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Rainbow Marriage
Under military rule for half a century, Myanmar was substantially isolated from the world, including international exchanges and developments that took place in neighbouring countries. Not only the economy, but also education and culture fell far behind as a result of stunted growth through sanctions and censorship. Major universities remained closed for decades. At least two generations of young people grew up without a robust and varied educational system. In those years, Myanmar quickly lost touch with international standards and models. Few had the opportunity to study or work abroad. As a consequence, the lack of innovative and trained professionals in almost all fields is enormous.

With such dire circumstances, the country races today to catch up with the present and prepare for the future. Artistic and intellectual exchange and the integration of Myanmar into essential international debates and discourses is critical for a new chapter to commence.

Given the urgency, I heartily accepted the offer of a South Asia oriented, visual-arts initiative to dedicate one volume to Myanmar’s contemporary voice and claim, through the medium of photography. After having focused on regions spanning Nepal to Sri Lanka; Iran to Pakistan, it was only logical to include Myanmar as part of a subcontinental conglomerate.

I am encouraged to think that the outcome offers insight into emerging media-driven initiatives here, an expanding compendium of contemporary approaches which underscores Myanmar’s global prospects and contribution to a growing collective memory.
From an outsider’s perspective, I feel that Myanmar’s photography history has been overshadowed by the exploits of colonial practitioners. British, German and even Italian-born photographers such as Felice Beato seem to find a prominent place in ethnographic museums and books on South Asian visual history. But there is an unwritten story of local photographers that needs to find some resonance too, as they took up the medium soon after the coming of European practitioners.

The Myanmar Photo Archive (MPA) is a physical archive of such traces that has been amassed in the recent past. The physical material ranges from studio portraiture, private photo albums, official photography, company records, science photography, documentary images as well as studio accessories, slides and negatives. MPA aims to research the historical context of the materials, the earliest of which dates back to 1890 and the most recent of which are from the present.

Some of the first Burmese cameramen served as apprentices to European photographers. By the late 19th century, photography was flourishing with Burmese, Indian and Chinese-run studios here, well up to the 1940s. The following years of war and occupation forced many out of the country. Once Burma gained Independence in 1948, professional portrait studios were in very high demand and a wide spectrum of society from the 1950s and 60s found themselves captured by the lens. In 1962, General Ne Win staged a coup, banning the political opposition, suspending the constitution, and introducing a “Burmese way of socialism.” The change of government and political agenda forced foreigners once again out of the country, and hence affected what was captured or exposed of the lives of those who remained within, given there were restrictions on photography at the time.

The images presented in this short essay give a glimpse into the practice of professional photographers in the last 90 years. At a time when social media has taken so much of recorded history onto a global platform, perhaps the little-known pasts of the image in Myanmar will resonate with the visual tropes prevalent in South Asia, if not the wider world. The images selected convey a sense of the changing popular tastes and conventions of the urban communities in Myanmar, focusing on portraiture and what may be considered, art photography, seen in the use of multiple exposure and hand-colour tinting.
This image was taken during the Shinbyu (Novitiation) ceremony, a significant coming of age ritual in the life of young Buddhist men in Myanmar, which marks the beginning of their religious education. The boys ask the monastery abbot’s permission to become novices, after which their heads are shaved and their fine clothes are exchanged for austere robes worn by monks. This image was taken in the 1930s – a tumultuous time in Myanmar, coloured by early nationalist movements and riots. Buddhism was a mainstay through it all, being the face of the Burmese majority and therefore its cultural identity.

In the 1930s and 40s, the first tinted photographs started to appear in Burma. Montages and double exposures became specializations of some photographers. This image from the early 30s is made of two negatives merged in the darkroom. During British rule, sports like cricket, football, tennis and boxing were introduced to the country and clubs were opened but were usually only accessible to the elite in society. A hand-coloured image from the 50s.
After the early colonial photo studios had disappeared or had been taken over by local photographers, a large number of Chinese-run studios opened. Many of the names and logos were in Chinese and their clientele would be Chinese speakers. During General Ne Win’s rule (1962–1988), the ban on Chinese-language schools caused the decline in Mandarin speaking. The note on the image reads: “For classmate Hong. Where there is a will, there is a way. From classmate Huang.”

