylic on canvas



Kyar Pauk, *Untitled*, April 2026,
60 x 90 cm, acrylic on canvas



Kyar Pauk, *The Spirals*, August 2023,
45 x 76 cm, acrylic, markers on canvas

“This was my first canvas painting in Paris. My paintings are rarely intentional, yet they somehow reflect the emotional atmosphere I was living through at the time. I created this piece while I was being introduced to the complexities of French administrative procedures—so, in a way, all of that found its way into the work.”

Kyar Pauk, *Fossilized Turmoil*,
23 May 2026, 120 x 120cm,
acrylic on canvas

“My main message is: It’s ok to make
art. Whether you have a higher
education or not. It’s a human thing.
It doesn’t have to be out there. It’s
for your own happiness [...] You
can calm down by immersing
yourself in art.”





Kyar Pauk, ကျော့ခိုင်းခြင်း
(The Leaving), April 2024,
15 ox 60 cm,
acrylic on canvas



Kyar Pauk, *Drunken Paris Nights*,
November 2024, 100 x 30 cm,
acrylic, drip pens on canvas

“During a difficult period in Paris, my wife was pregnant and I was struggling to find work. One day, I went to an employment office hoping for guidance. After learning about my educational background and looking through my certificates, the officers suggested that I work as a night guard or a packaging laborer. That moment shattered me. I got heavily drunk that night and wandered through the small streets of Paris for hours before finally returning home very late. When I got back, I painted this piece.”

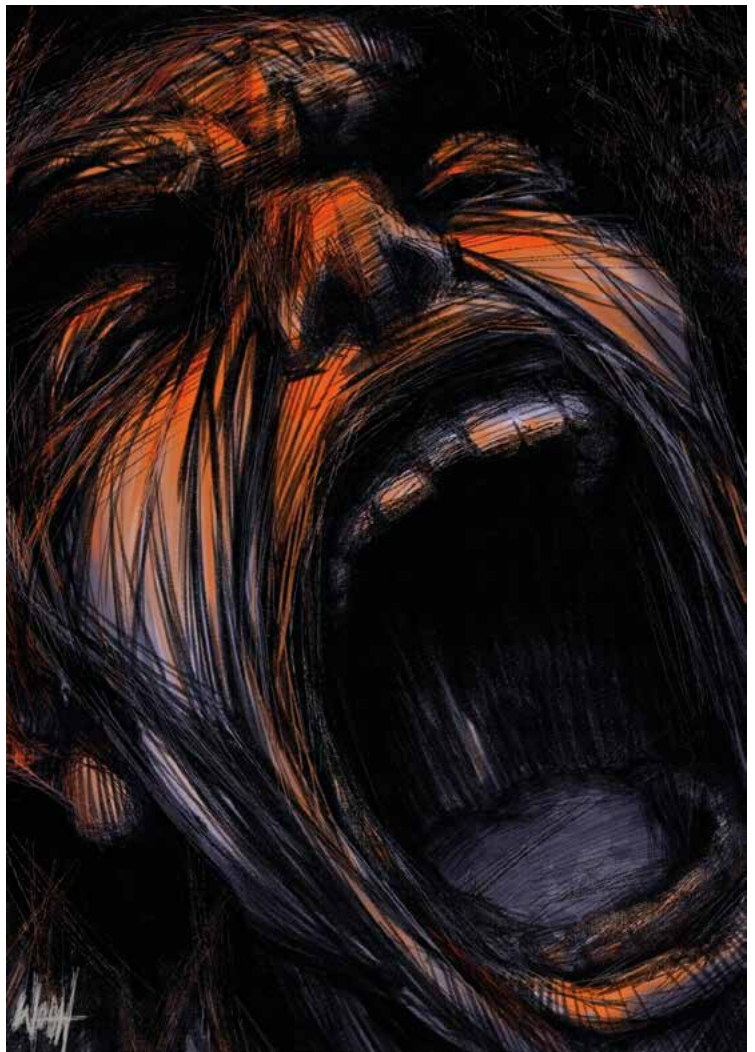
“My artworks come directly from my wounds, so they are not always pleasant or visually amusing.”

—WooH



WooH, 1st February 2021, March 2022,
digital illustration

“On that day, I was woken by a phone call at 5 a.m. It was my office manager, his voice filled with anxiety. He said the military had seized power and that Daw Aung San Su Kyi had been arrested. Almost everyone in Burma, at that moment, was awakened either by a call like this or by someone already shaken by the same horrifying news. We were all suffocated by emotions that can only be understood if you are one of us. A few moments later, all internet and phone services were cut off. Another realm of hell had just begun.”



Wooh, *Endless Pain*, 2019-2022
(colour retouch), digital illustration

“This illustration was created before the 2021 *Coup*. There are two things in Burma that will never decay or disappear: revolution and trauma.”

4.

RIDICULE

As in other politically constrained, authoritarian contexts, the use of ridicule by artists and writers enjoys a strong tradition in Myanmar. It has been deployed to effect in *anti-coup* art (including theatre) and wider communications, showing up the brutality and self-serving interests of the Myanmar military regime. The appeal for artists in using ridicule and satire centres on the immediacy, clarity, and power of the political message being conveyed. The (often dark) humour relied upon is a key component of its power.

Resistance artists use these to leave an impression on the viewers' political consciousness which is distinctive and, hopefully, lasting.

The illustrator 42 (Phoe Htoo) considers artists "have a responsibility to truth". He uses a traditionally styled depiction of the *Baluu* dancing (a mythical Burmese deity of evil and deception). In this depiction, the *Baluu* is in military dress, representing the Myanmar military *coup* leader Min Aung Hlaing. In the artist's description of the piece: "This fool tried to deal with us by hypnotising us with dance and entertainment during the Thingyan Festival. Meanwhile, he still holds a scythe and is so dangerous."

The illustrator and cartoonist Harrywhohehe did not shy away from the use of swear words to gain attention in his digital piece evoking a stark rejection of the *coup* *Fuck the Coup*, *Fuck the Pooh*. The illustrator Jason Todd uses the same phrasing in his piece *Anti Pooh* in his graphic novel style. The Pooh reference is

drawn from the rhyming with *coup* and because the Chinese President Xi Jinping looks like Pooh and gained prominence after an art challenge contest hosted by Artstrike with an express *#anti_pooh* theme.

