



REMEMBERING NCS

NYEIN CHAN SU
(1973 - 2020)

Nyein Chan Su and His Arts: Theatrical, Towering and Timeless

In the theatre of a true master, drama is elevated into luxury. The late artist, Nyein Chan Su's works belong to the theatricality of this degree. The figures in his "Toy Soldiers" (2015) sculpture series are cast in bronze, toy-sized, and menacingly armed. Do it overly and dramatic subject like this associated with the atrocity of Myanmar's military would sometimes run the risk of traumatizing the viewers visually; do it ineptly, and the effect would not go beyond a set of cute figurines. Here Nyein Chan Su theatrically rendered the composition in the dehumanized aesthetic of metal – which neatly accentuates not the strength of men with destructive weapons, but their lifelessness – in which monstrous mousetrap, gigantic scissor or bulldozer positioned at the center of the soldiers displays a robust metaphor that men can be weaponized by weapons, thereby becoming mere toys for the powers that be.

When this high-end tableau is projected onto canvas, the lifelessness leaks from the immeasurable innocent blood that has long been spilled for decades by these Toy Soldiers; the atmosphere in these paintings is completely polluted from the perpetual evaporation of the (unstoppable) bloodshed; the soldiers, all representing one face, one person, one body, are breathing the sheer red, their demonic eyes dead, their hands pointing nasty guns at you. Unlike in the sculpture edition, Nyein Chan Su seemed to have determined not to discount an ounce of shock factor in these paintings, inspired by his hands-on experience in the 1988 uprising, which led to one of the savage massacres in the politics of Myanmar. Ironically, this camp portrayal of inhumanity in visceral red also looks so ineffable and haunting for viewers to avert their eyes.

After all, Nyein Chan Su is also a performance and installation artist “who dared to perform street art when no one else would” in Myanmar. He knew very well how to set his arts apart from others, how best to showcase them and win viewers’ attention, and even where to position his viewers in relation to his canvas. Though he will be remembered for his great brush works of blue, red, and yellow, it is actually the latter – his setting up of the emotional distance by maximizing and minimizing subject matters and his characteristic knack for perspectives – that defines Nyein Chan Su’s outstanding artistic identity among his various attributes.

The illusory nearness juxtaposed with the immense depth in his dreamscape and landscape paintings can lock viewers up in a series of surreal mini-seconds that seem to go on and on. Most will simply see their minimalistic allure, but there is actually more to them than meets the eye: a mysterious mental distance Nyein Chan Su had created between these paintings and viewers. No matter where the viewers stand from them in reality, up close or a few feet away, they will always give the viewers the panoramic sensation of looking from the balcony seat or farther back in a theatre, at a spectacular scenic design, whose magnificence is maximized usually by the presence of two otherworldly figures rendered in small sketches. In the floodlight of luminous colors, they appear to be travelers heading towards the heavenly horizon, and watching them feels like following them.