Left: This note says, “My Beloved Nyo (a.k.a) Mal Ohnmar. I hope you will always remember the ‘ar pone’ snack from Aung San Amusement playground, whenever you see this photo. With much love, from Shwe Lin to Shwe Su.”

The photograph above from 1977 was taken at Central Photo Studio, Yangon, which has been closed for some time. A Burmese wedding can be religious or secular, extravagant or simple. Chinese families in Myanmar might prefer less conservative weddings, adopting fashionable Western-style vestiges, and a dinner for friends, family and colleagues; together with the auspicious “double happiness” inscribed in Chinese characters, wishing the couple good fortune. The 1970s were tense times for the Chinese community, and the less attention an event invited, the better.
Pages from a private photo album with images from the 1960s.
In the last decade, South Asia has witnessed a deluge in exploratory works being produced by students, who have been mentored within many forms of visual/artistic disciplines. The scope of student work – in image-making and writing – has also been exponentially broadened through internships, workshops and training exercises as well as the personal drive of a generation who took to the camera without the availability of taught courses. All of these combined efforts has led to a rich and varied reading of contemporary photography – no longer restricted to the single image, but demands consideration of the form images take and discussions that need to be debated about future practices.

"Photography is no longer restricted to the form images take and discussions that need to be debated about future practices."

The role of the university, criticism and pedagogy as a whole are therefore allied to this issue, reflecting on existing and pedagogy as a whole are therefore allied to this issue, reflecting on existing and new work, collaborations and even by investigating the unexplored archives of modern practitioners in order to learn from their trials and tests. In the forthcoming issue, we would like to enlarge the canvas of what student work in the present accounts for; where it comes from, and even, who constitutes a student(?) – by considering processes and evolving styles across generations; also bearing in mind how existing departments are chartering new approaches to the medium as an inter-disciplinary asset. The last date for submission for this issue is June 30th, 2017. POSTPONS is a research initiative initiated by him.

FORTHCOMING: The Student Issue – Experimentation

For the last year, PDG has been working on a long-term project on the Hmong militias who fought for the USA against the Vietnamese in the late 70s. His recent photo book deals with modernization in China. Currently, he is working on Myanmar Photo Archive, a project to archive private photographic records of Myanmar, which was internedial.

The project "Hunger" won the Young Talent Programme awards, Gala exhibition at IDH Art Gallery, Singapore. PHILIP BILLINGER is a freelance and visual storyteller whose work has been published in the world’s leading media and has been shortlisted for the World Press Photo awards. He has worked on various projects across South Asia, working within the IUCS Congress where he served as President for the IUCS and had the opportunity to intervene in the ongoing genocide by the Laotian government against the local resistance in the "Thai-Lao" (or the (Austrian) peace talks in 2010. His work has been the subject of a documentary film, "The Rainbow Project" which he directed and co-produced.

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Supported by the French Embassy, French Institute of India.

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Thailand. He returned to London where he worked with the Burmese communities of northern Thailand. He has won various international awards including the Sony World Photography Award two years in a row. Rubén is currently finishing his first photography book with the Grammy winning musician, Residents of Calle 13.

THAI KERN is an artist who was born in Yangon, Shan State. He has held five solo exhibitions and participated in more than 60 group exhibitions in Myanmar. He has shown his work in Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States of America.

YADANAR WIN is a performance, video and installation artist living in Yangon. She joined New Zero Art Space as a collaborative member in 2009, where she remained for 5 years as an organizer, participant, and volunteer. It was during these years that Yadaran began to experiment with performance, video and installation art. Yadaran also works as an arts and cultural manager at the Goethe Institute, Yangon.

MATT GRACE is an English photographer and founder of Myanmar Deitta who is based in Yangon. Matt first came to Asia and founded Myanmar Deitta who is published in June 2013. Her joint poetry book with Cho Pain Naung titled Parallel Lines (I.T.B.M.U). His flash fiction project has been published in numerous international publications, including National Geographic Magazine and TIME. He has won various international awards including the Sony World Photography Award two years in a row. Rubén is currently finishing his first photography book with the Grammy winning musician, Residents of Calle 13.

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