Harrywhohehe notes that the use of 'blunt' language is an expression of both anger and fear in articulating rejection of the *coup*. The later piece *Fuck Your Election* refers to the end 2025, early 2026 election organised by the military regime which was overwhelmingly viewed as illegitimate, a 'sham' election.

Honey's 2022 piece *Cataclysm* pokes fun at the military regime's obsessions with astrology in this instance seeking to keep good spirits chained. Honey expresses how she "would like everyone to remember who we were before the *coup*. People forget how it was then. I want to give back hope." The illustrator Jay's piece, *The Military*, shows identical, laughing, crazed-looking Myanmar military soldiers with their faces painted white and red – an illustration accompanying an article on the violence of a Myanmar military soldier in a Rohingya minority village in Rakhine State. The depiction in this piece speaks to a mentality that contributes to enabling the commission of atrocities by the Myanmar military against civilian populations, a phenomenon well-documented before and since the 2021 *coup*.

Seen in the piece *Shont Cha Forever* (Condemn forever) Kyar Pauk's cartoons use politically-informed humour to highlight the sense of indifference and impunity on the part of the Myanmar military regime repeat. Condemnations that have to date seen no change in the military's strategy of violent repression.

Thoe Htein's 2021 cartoon depiction of a bloodbath in *Characteristics of Military Junta*, with the military leader proclaiming, "I'm relaxing, it is calm and fair" does not hold back in its blood-soaked imagery.

Photographer, Myo Thaw aka 666Fotoryhmer photographed the much-reproduced depiction of the Myanmar military *coup* leader Min Aung Hlaing looking like a stereotypical, comedy robber with the imposition of a heavy black lined eye mask on what otherwise looks to be an official photograph of the *coup* leader.

“I believe that artists who have been freed from Myanmar must rise to compete with those still working under the military government. We have a responsibility to be the ones who spread the truth. To counter the ugly lies manufactured by the junta, we must be stronger, more creative, and more professional in everything we produce.”

—42 (Phoe Htoo)

“By sharing my images with local and independent media, I aimed to challenge the military’s imposed information blackout and amplify the voices of dissent.”

—Annt Hmue Mahr

“My role as a creator is to hack a culture. If we put a sense of justice in our culture, our work, justice will be unstoppable. I use culture as a platform.”

—Sai ■



42 (Phoe Htoo), *The Devil Will Dance*,
29 March 2023, digital illustration

“Winning audiences through art weakens the military’s economy. Empowering liberated artists diminishes the junta’s control over entertainment and narrative.”

Harrywhohehe, *Fuck the Coup, Fuck the Pooh*,
25 November 2024, digital illustration

“This piece was a part of a collective visual response by artists, as an act of refusal —rejecting fear, censorship, and imposed silence through blunt language and shared anger.”

Harrywhohehe, *Fuck Your Election*,
23 December 2025, digital illustration

“This is a rejection of the Myanmar military’s sham election and the legitimacy it attempts to claim.”





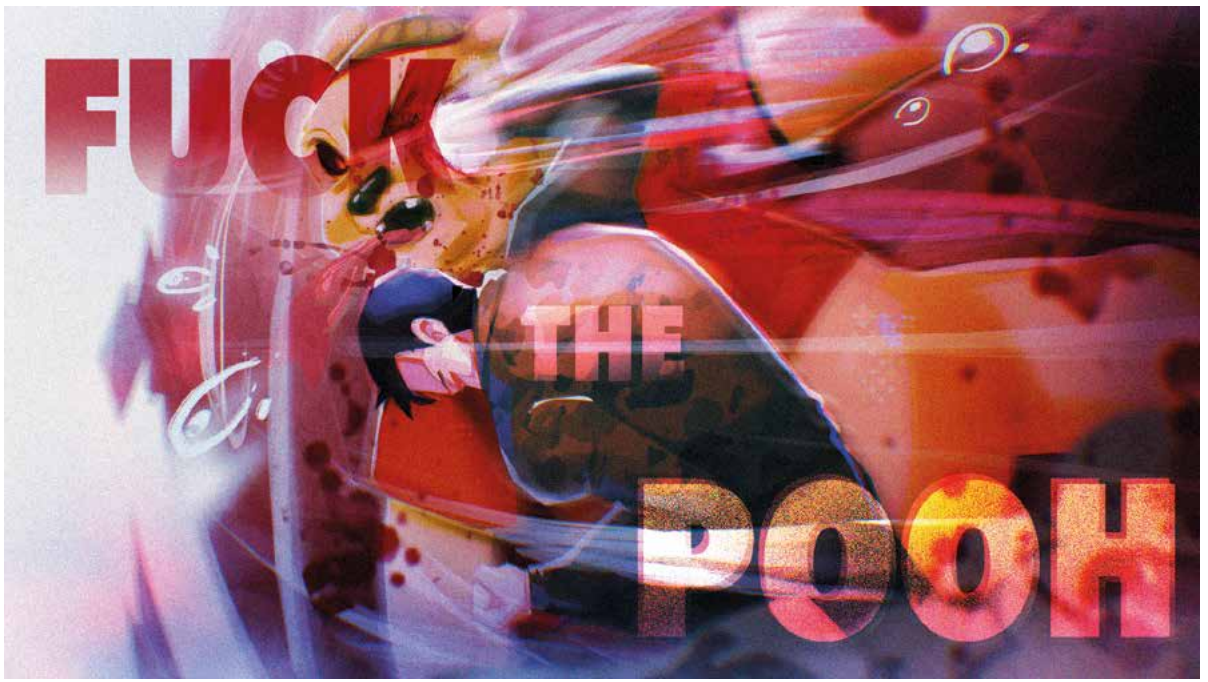
Honey, *Three of Spring*,
1 February 2024,
digital illustration

“In this revolution, there are people who still protect their fortune. They cannot get free from it because they have economic links with the military government.”



Honey, *Cataclysm*,
2 October 2022,
digital illustration

“The white hands represent the Burmese spirits. They are captured and cannot help but watch.”



Jason Todd, *Anti Pooh*,
26 November 2024, digital illustration

“This is a challenge hosted by Artstrike under the #anti_pooh theme, standing against the Chinese government’s stance on the Myanmar crisis. The work uses direct, aggressive imagery to express anger, violence, and imbalance of power, pointing to how political support and silence can contribute to harm. It’s a protest piece meant to confront viewers and refuse neutrality.”