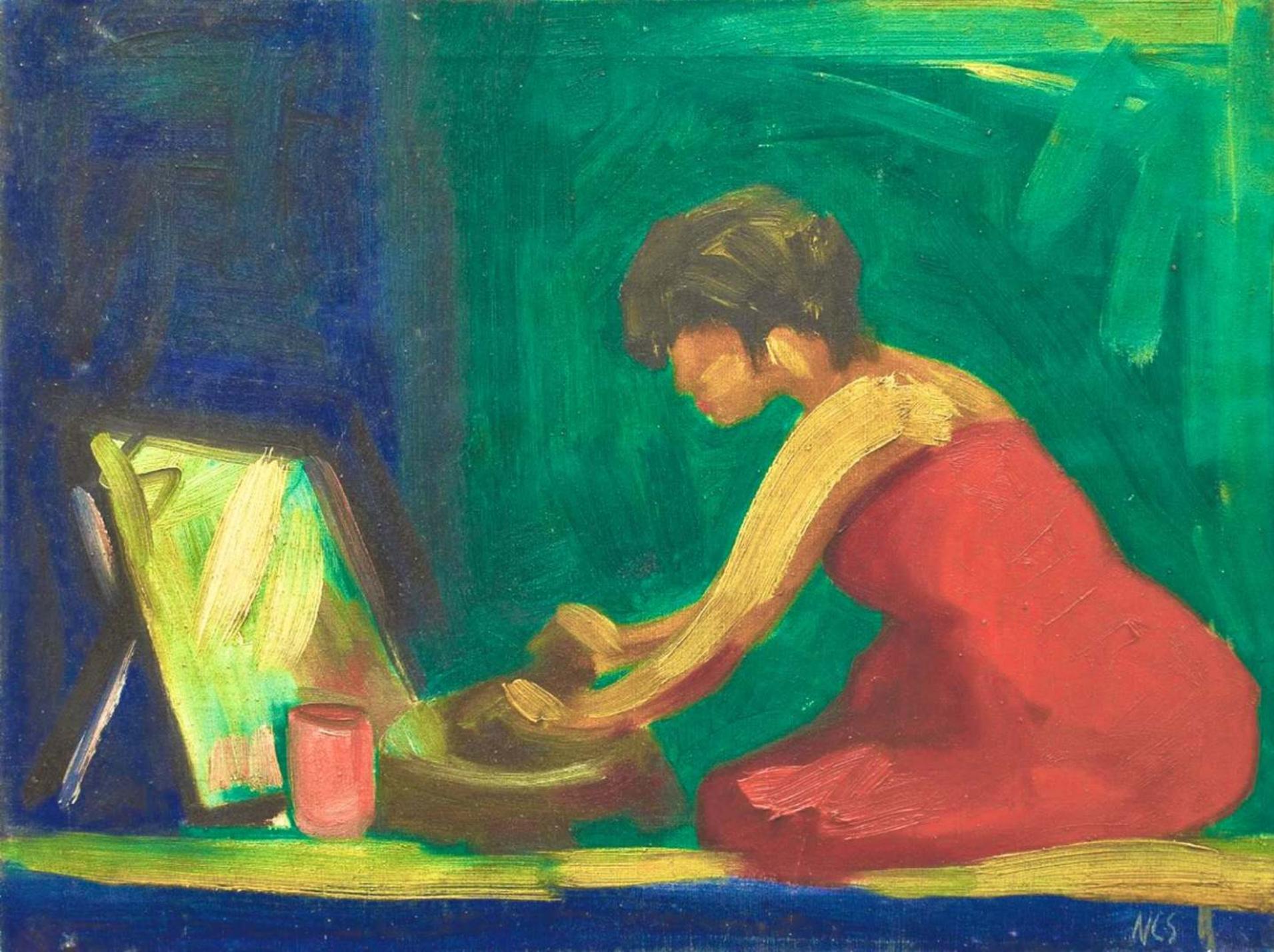
Nyein Chan Su also achieved the same grandeur in “Flowers”, the Gulliver-esque vision of insignificant ant-sized men and giant pot holding giant red flowers. One of the three men wields a very long pole, apparently attempting to pluck the flowers while the two others are seemingly helping him. Unlike the blood-red in pieces mentioned above, the red in this painting looks benign and accommodating. Nevertheless, Nyein Chan Su’s theatrical playfulness on perspectives and contrasting sizes imparts edges on the red and promotes the fortitude of the flowers.

In the political consciousness of Myanmar, it is difficult to tell apart the color red and resistance. The more an artist knows the secrets of red, the more profoundly he or she can work viewers up to this associated sensation of conflict and tension in their works – if this is intended. Nyein Chan Su seemed to understand this intimately. His Gold in The Red series is a testament to this. The overpowering red surrounding or representing pagodas in most of these paintings could be interpreted, alongside accompanying intense colors, as the disturbing stains from the embattled history of Myanmar. However, a look back at the title itself could reflect otherwise: the red Nyein Chan Su had found here has gold in it. Thus it reminds us, other than its negative connotations, the various virtues of red: perseverance, courage, humanity, and dignity.

Maybe, the red itself here hints at the evil power in the hands of destructive dictators. Nevertheless, Nyein Chan Su seemed to encourage us to remember that there is also gold in the red in the world: we should never forget every hero who fights against the dark forces with all their might. This gives us hope. At the time when history comes full circle and Myanmar has been caught in a recurring nightmare with another military coup since February 2021, all we need is motivation, however small, like this that we can find in Gold in The Red. In terms of theatrical luxury, it can be seen here in the sheer confidence of the artist that faint can move mountains – including his own faith in the spirit of the unwavering fight for the better world.

Nyein Chan Su departed this life two years ago. No longer is he with us, but his arts are immortal and timeless and stay with us to remind, whenever we need it, that life is so grand and arts can affirm that.

Written by Do: Na (alias)



