

INTERNATIONAL
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Art smuggled out of prison paints the silence of Myanmar

By Jane Perlez

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LONDON: A color photograph of Htein Lin, an artist from Myanmar, taken on the day of his release from prison, shows him stooped and wan, looking easily 20 years older than his real age. His face is scrawny, and in one of his thin hands he holds a white plastic bag filled with the remnants of more than six years in a cell.

On his face is a jubilant grin. Behind the smile lies a well-kept, high-wire secret.

Htein Lin, a political prisoner charged with having planned opposition activities, managed to smuggle out from prison more than 300 paintings and 1,000 illustrations on paper. Now, three years later, his artwork offers a rare vision of prison life in Myanmar, one of the most authoritarian and closed nations in the world.



The most grisly of Htein Lin's works, titled "Six Fingers," shows a line of thin men with missing fingers and toes. These were the men whose families were too poor to provide the \$50 to \$100 bribes that could stop prisoners from being sent to hard labor camps in malarial swamps and stone quarries.

"The only way for the poorer prisoners to escape the camps was to have an 'accident,' " said Htein Lin, now 41 and a resident of London. This usually involved asking another prisoner to use a hoe or a spade from the prison garden to cut off two or three fingers and then to show the injuries to doctors.

Other works, many of them painted on the white sarongs that serve as prison uniforms in Myanmar, show gruesome depictions of hunger and sickness. The works are on display for the first time at Asia House, a cultural center in central London.

That Htein Lin's collection of works is on public display in London pinpoints the long connection between Myanmar and Britain, the colonial power from the 1880s until 1948, when the country was still known as Burma. Htein Lin does not specifically mention George Orwell in his exhibition, but the legacy of Orwell, the British writer who worked as a colonial police officer in Burma and used his experiences there to fashion the theme of the rottenness of Big Brother rule, underlies much of the artist's work.

For Htein Lin, seven months on death row, where he was sent as punishment for having given a political speech to inmates, turned out to be some of his most productive time.

"It was a good chance to paint because the prison officers didn't come very often; they were too scared," he said.

The death row prisoners, though tough and not the least bit knowledgeable about art, wanted to help him. "They wanted to participate in something," Htein Lin said. "They thought: 'Before our death, we can help this artist.' "

So the men on death row willingly gave him the sarongs that were their only form of dress and that served as Htein Lin's canvases.

The prisoners would then be left naked because sarongs were only issued every six months. "They would sit there naked but they were very difficult to punish," Htein Lin said. Eventually the prison guards would give in and issue new sarongs, ensuring a supply of canvases for the clandestine artist.

Htein Lin ended up in prison after a colleague in an opposition group, unbeknownst to the artist, sent a letter in 1998 to another colleague mentioning Htein Lin as a possible recruit. The secret police intercepted the letter and came to Htein Lin's house in the capital, Yangon, formerly Rangoon, and hauled him off blindfolded. A military tribunal sentenced him to seven years in prison. He was released

slightly early as part of a general amnesty in 2004.

The artist had been a supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democracy leader who has been under house arrest for much of the past 17 years. "The main problem when I was arrested was that I answered their questions," Htein Lin acknowledged. "I said: 'Aung San Suu Kyi loves the country like you.' "

Once in jail, life became a perpetual game of finding materials and befriending prison guards who would safely deliver his works to friends outside. He became close to a medical orderly, who was also a poet and happy to supply him with the syringes that became his substitutes for paint brushes.

With the little bit of money that his family brought him on visits, he bribed friendly prison guards to bring him oil paint. Sometimes they would buy him acrylic paint, sometimes house paint.

One of his more ingenious techniques was to use as a print plate the plasticized white back of a photo of Buddha that he was allowed to keep in his cell. He would draw on the white coated surface and then put a cloth on top to transfer the image.

There were near scrapes. After a prisoner tattled on Htein Lin, guards came marching into his cell hunting for his art. He had a painting on a sarong drying on his cell wall at the time, he said, and held his breath as the guards lifted a corner of the sarong to peer behind it, and then put it back in place. They had no idea that the wet cloth was what they were looking for.

A fellow artist from Yangon, Chaw Ei Thein, 38, is visiting London for the three months of Htein Lin's show. She has created performance art in Japan and Taiwan and her paintings have been shown in Thailand.

The two met in law school in Yangon in the 1990s, dropped plans to be lawyers and together created performance art that pushed the junta's limits on freedom of expression. Several years ago, they devised a performance in which they went into a busy Yangon outdoor market and sold small items - candy, ribbons - for tiny amounts of money. The performance was a commentary on the inflated prices under the current government.

Unexpectedly, they were arrested. But other, more serious, offenders suspected of planting bombs in the capital were being held at the same police station.

Chaw Ei Thein said that the police confessed that they could not cope with two cases at once. So the police told Htein Lin and Chaw Ei Thein to go free, but not before asking the two artists - in one of the Orwellian gestures that seem to permeate life in Myanmar - to help draw sketches of the bomb suspects.

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