ကပ်ဝတ်မှုမဝေ့နဲ့



Jay, *Never Forgive, Never Forget*
[Never forget], 1 February 2024,
digital illustration



Jay, *The Military*, [This is the military (author, Ga Nite)], 25 August 2023, digital illustration

“Together, we built an online digital magazine a quiet rebellion against censorship, a home for exiled voices who still refuse to be silent.”

This is a visual illustration for a *The Call* article retelling a CDM soldier’s experience in a Rohingya village in Arakan area, where a junta soldier shot a child on impulse and how this was covered up.

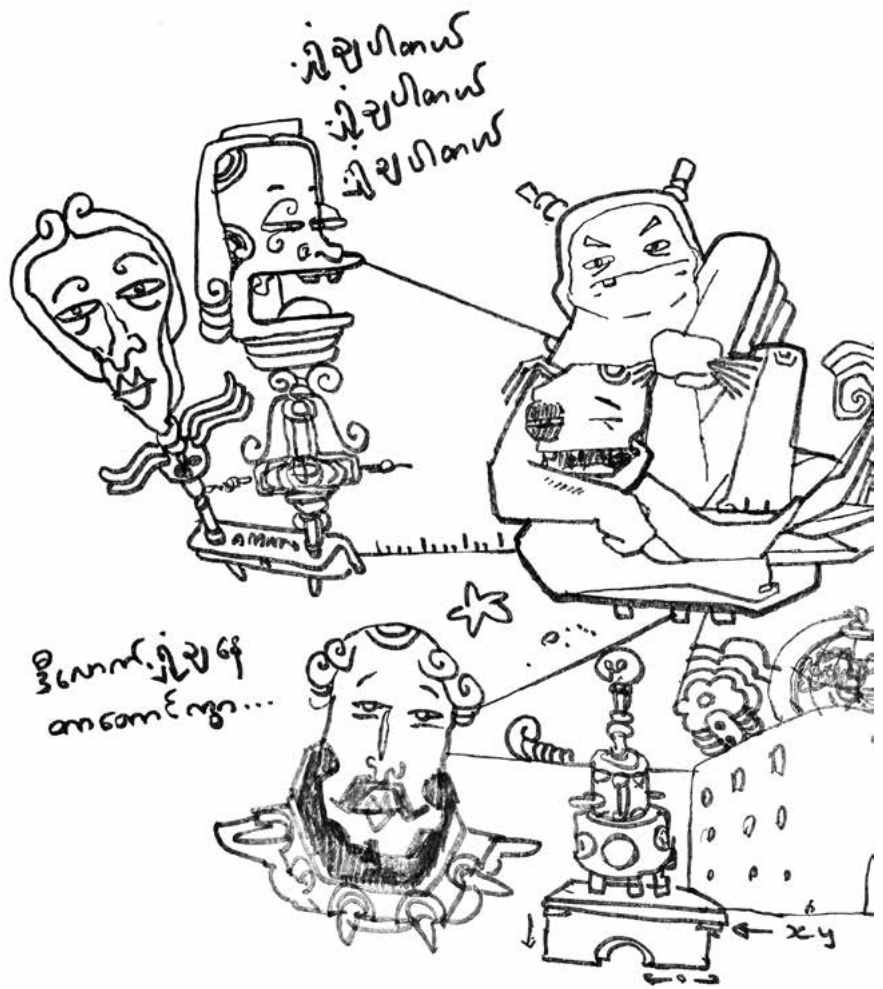


Kyar Pauk, *I shot him cos I didn't want him to die*, 2021, digital illustration

“My parents told me to use a different pseudonym if I wanted to draw political editorials. So, I changed it to ‘mmsp’, which could be an abbreviation for a lot of Burmese phrases, but people definitely got what I meant by that pen name.”

“Only one thing on my mind is to annoy the military. Whenever people gathered and do donations to focus on the revolution, they get annoyed seeing me. That’s the button I want to click. I’m supporting the people against [the military]. Of course, it’s very personal.”

—Kyar Pauk



Kyar Pauk, *ရှုံးချိ forever* (Condemn forever) [we condemn, we condemn, we condemn - even though we're condemning this much...], 2025, brushpen and ink on paper

“I drew it after I saw the UN condemning Burmese Juntas for the 100000th time without any serious follow up action for 5 consecutive years. In my personal view, the only thing more useless than the UN could be the *share* buttons on pornographic website. All they have done was basically tell the bad guys, ‘Hey you guys, it’s not cool that you’re bombing here and there. We can’t say we’re pleased by your actions. So could you please tone it down a bit? If you don’t stop the killings, we’ll be very mad. And we’ll publish a letter saying how angry we are at you.’ Ooouhhh so scarryy right?”



Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer, *Untitled*,
February 2021, photography

“Before the *coup*, I was never involved in political movements, nor did I have particularly strong political views. I was simply an artist who loved street culture.”

“At first, I did not participate in the revolution through art. I saw my role primarily as a political activist. The drawings I created in support of the revolution were not my main weapon. I used my artistic talent more like a child throwing things back at someone who mocked him. I understood that art alone could not create enough impact against a dictatorship like this.”

—WooH



Thoe Htein, *Characteristics of Military Junta*,
2021, 24 x 30 inches, acrylic on canvas

“All our lives, we were never given the chance to openly discuss politics. We couldn’t clearly see or hear the truth because we were blinded by endless propaganda. And now, even today, people still try to stop others from seeing, hearing, or speaking about things that are forbidden.”

5.

HEROES & MARTYRS

Those resisting the *coup*, and the population more broadly, were quick to recognise and highlight the sacrifice and struggle of figures who stood in opposition to the *coup*. Some were prominent, national figures, others were recognised as representative of a particular group, for example Gen Z women.

The military regime's list of targets for arrest was wide-ranging: those it could immediately identify as being in opposition to its *coup*, those who were speaking out, and those who were mobilising protest and resistance, among others. Their actions and what they came to symbolise were captured by Myanmar's rebel artists. (It is important to underscore that targeting for arrest, detention, and torture by the Myanmar military regime also included the artists in this book).

Among the heroes and martyrs depicted by artists, several stand-out:

In the early hours of the February 2021 *coup*, the Myanmar military arrested leaders of the party that had won the national election in the preceding November: the National League for Democracy (NLD). The State Counsellor and leader of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi being the most prominent among them. Prominent hip-hop artist turned NLD politician, Phyo Zeya Thaw was another—he was arrested in November 2021, sentenced to death in January 2022, and executed by the Myanmar military on 23 July, 2022. Phyo Zeya Thaw was a close friend and

associate of a number of artists featured in this book. He remains an inspiration for them and countless others across the country. Both Aung San Suu Kyi and Phyo Zeya Thaw have been subject to repeat representation by artists since the February 2021 *coup*.