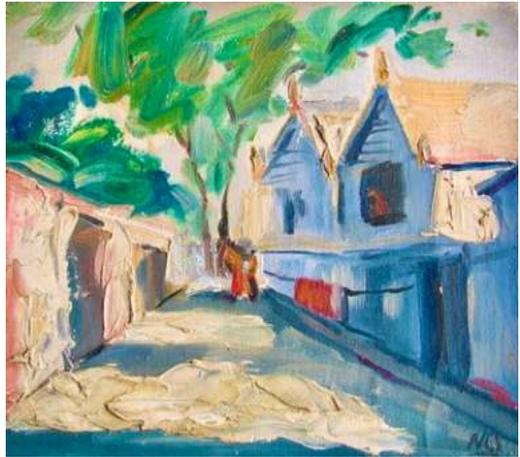
*Early Works
of
NCS*

Untitled

1994

Acrylic on Canvas

35 x 45 cm



Untitled

1994

Acrylic on Canvas

33 x 35 cm

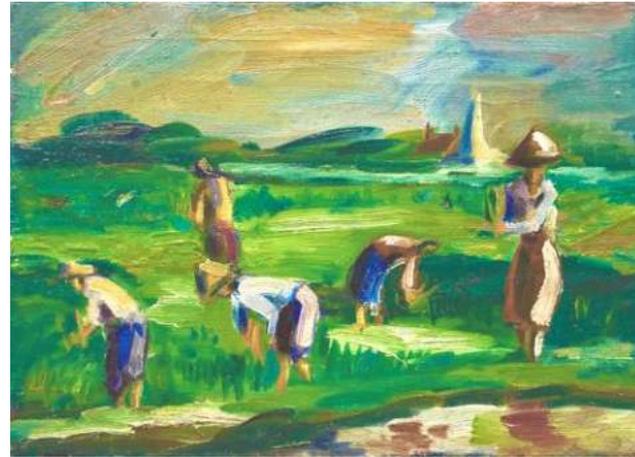


Untitled

1994

Acrylic on Canvas

25 x 30 cm



Untitled

1995

Acrylic on Canvas

33 x 45 cm



Still-life

1996

Acrylic on Canvas

35 x 45 cm



Flowers

1996

Acrylic on Canvas

92 x 122 cm

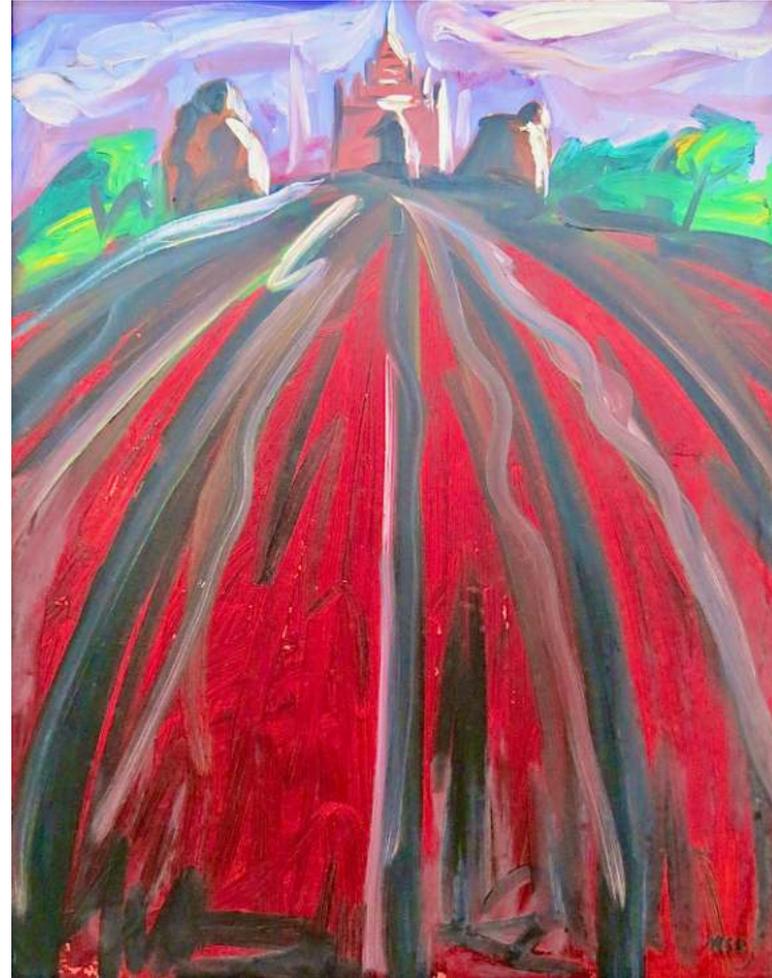


Untitled

1997

Acrylic on Canvas

122 x 92 cm



Road to Bagan

1999

Acrylic on Canvas

122 x 92 cm



Guitarist

1997

Acrylic on Canvas

92 x 122 cm



Nude

1999

Acrylic on Canvas

92 x 122 cm

Pa-O Festival
2000
Acrylic on Canvas
184 x 222
(92 x 222 cm X 2)





NCS captured the Burmese men playing the Ozi drums at a Pa'O festival with his signature broad brush strokes, with the green contrasting with blues and reds, mixed into the canvas to mimic the sounds and the movements of the performance. During this typical 'Pa-O' festival, hot-air balloons are released day and night and compete for attractiveness and height attained. During the day, animal figures are flown, and at night, there are fireworks and bamboo and gunpowder rockets launched, and lighted balloons are sent up as high as possible. Everywhere scenes of dance and music celebrate these special festivities. (This work is probably the biggest painting done by NCS)





