

By **LOW SHI PING** in Yangon
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Adding color to Yangon's palette

Myanmar's largest city is home to a thriving contemporary art scene driven by dedicated creatives, gallery owners

What is the art scene in Myanmar like? Ask this to anyone from outside the country and the response will likely be a blank look.

The reality, though, is that the landscape is more colorful than a Pantone swatch, and much of the scene is concentrated in the country's largest city and former capital, Yangon.

Shedding light on this is Mya Myitzu, a Myanmar sculpture artist, who is also one of its leading interior designers, heading up the firm M.ID.

Mya took time off from her busy schedule to show some of her favorite galleries.

"I've always said Yangon is an insider's city," she explained, while walking along the busy streets toward the first gallery. "It is best experienced with a local. If you visit on your own, you tend not to see the real side of the city."

That same advice is especially relevant to the art scene, since many of the art spaces are not located at street level and can easily be missed.

First stop is Pansodan Gallery, on the first floor of a shophouse on the street of the same name. It is slightly challenging to find the entrance to stairs that lead up to it, but do so and be rewarded by a natural light-filled space where every inch is covered with art.

Displayed on the walls and standing in rows along the floor are paintings by budding Myanmar artists and the occasional older master.

Mya gestured to a piece by abstract painter Soe Naing, which she said is one of her favorites.

The painting's resemblance to an unidentifiable animal is attributed to his studying of zoology in school. Some have even likened his paintings to those by renowned masters Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky.

A short car ride uptown is Nawa-day Tharlar Gallery, on Yaw Min Gyi Road, located on the third floor of a building. But this is no ordinary gallery — it is helmed by Pyay Way, who was formerly a monk for 20 years, from the age of 9 to 29.

He opened the gallery in 2012, not long after he left monkhood, and he admits he "(runs) the gallery like a monastery," because he knows no other way.

"My vision is for the space to be for all artists, including poets, writers and musicians. This is my way of giving them encouragement," he said.

"I just want to be a helper. I don't make the artists I represent sign a contract with me. There are zero expectations. If something they propose makes sense, I will do it within my limit. I operate on mutual trust."

When Mya dropped by, a solo exhibition by Sandar Khaing was taking place in the main gallery. Entitled *Powerful Women Readers*, the paintings depict generously sized women reading government-run newspapers in the nude, against vibrant, colorful backgrounds.



Powerful Women Readers, a solo exhibition by Myanmar artist Sandar Khaing, depicts generously sized women reading government-run newspapers in the nude, against vibrant, colorful backgrounds. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



From left: Pansodan Gallery, on the first floor of a shophouse, has works by budding Myanmar artists and the occasional older master; Mya Myitzu (right), a sculpture artist, and art gallery owner Pyay Way typify the lively Myanmar art scene.

Sandar Khaing is just one of 81 primarily local artists Pyay Way represents. Visitors can admire works by others in the gallery's small attic, which can be accessed through a steep and narrow flight of stairs.

Artworks in the attic space are tightly packed like sardines in a can. Pyay Way said he chooses artists to represent by looking at the quality of their work and understanding what their aspirations are.

"I assess their reputation, experience, whether the pieces are visually strong. The artists need to think for the art community, society and

country. It is not just about making money," he said.

The following evening, Mya attended a party at the Pansuriya restaurant, organized to thank the participants of the Pyinsa Rasa Art Space project at The Secretariat, which was the administrative seat of British Burma.

Pyinsa Rasa is "an arts collective dedicated to local arts promotion and development" in Yangon. In 2017, the five-member organization mooted the idea to The Secretariat Conservation Group to create an art-related program in the historic building.

Following several months of nego-

tiations, approval was given and the Secretariat opened its doors to the public from February to July 2018.

Throughout the six months, the organizers collaborated with different institutions and artists to showcase the various facets of Yangon's art scene.

In March, it staged the first Yangon Art Fair at The Secretariat, in collaboration with 20 of the most influential galleries in the city. Over three days, more than 500 visitors dropped by to appreciate the art.

Nathalie Johnston is the founder of Myanm/art, one of the five members

of the Pyinsa Rasa collective. Myanm/art is located above Pansuriya.

Mya said the American is increasingly becoming a force to be reckoned with in the promotion of contemporary art in Myanmar — something that is apparent once you start chatting with her.

"At Myanm/art, I stage solo exhibitions by Myanmar artists every six weeks," Johnston said of the 2-year-old gallery.

"I have no mandate about the subject matter. The priority is freedom of expression. They have no pressure at all, and can do what they want to. It is an artist-led space." Housed inside a heritage building, the gallery has developed a reputation for representation artists who are more experimental and less literal.

BART is an up-and-coming artist who has had several shows in the gallery. In an interview with website Arts Equator, he said Myanm/art is "a much-needed space for the avant-garde kind (of art)".

"There are only a handful of places that accept the young people in the creative circle ... and Myanm/art is one of the pillars," he said.

Prior to opening the gallery, Johnston did a thesis on contemporary Myanmar performance art and its origins, at the Sotheby's Institute of Art in Singapore in 2009.

She recalled that when she first brought up the topic, her professor replied: "There is no contemporary art in Myanmar."

Almost 10 years on, Johnston acknowledges that challenges still abound. "Yangon has a rich art scene that is more developed than (in other parts of) Southeast Asia," she said.

"Unfortunately, there is no international platform for the artists to gain exposure. They are not included in regional exhibitions and auctions because of (recent issues faced by the government)," Johnston feels there is a need for the international community to engage with Myanmar.

Next month, a cultural exchange project will see 10 Chinese artists traveling to Myanmar to visit Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan. Titled *Myanmar: Through the Dragon's Brush*, the project co-sponsored by *China Daily* aims to boost ties between the two countries through art, and will hold an exhibition in Yangon and publish a book of paintings produced during the trip.

Johnston's desire to further boost the community is one reason why she offered to edit the previously censored book *Myanmar Contemporary Art I* by author Aung Min. The book was originally published in Burmese in October 2008.

In 2017, it was translated into English, and together with Mrat Lunn Htwann, Johnston worked on it and helped to get it published.

At almost 400 pages, it is the first and most comprehensive guide to Myanmar's contemporary art scene, detailing the life stories of some of the most important artists from 1960 to 1990.

"It is important to continue to educate the general public, give exposure and promote the artists, and have dialogue," Johnston said.