As seen in other chapters in this book, notable also is the artistic representation of the role of young women in resisting the *coup*, their role highlighted and celebrated in many of the works of rebel artists.

The photographer Annt Hmue Mahr captures the use of Aung San Suu Kyi's image on placards held by protestors demanding her release from prison.

Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday (19 June) in incarceration continues to be marked by artists. The illustrator Honey's piece *Suu's Birthday* marks her birthday in her first year in prison. The illustrator and cartoonist Harrywhohehe also depicts Aung San Suu Kyi's (The Lady) 80th birthday in prison with his piece *Happy 80th Birthday* in cartoon form, with her facing the rifles of the Myanmar military.

Harrywhohehe's piece *Nothing Can Stop Us When We Stand Together* celebrates Zeya Thaw, drawing on the subject's slogan that came to be representative of the pro-democratic resistance movement. He notes that this piece "...exists not as mourning, but as a reminder. The illustration is meant to uplift, to echo the words that once sparked a movement".

The graphic and digital artist Kuecool's piece *They killed our brother* marks the impact of Zeya Thaw on those who stand in opposition to military rule. In respect of his legacy, Kuecool notes: "...what they [the Myanmar military] don't know is that you can only kill people, not ideology."

Maung Phoe, as an artist who has also engaged with earlier pro-democracy movements in Myanmar, depicts Zeya Thaw (using his nickname) in his piece, *The Nitric Acid*. The painting shows Zeya Thaw in a defiant pose, with a fixed stare and raised, clenched fist. The piece (acrylic on canvas), Maung Phoe's first painting in ten years, was painted on the day of Zeya Thaw's execution by the Myanmar military in July 2022. The artist notes that his express intention was to memorialise Zeya Thaw as a hero.

Maung Phoe also depicts two generations of democracy activists and artists in the piece, *The Father and Daughter*: the father (active in the '88 generation's pro-democracy movement) and the daughter (active in using the power of art with her organisation, *A New Burma*, to inform the world about what is happening in Myanmar, subsequent to the 2021 coup) work together on a *Ba Ka Tha* flag (a flag of the student union movement).

As seen in other chapters, the representation of young women and their heroism in resisting the *coup* and standing-up for democracy is a repeat theme in a number of artists' work. Honey's piece depicting a young woman engaged in the three-fingered salute is illustrative; "we don't have weapons, we don't have guns, just only we have a voice." As is Kuecool's piece *When you go on a journey...* is an expression of women in solidarity, in their many roles, in Kuecool's words, the piece "honours the women who have walked the hard path."

**“For me, art is resistance in motion,
a dialogue between imagination and
reality, between those who dream
and those who survive.”**

—Jay





Annt Hmue Mahr, 22 February 2021 –
*Ye, Mon State, Public support for Daw
Aung San Suu Kyi reflects the widespread
desire for democracy following the
military coup* (extract from *Without
Address* series), photography



Harrywhohehe, *Nothing Can Stop Us When We Stand Together* - [Nothing can stop us when we stand together] (translation of in-art text), 26 March 2024, digital illustration

“This is a tribute to celebrate Zeya Thaw, a rapper, political figure, and a powerful voice of the revolution. It is meant to echo the words that once sparked movement, and to remind everyone that as long as people stand together, the spirit of resistance remains alive.”

Harrywhohehe, *Happy 80th Birthday*, 10 May 2025, digital illustration

“Daw Aung San Su Kyi remains detained since the 2021 *coup*, this is a gesture of remembrance rather than celebration—an acknowledgment that time, dignity, and public affection cannot be erased by imprisonment.”



Kuecool, *They killed our brother* [The revolutionary flames ignited by Ko Maung Kyaw continues burning] (translation of in-art text), 23 July 2022, digital illustration

Phyo Zeya Thaw (Ko Maung Kyaw)—hip hop artist turned NLD Parliamentarian—was arrested in November 2022, executed by the regime on 23 July 2022.

I'm not afraid at all.

If we're afraid, we people around
here would not hit the bang and
the pan.

We don't wanna go back to
the dark age.

We lost our voice and we had democracy
only for ten years.

We don't have weapons,
we don't have guns.

Just only we have voice.



Honey, *Little Courage*, 9 April 2021,
digital illustration



Honey, *Suu's Birthday*, 19 June 2021,
digital illustration

“The Army doesn’t understand the power of the youth, youth voices, youth involvement”

—Annt Hmue Mahr



Kuecool, *When you go on a journey that doesn’t guarantee you’ll return as planned, may the bonds of life forgive*, 2021-2024, digital illustration

“The title is a quote from the nurse, Thinzar Hein, who was killed by the Junta. The painting honors the women who have walked the hard path in the PDFs, journalists, women from ethnic minorities, pen fighters, women displaced by war, a mother who delivers food to prison and her daughter in prison, and women who bombed themselves rather than be captured by the Military Junta.”



Two Kewlin PDF female comrades
disarmed a mine while being inspected by
the Military and fought until the end



Maung Phoe, နွေဦးသူရဲကောင်း
(*The Nitric Acid*) (Spring Hero), 2022,
40 x 50 cm, acrylic on canvas



Maung Phoe, မျိုးဆက်အမွေ
(Generational inheritance),
The father and daughter, 30 x 42 cm,
ballpoint pen on paper

6.

EXIT

The pieces in this chapter reflect experiences of being displaced from home, from country. They are also portraits of humanity, articulating feelings of hope and aspiration for reversing military rule and of seeing justice and peace prevail. Questions about and fears for the future are equally evident. This complex mix of experiences and emotions make for a particular poignancy in the works of Myanmar's rebel artists.

The illustrator 42 (Phoe Htoo)'s digital piece from 2023 *How Soon is Now?* shows a public school bus with a text trail noting (in Burmese) that "the revolution shall prevail"—a pre-independence rallying cry that has resonated through the decades from British colonial rule to resistance to the February 2021 *coup*.