Two Guys
2001
Acrylic on Canvas
122 x 92 cm



Ancient Pa'O
2003
Acrylic on Canvas
92 x 122 cm

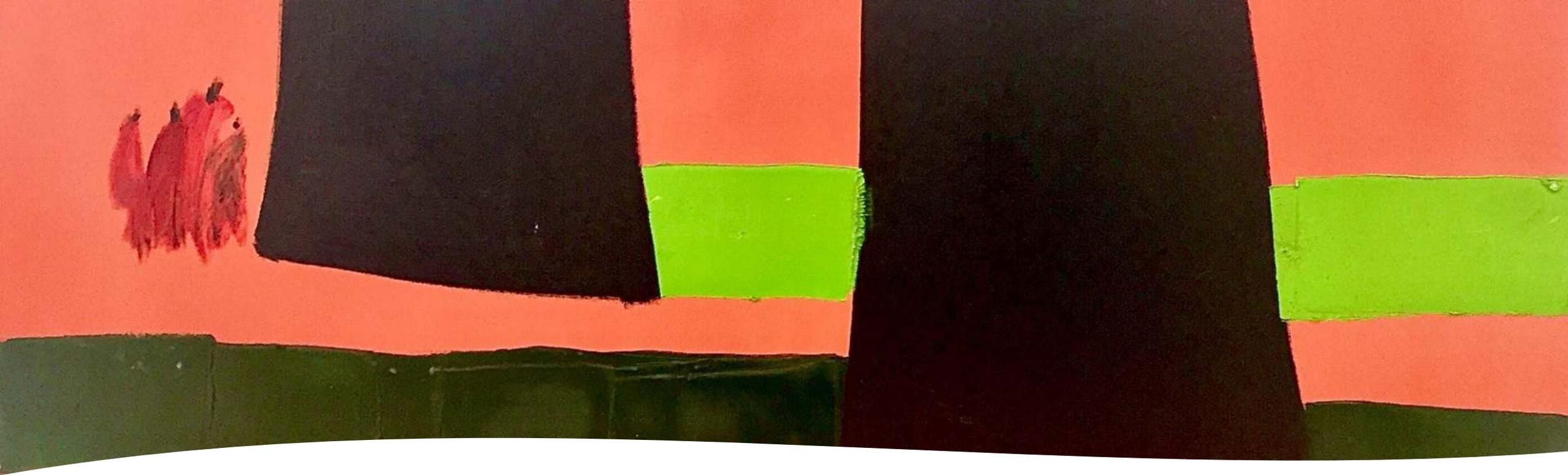


1988

2003

Acrylic on Canvas

92 x 122 cm



NCS is famous for his contemporary abstract expressionism, refining his style with different colours and brushes. He was so successful that art lovers could identify his paintings with his signature broad brush strokes, with contrasting blues, reds and yellows mixed into the canvas. NCS "Landscape" and "Dreamscape" series are probably one of his best-known works. Using a hard palette knife and soft paintbrush, he sweeps broad strokes of vibrant colours across a singularly hued background. Ever present are several brushstrokes that depict individuals, perhaps in conversation. This painting style is also utilized in his Nats series and his early works in the 1990s and was further adapted over the years until the late 2010s, which was inspired by his deep fascination with animist worship in Myanmar, which delves into his subconscious.



Modern Myanmar, 2001, Acrylic & Mixed Media on Canvas, 40 x 60 cm



Landscape 5
2003
Acrylic on Canvas
62 x 76 cm



Landscape 42
2003
Acrylic on Canvas
62 x 76 cm

*Monks in Mandalay
Monastery
2003
Acrylic on Canvas
92 x 122 cm*





Nat Series

2005

Acrylic on Canvas

122 x 92 cm



Nat Series

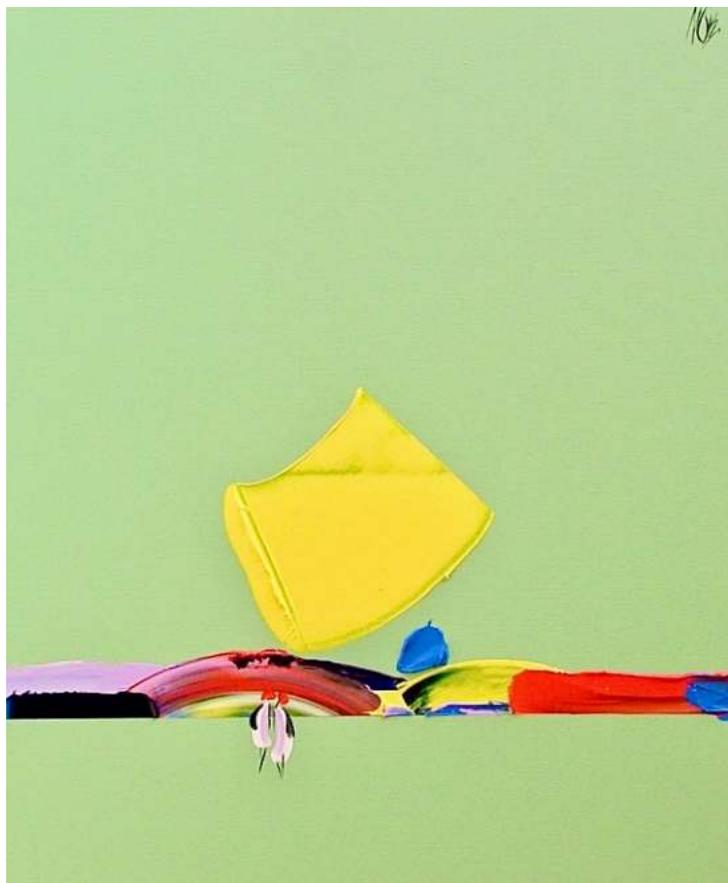
2009

Acrylic on Canvas

122 x 122 cm



Six Blind Men & Elephant, 2010, Acrylic on Canvas, 152 x 122 cm



Deep Dreamscape
2013
Acrylic on Canvas
76 x 62 cm



Dreamscape & Trees
2014
Acrylic on Canvas
60 x 90 cm



In Nyein Chan Su (NCS) later years, his cutting edge practice is deeply rooted in his Burmese identity and culture, with strong narratives questioning current social and political issues. NCS commented that the development of the arts scene in Myanmar remains limited and laments that the “essence of arts” is not understood by the authorities. He said, “Some of my new creations are still prohibited, and I always question myself when I can freely create pure art.”

In 2014, NCS exhibited a dozen works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, titled “Gold in the Red”. This series of works were undertaken with layers of bold strokes of the brush and tell of Myanmar past tainted with red, a past that has bled into the present. The people of Myanmar have a long history with red, but red is also linked with more violent aspects and sombre consequences of the nation’s history. Myanmar history has multiple layers; this series “Gold In the Red” refers to a transformative period that changes over time, from era to era. The (new) Myanmar is a country sparkling with a golden future based on the blood, red colour from the past - revolution, bloodshed and bravery. They are referencing in part the military junta that ruled for decades and yielded absolute power.



Red 5

2014

Acrylic on Canvas

62 x 76 cm



Red 16

2014

Acrylic on Canvas

122 x 152 cm



Red 17

2014

Acrylic on Canvas

150 x 200 cm

NCS witnessed the pro-democracy uprising in Yangon in 1988 that made quite an impression on him. In an earlier interview, NCS mentioned that when student protests spread through the country like wildfire and the schools had to be closed, he knew he wanted to be an artist. In 2015, he did a series of mixed media canvases and twelve sculptures made of cast bronzes on a teakwood base, titled "Toy Soldiers" to remember that time in 1988. Images of the 1988 uprising were used on the embellished red canvas and sculpture made with cast toy soldiers set on a teakwood stage, mimicking that time's events. These works reminiscence people are running everywhere in fear because of the sounds of shooting from the rifles and explosions. People were protesting, trying to put up banners and pictures of guns and red roses on the walls amidst the chaos and the killings. Many people were apprehended and brutally killed by the army during the uprising.