In representing hope, the illustrator Jason Todd's piece *The Victory* is a scene he describes as "...representing the moment everyone is waiting for, the day we finally return home, reunite with our loved ones, and feel at peace again." He describes it as a vision for when people are "...free to live, love and be happy together again." The style of this piece contrasts with his other works depicting darker themes. Similarly, his piece *Home* showing two displaced children drawing together in a tent, imagining their one day returning home is imbued with optimism. The artist noted that the piece is one intended to capture hope; that even in the face of uncertainty, children will hold onto an ideal of home and a better future.

A key, repeat theme for the rebel artist is an exit from repression. The graphic and digital artist Kuecool's piece *Welcome Defectors* again uses the symbolism of flowers in depicting Myanmar military soldiers leaving (*defecting*) an ominous landscape to be embraced by a brighter future.

The painter Lu's abstract pieces speak to survival, in their own words: "...reflecting an inner world caught between hope and the loss of hope...a time when living itself feels like an act of resistance."

S.Artventure's digital illustration *Starts with One* reflects a similar theme: how the change hoped for can start when one person (a defector from the military) decides to act. S.Artventure's digital illustration from 2025 *Justice Will Always Prevail* presents an illustration that also holds onto hope while acknowledging the very difficult times. She notes: "The melted candles below the man represent lives lost and tragedy in the pursuit of justice. The light at the top suggests that justice may be delayed but not extinguished."

The actor Daung has created pieces in dark tones, both pieces presented here, respectively with a woman and child, are in motion, walking and carrying. Daung's rendering of a displaced woman (back turned, baby strapped to her back, holding a plate of rice) is in a style that brings out the traditional colours of her clothes. The face contours of the baby are only identifiable by the *thanaka* (a paste made from ground bark, traditionally

used in Myanmar) applied. Daung's piece of the displaced child (again in black with traces of *thanaka*) denotes the same against a backdrop of precarity. Noted by Daung as resulting from his seeing displaced people, and where, having seen the faces of children, these became "deeply rooted in my memory."

HABO's photographs of displacement, depicting everyday domestic scenes of the displaced, *A Mom in Displacement* and *Time-worn in a border town* have a washed-out tone that is sympathetic to their subjects while intimating at what has been lost. Both photos are from the photographer's series – *My Surreal World* – which provides a lens on the more quotidian aspects of displacement that can be too often over-looked.

The illustrator and cartoonist Harrywhohehe covers similar themes but with an upbeat focus in his UNHCR award winning digital piece *Hope Away From Home*. A bright presentation of a boy walking through a landscape of debris toward *home* is set out in pastel colours. In the interview, he notes that home can exist as an idea as well a place.

Kyar Pauk's piece *Untitled* (from the artist's safe house in Mae Sot) presents a complex painting in black lines with red, reminiscent, in part, of a technical drawing. The piece was created when the artist had escaped Myanmar into the Thai border town of Mae Sot, holed-up in a safehouse where it was hoped he would be out of the reach of the Myanmar military.

The painter Nay Ni Hlaing Kha's 2025 piece, *Siblings* (in acrylic), is, like others' work, inspired by experiences of seeing displaced families first-hand. The siblings represented in this piece, the younger being carried and clearly exhausted, were witnessed by Nay Ni Hlaing Kha running away from conflict that was taking place in Karen State in the southeast of Myanmar.

The painter Maung Phoe's 2024 piece *A Peaceful Earth* sits in contrast to his work *A World in Conflict*. Its vibrant colours and depictions of children happy and dancing provide a glimpse of what could be, characterising the hopes and aspirations of the people of Myanmar.

“Now I am physically in Paris, but I no longer have even half the creative energy I had in Burma. I don’t feel inspired anymore. Here, I became nobody. My career is almost dead.”

—Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer

“Sometimes I aim for the people who don’t care about the revolution, to remind. Sometimes, my aim is to encourage the people in the revolution. Sometimes, I want to show our revolution.”

—Jason Todd

“I want to support and help the revolution and I want to create art that supports the revolution.”

—Nay Ni Hlaing Kha



42 (Phoe Htoo), *How Soon is Now?*
[The Revolution Shall Prevail]
(translation of in-art text),
17 June 2023, digital illustration

“Since the *coup* began, freedom of speech has been seriously restricted so people cannot express their feelings freely. But artists represent freedom. The role of the artist is thus to be the voice for the people. [...] Their work contribute to our collective memory and serve to record time.”

—Jason Todd

Jason Todd, *The Victory*,
18 May 2023,
digital illustration

“This work is not about the present, but about hope, a vision of what victory could look like when people are free to live, love, and be happy together again.”



Jason Todd, *Home*,
17 September 2023,
digital illustration

“This illustration shows children living in a refugee camp, imagining the home they hope to return to one day. They create a picture of safety, warmth, and normal life that has been taken away from them.”





Kuecool, *Welcome Defectors*,
May 2022, digital illustration

“We welcome every soldier who is trying
to escape from the pit of evil.”



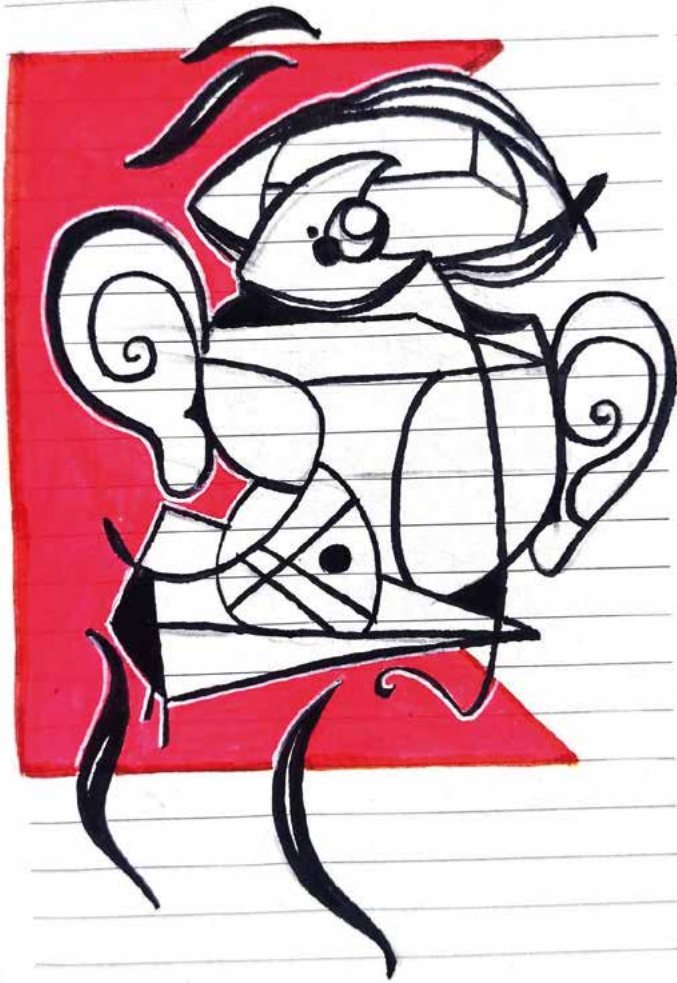
**"I don't like war, but I do feel I need
to continue to represent life's struggles.
I don't want to know about war,
but I feel I have to."**