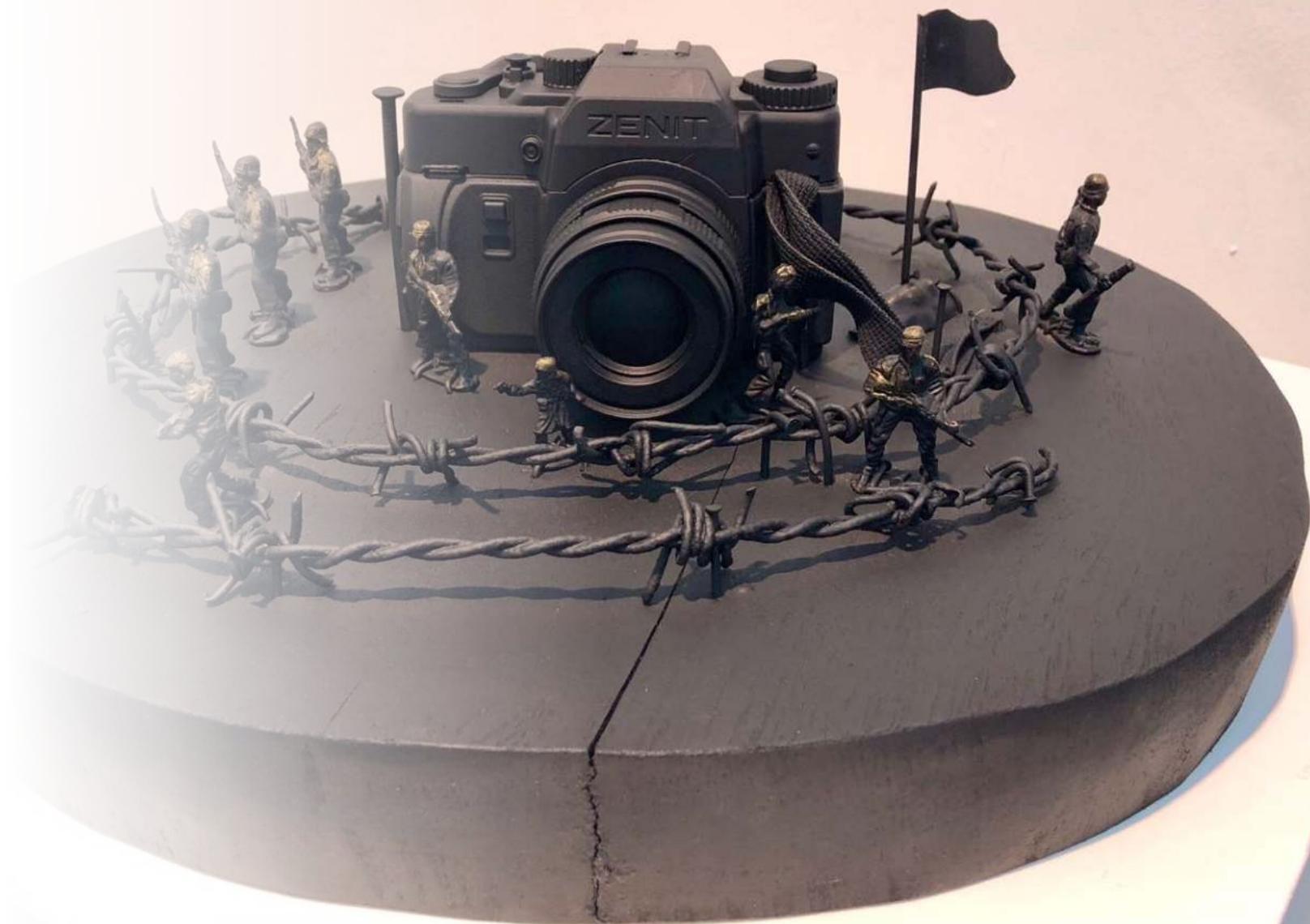


Toy Soldiers, 2015, Acrylic & Print on Canvas, 120 x 150 cm



*Bulldozer
(Toy Soldiers Series)
2014
Bronze & Teakwood Block
D. 50 cm*

*Camera
(Toy Soldiers Series)
2014
Bronze & Teakwood Block
D. 50 cm*





Clever
(Toy Soldiers Series)
2014
Bronze & Teakwood Block
D. 38 cm



The first instinctive inspiration to freely create his works dominates NCS, who still cannot reveal his thoughts even under the civilian and military government. In 2018, he painted half a dozen canvases, with his iconic sweeps of broad strokes of yellow (gold), red, white and black. These few canvases were to represent the flag of Myanmar and depicts the military presence in the civilian government then. He replaces the flag's green with masses of black in protest - how the military is detrimental to the country's peace, tranquillity and lush greenery, which the colour green represents. NCS named these works briefly "Black" and he later produced few similar works with masses of blue and red instead.

Myanmar has gone through with the monarchy, colonialism, the failed socialist government, military junta, student demonstrations, the suppression of Buddhist monks, and the collision civilian and military government. Many people in Myanmar are tired, especially after the recent military coup - a sense of deja vu. In his own words some time ago, NCS says: "Changes are only on the surface, in other words - there is no change, no improvement, no feeling of security in our minds, souls and emotions. In reality, there still is no equality, justice. We continue to be plagued by "red tape" bureaucracy as we survive on faint hopes for a brighter future."



Untitled
2018
Acrylic on Canvas
92 x 122 cm



Untitled
2018
Acrylic on Canvas
92 x 122 cm



Untitled

2019

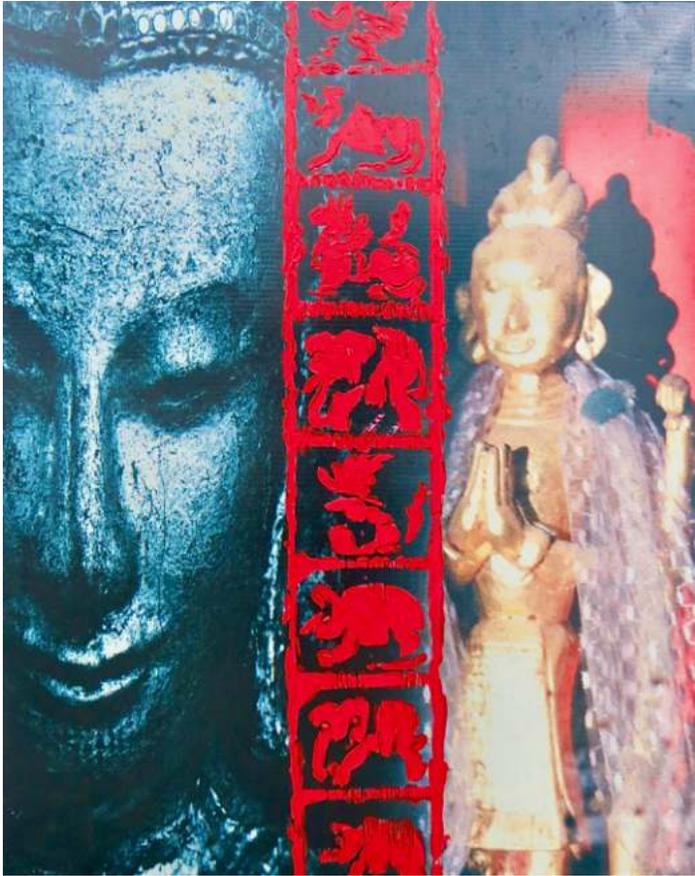
Acrylic on Canvas

136 x 180 cm

Nyein Chan Su (NCS) departed this life on February 24, 2020. He was 47 years old at that time. There is no knowing for me whether it was or was not his wish to leave this world forever. He was always a strong-willed, determined man a go-getter who would try to get what he wanted and accomplish what his heart set for. His ambitions and aspirations might be differing from those of others; but one can be certain that his heart was always teeming with them. However, even those closest to him could not predict sometimes what he truly wanted and envisioned. Not only in creating art, from family to social matters, he went his way to get what he wanted regardless of disapproval from other people. At the same time, he would not do something he did not want to no matter how strongly he was persuaded.

I became friends with NCS in late 1990. Our close friendship which initiated in the classroom of first year students at the State School of Fine Art (Yangon) extended till his death in 2020. He was a slim, stooped guy with curly hair who always cracked jokes among friends in the classroom. NCS was quite focused and highly sensitive. He was also remembered as being free-spirited, funny, sociable, outgoing and generous. NCS was very much into contemporary art since his days as an art student, and began to be fond of alcohol at that time. Now looking back on all this, I saw that NCS lived rather a fictional life, full of dramatic twists and turns. However, in whatever directions his life was swayed by the circumstances of his time, he always remained an artist. In some years, he had to endure depression, disappointment and devastation. But he never allowed them to harm his arts. In fact, these challenging episodes even inspired him to create several great works of art. Actually, the social setting and the atmosphere of the time in which he grew up were very stifling and closed off.

Some of his friends are disappointed that NCS had a short lifetime for his brilliant artistic talent. I don't think so. Art is not centred on quantity, but based on quality. In his not-so-long life, he could leave us an invaluable, yet sufficient legacy of his outstanding arts – which attest that NCS is a true artist. NCS works are diverse and eclectic in a wide range of medium: oil and acrylic canvases, watercolours on paper, profound installation works and emotive performances, simple, yet sublime sculptures, digital and video art. I would say NCS created some of the works with great happiness whereas he did others with despair. However, he never betrayed art and was very dutiful as an artist. I believe his arts are the eternal creation of his brief life.