—Kuecool



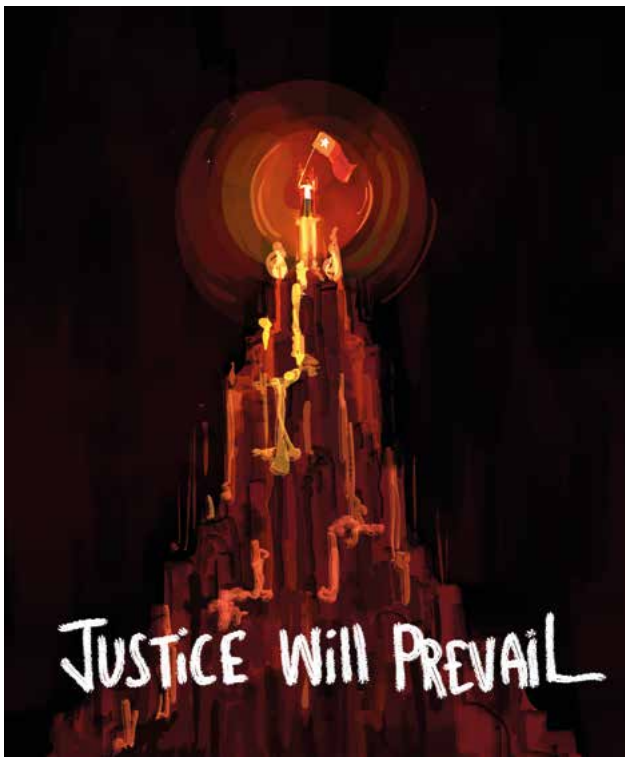
Lu, ကိုယ်ရေး ကောက်ကြောင်း (Biography),
21 May 2024, 11.69 x 16.53 inch, acrylic on watercolour paper

“My work traces a personal outline shaped by desire, belief, memory, and resistance. The fragmented forms reflect a life constantly questioning what is needed, what is lost, and what is left behind. Between intimacy and politics, faith and the body, the drawing holds the tension of living inside a burning country while still trying to remain human.”



Lu, ကောက်ရိုးမီးဖြစ်ဖြစ် ဖွဲမီးဖြစ်ဖြစ် လောင်တာပဲ မစ္စတာဂေါ့ဒ်
(Whether Straw Fires or Bush Fires, They Burn, Mr. God),
8 August 2025, acrylic and watercolour marker on watercolour paper

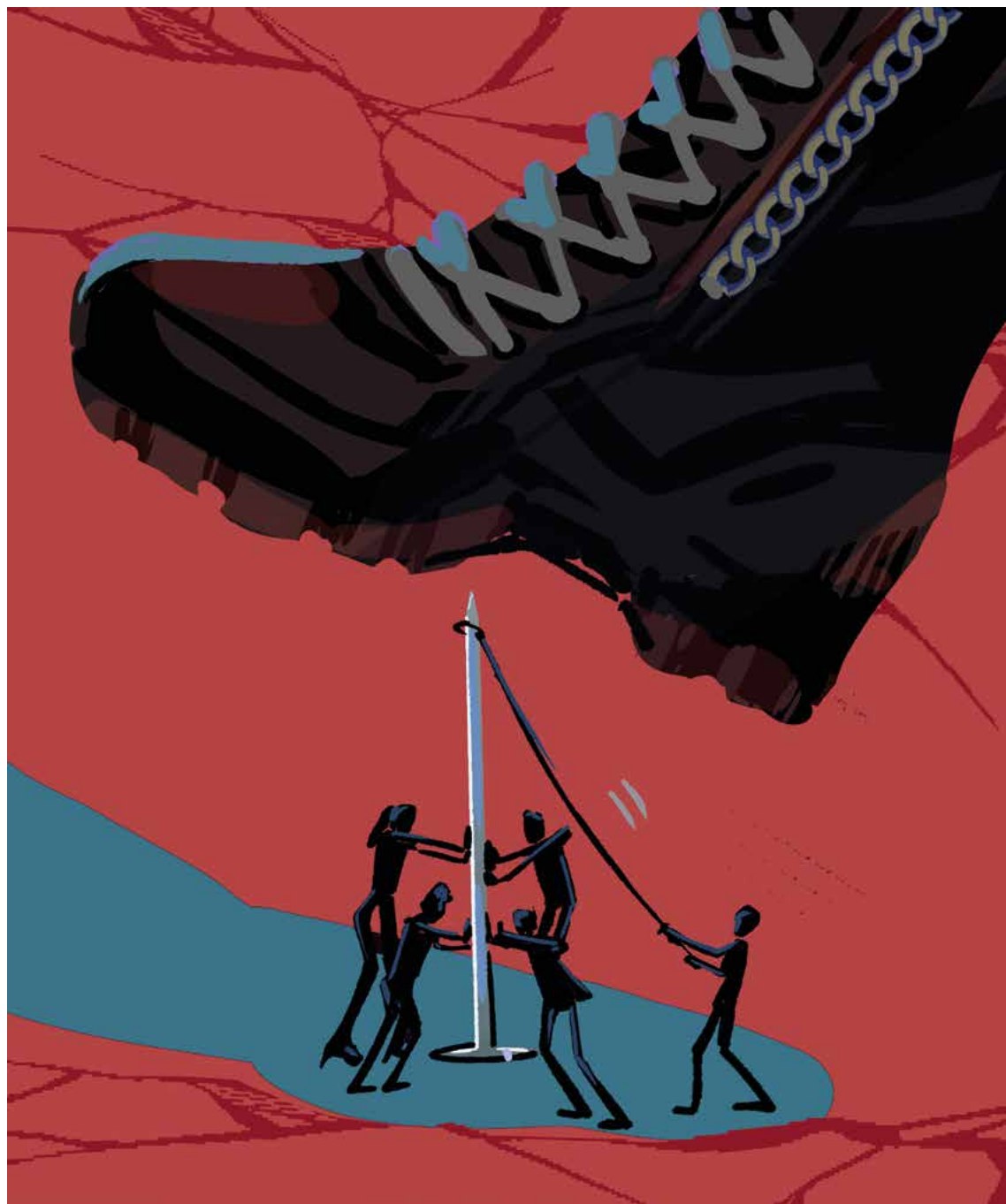
“This illustration captures a state of mind that is simply trying to survive. The body does not feel whole—its parts are broken apart and out of place (...) It stands as a record of a time when living itself feels like an act of resistance.”



S.Artventure, *Justice will always Prevail*,
2025, digital painting, print on paper

S.Artventure, *Starts with One*, 2025,
digital painting, print on paper

“This work explores how change begins with a single act of courage. The towering boot symbolizes oppressive power, while the small figures lifting the pole represent individuals choosing to resist despite overwhelming odds. Change doesn’t begin with power or numbers, it begins when one person decides to act (...) The needle will destroy the boot.”





Daung, ကလေးများ(၄) (Children (4)), 2023,
60 x 80cm, acrylic on canvas

Daung, ကလေးများ(၂) (Children (2)), 2024,
60 x 80 cm, acrylic on canvas

“It was extremely difficult to stay calm when
all I saw online were people being tortured
by police and shot in the head.”





HABO, 14 August 2025—*Time-worn in a Border Town*, photography

“This world is beautiful. I know that. But there is still suffering. I watched my friends die. I watched my friends suffer.”

All pictures provided by HABO are from their *My Surreal World* series (extract), January 2024-ongoing, photography

HABO, 17 August 2025—*A Mom in Displacement*, photography



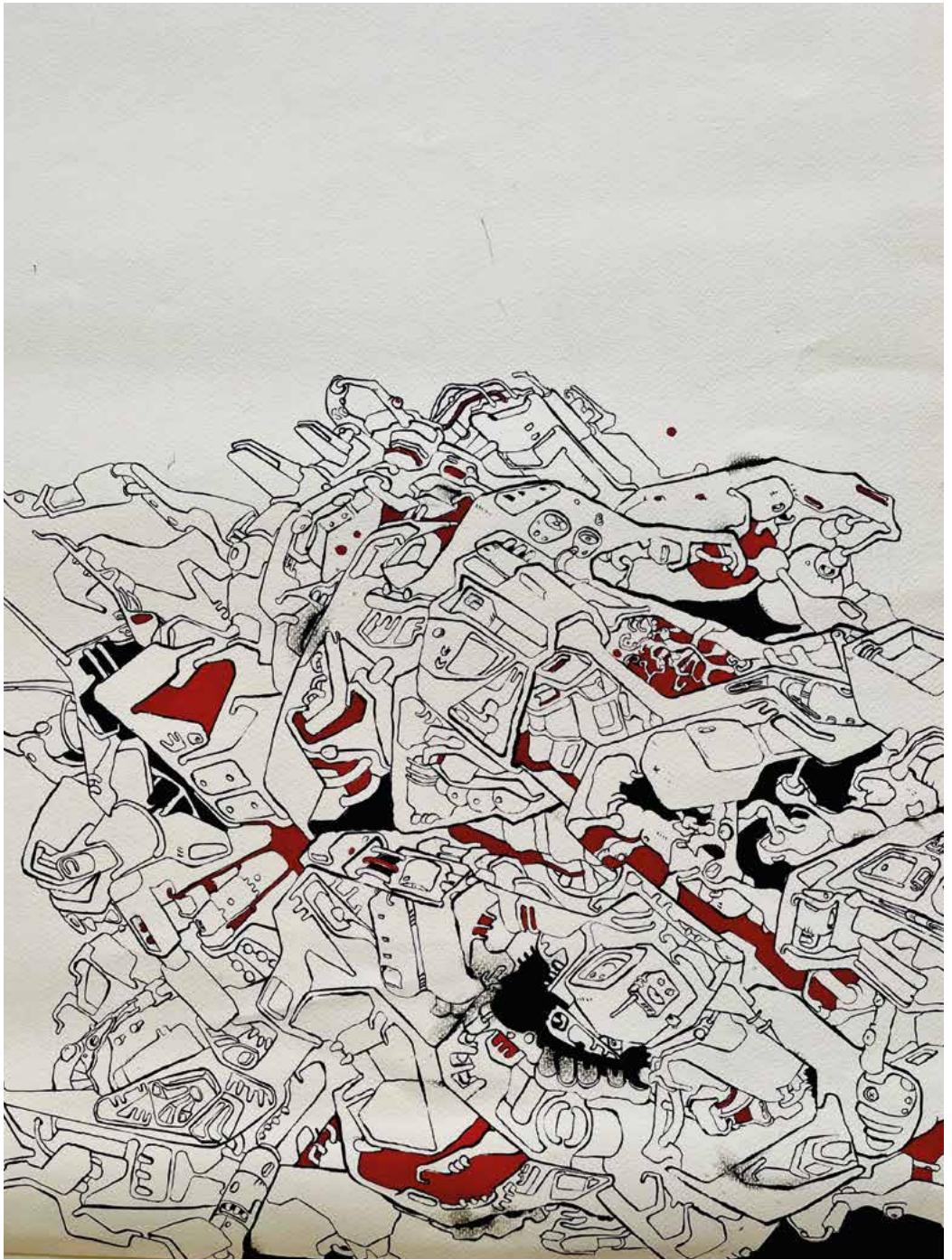


Harrywhohehe, *Hope Away From Home*,
30 September 2023, digital illustration

“[Home] focuses on hope and imagination, showing how even in displacement and uncertainty, children still hold onto the idea of home and a future where they can belong again.”

“An art piece can speak a lot of words without any words on it like ‘who made this’ and ‘why’. It’s like recording someone’s mind. It speaks for the history. That’s why it’s necessary. It records how people change in their way of thinking.”

—Kyar Pauk



Kyar Pauk, *Untitled*, June 2021, brushpen and ink on paper, painted from the artist's safe house in Mae Sot

"I developed this style during the *coup*. I was tremendously under stress especially when I was hiding. To cope with the stress, I was drawing and painting in that way... mind is totally blank."