Buddha

2004

Acrylic & Print on Vinyl

76 x 61 cm



Buddha

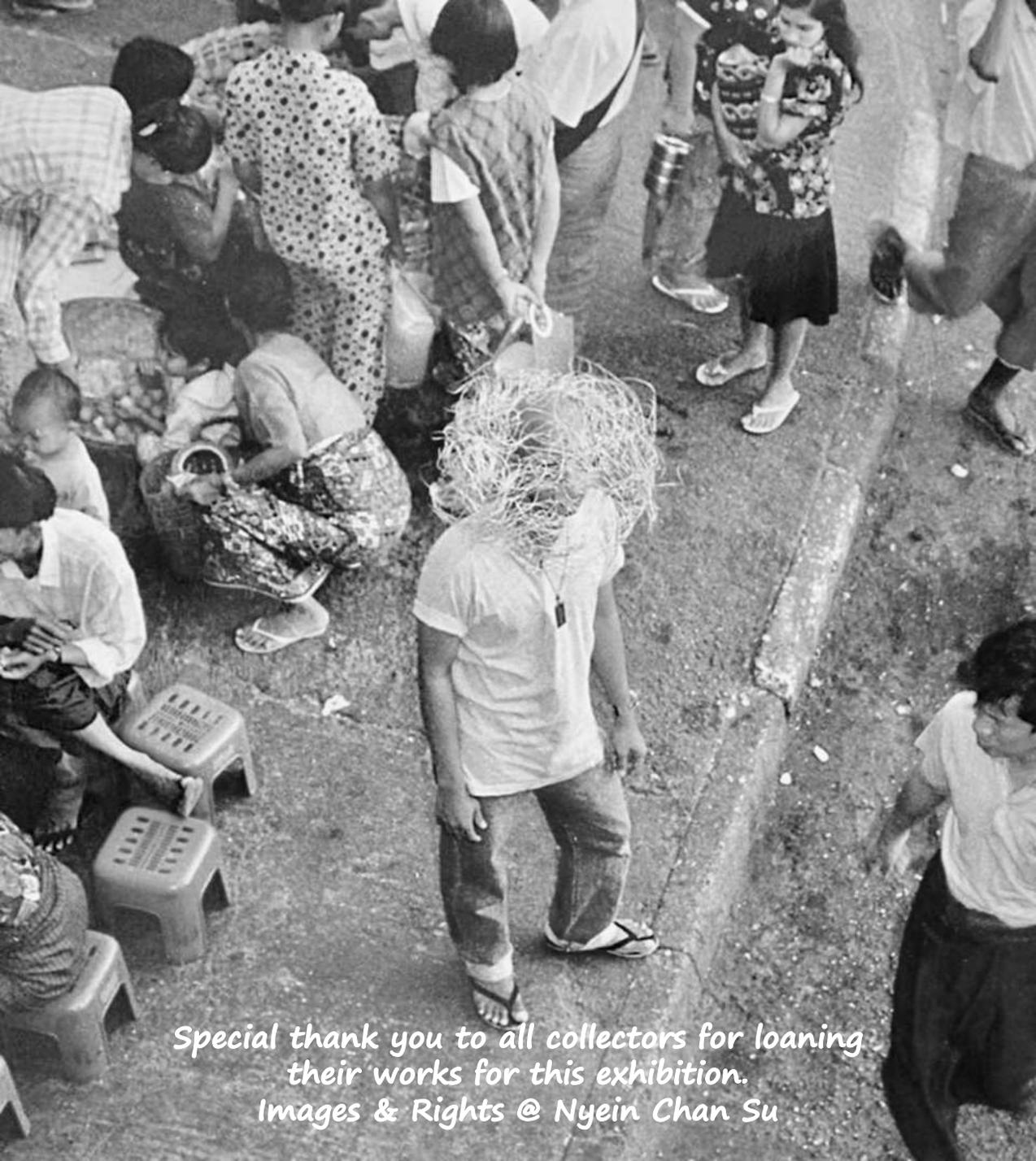
2004

Acrylic & Print on Vinyl

61 x 76 cm

Nyein Chan Su, mostly known as NCS, belongs to a new generation of avant-garde Burmese artists. His works are eclectic and versatile in style and his early works were inspired by Nats; spirits worshipped in Burma alongside Buddhism. NCS was born in 1973 in Rangoon and studied at the State School of Fine Arts from 1994. NCS produced many different works of art, from paintings and photos to performances and installations. He created modern paintings in Myanmar when there were very few painters and dared to perform street art when no one else would. Although NCS created many performances in his younger days, he stuck to painting as his main practice. NCS is famous for his contemporary abstract expressionism, refining his style with different colours and brushes. He was so successful that art lovers could identify his paintings with his signature broad brush strokes, with contrasting blues, reds and yellows mixed into the canvas. NCS "Dreamscape" series is probably one of his best-known works. Using a hard palette knife and soft paintbrush, he sweeps broad strokes of vibrant colours across a singularly hued background. Ever present are two brushstrokes that depict two individuals, perhaps in conversation. This painting style is also utilized in his Nats series and his early works in the 1990s, which was inspired by his deep fascination with animist worship in Myanmar, which delves into his subconscious. In his later years, his cutting edge practise is deeply rooted in his Burmese identity and culture, with strong narratives questioning current social and political issues, which he deeply cares about. In his own words, he says: "Changes are only on the surface, in other words – there is no change, no improvement, no feeling of security in our minds, souls and emotions. In reality, there still is no equality, justice. We continue to be plagued by "red tape" bureaucracy as we survive on faint hopes for a brighter future." NCS is one of the founders of Studio Square Gallery in Yangon and today he is regarded as one of the most significant artists in the contemporary Myanmar art scene. Well established both in Myanmar and internationally, NCS has participated in numerous shows inside Myanmar as well as in Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand. He was invited to participate in the 1999 Fukuoka Art Triennale in Japan, which launched his international art career. NCS was nominated for the prestigious APB Signature Art Prize 2011 organized by the Singapore Art Museum. His artworks are in the permanent collections of the Singapore Art Museum, Fukuoka Art Museum as well as in private collections in Europe and Asia. Nyein Chan Su passed away 24 February 2020.

Terry Lee 2020



*Special thank you to all collectors for loaning
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