S.Artventure, *Youths in Exile*,
2023, digital illustration

“Young people are forced to leave their country to avoid enlistment and an uncertain, dangerous future. Families are left behind not because they want to separate, but because the system leaves them no other option.”

S.Artventure, *Leaving, not by choice*, 2023, digital illustration

“This family was forced into displacement after military violence and mass destruction. Genocide and bombing turned everyday life into an immediate threat, leaving no option but to flee. Refugees are created by deliberate acts, not accidents.”





Nay Ni Hlaing Kha, *Siblings*, 2025,
60 x 50 cm, acrylic on canvas

“Theres this Japanese movie I took inspiration from. It relates to what I saw while I was in Karen state—this sibling running away from the conflict. I painted this in 2025 when I was exiled in Mae Sot.”



Maung Phoe, ငြိမ်းချမ်းသောကမ္ဘာမြေ (A Peaceful Earth),
120 x 120 cm, acrylic on canvas

22 artists

42 (Phoe Htoo)

—illustrator

I chose illustration as a way to respond to lived experience and close observation. Working primarily through editorial illustration, my practice reflects stories of loss, resilience, and everyday life shaped by conflict in Myanmar.

Annt Hmue Mahr

—photographer

Annt Hmue Mahr is a Mon Burmese photographer and visual storyteller documenting themes of displacement, memory, identity, and resilience in Myanmar and beyond.

Aung Kyaw Htet

—photographer

Aung Kyaw Htet is a Myanmar documentary photographer documenting the human impact of conflict, displacement, and resistance across the country. His work focuses on the lives of civilians and communities affected by war, capturing both violence and everyday resilience. Through photography, he aims to preserve memory, bear witness, and bring distant realities closer to the world.

Daung

—actor

My name is Daung. I am an actor by profession. I sing as a passion, and I turn to painting and poetry as a refuge for my soul. Through them, I can freely express the emotions that live within me.

After all, aren't poetry and art among the most beautiful languages for speaking from the heart?

HABo

—photographer

HABo (b. 1998, Myanmar) is a photographer currently based in Chiang Mai. Her work is rooted in intense feelings where words often fall short. She seeks to capture not just what's seen, but what's carried, faded, or hidden.

Harrywhohehe

—illustrator and cartoonist

Multidisciplinary artist. Illustrator, comic creator, and animator. Telling stories of resistance, freedom, and humanity through bold visuals and uncompromising creativity.

Honey

—illustrator

Hi! My name is Honey. I draw pretty things. I also draw things that make people uncomfortable. Through art, activism, and storytelling, I challenge injustice, support women's rights, and amplify voices affected by the Myanmar military *coup*.

Hugo

—illustrator

Born in November 1990, I possessed a childhood passion for drawing. Today, I actively contribute my illustrations to revolutionary fundraising campaigns and educational channels, leveraging my art as a tool to continue the fight against the military dictatorship.

Jason Todd

—illustrator

I dream of becoming a famous mangaka and sharing my stories with the world. I adapt to many different art styles to express emotion and imagination. Even though I cannot truly see colors, I believe I can still feel them through art.

Jay

—character illustrator & tattoo artist

24 year old tattooist and visual illustrator based in Chiang Mai, creating bold, expressive art through ink and design.

Kuecool

—illustrator

Kuecool discovered art through the city's streets, developing her own distinctive visual language across graffiti, painting, and digital media. Her work is deeply influenced by women's identities, experiences, and resilience, often exploring themes of feminism, community and cultural expression.

Since the 2021 military *coup*, she has used art as a tool of resistance, amplifying stories of courage, survival, collective experiences into visual narratives of resilience and memory.

Kyar Pauk

—musician, cartoonist and painter

Kyar Pauk is a Burmese multidisciplinary artist, music producer, and writer currently based in France. His mind has a mind of its own. A tramp, a stray, Aware, but asleep.

Lu

—painter

My name is Lu, born in Yangon, Myanmar. I draw because I believe that within everything we are trying to construct, there exists deconstructivism.

Maung Phoe

—painter

I don't always identify as a professional artist. When I paint, rather than prioritise my personal interests, I enjoy more to create art that is understood by others.

Mayco Naing

—photographer

Mayco Naing is an artist, photographer, and curator from Myanmar, now based in Marseille. Working across conceptual and documentary practices, she explores fear, identity, resistance, exile, and political struggle, with a focus on the lived experiences and resilience of people under military oppression.

Myo Thaw aka 666Fotorhymer

—photographer

Biography -Born in 1987 in Yangon, Myanmar. Lives in Paris, France.
Discipline: Contemporary Street Photography

Nay Ni Hlaing Kha

—painter

Born in the upper region of the Ayeyarwady River in Myanmar, the artist graduated with a specialization in painting. Alongside painting, they have continuously worked in filmmaking as an ongoing creative practice. Their works explore visual storytelling through both canvas and moving images.

Novem Htoo

—singer

Novem Htoo is a Myanmar metal vocalist, artist, and democracy & human rights activist using music to speak out against the military oppression and injustices in Myanmar. Since the 2021 *coup*, his work has showcased the struggles and resilience of Myanmar youth and artists. Despite his musical career, he is also working 4-5 different jobs to survive in exile.

Sai ■■■

—photographer

Sai ■■■ is a Shan artist, curator, and cofounder of the Myanmar Peace Museum, working at the intersection of memory, justice, and evidence. His practice uses photography, installation, testimony, and archival materials to confront military violence, political imprisonment, and authoritarian repression. Through his work, he transforms personal and collective grief into evidence, public memory, and solidarity.

S.Artventure

—illustrator

S.Artventure is a Myanmar digital artist, working across visual art and digital media. Her work mainly explores resistance, displacement, and life under political repression. Through symbolism, she documents grief, courage, and hope in Myanmar's struggle for freedom.

Thoe Htein

—visual artist

Thoe Htein is a visual artist originally from Yangon and now based in Paris. He believes in Freedom of expression and Rebellion. He keeps his faith in Wisdom and Love.

Wooh

—illustrator

I was born in Yangon. I spent over twenty years in Burma as an artist. Then I emigrated to France. My whole life has been a mix of being a political activist and an artist. Throughout my life, I have absorbed every little moment that has moved me. I have felt it. And I have captured it in art.

In the research and development for this book, a small team worked in support of Kyar Pauk, the Creative Coordinator, and Artist Shelter. This team wishes to remain anonymous. Their support and inputs in interviewing artists, drafting, editing, collating, and curating made this book possible.

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