

‘A Show of Hands’ for Burma’s Former Political Prisoners

By EMILY MALINOWSKI / THE IRRAWADDY | Tuesday, January 21, 2014 |

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Artist Htein Lin sits with a few of his plaster of Paris hand molds, each representing a different former political prisoner's story. (Photo: Sai Zaw / The Irrawaddy)

RANGOON — As President Thein Sein releases and pardons political prisoners, hoping to put the issue in Burma's past, Rangoon-based artist Htein Lin is working to ensure that the prisoners' sacrifices are not forgotten.

In a project entitled "A Show of Hands," he will display plaster of Paris molds of 1,000 former political prisoners' hands, each paired with a video about the individual's personal journey through prison.

Since September, Htein Lin has collected 206 molds, which each took him about 20 minutes to shape and dry. He made the molds in his own Rangoon home and at political events, during which the molding process became a public performance.

"The political prisoner issue is extremely important during this time of transition in Burma," he says.

Htein Lin was a prisoner from 1998 to 2004, after the government intercepted a letter an old friend had written to him and accused him of suspicious political activity. He says "A Show of Hands" has allowed him to come back into contact with many of the people he met while in prison.

"It's kind of a reunion," he says. "Also it is a kind of a retreat for ex-prisoners to their time in prison. I am learning how these people survived."

The hand molds are visual representations of the prisoners' personal stories. One of them belongs to Nitar May, who worked for the British Embassy in Rangoon before she was imprisoned. When she was arrested, she was unaware of the fact that she was pregnant. Her son was born in prison and immediately sent home to his father. Nitar May was separated from her child for three years. When Htein Lin met with her in Rangoon to make the mold, it was her first visit back to Burma with her son after a period of exile in the United Kingdom, where she now works for BBC Burma.

Another mold gives the peace sign and belongs to Nay Phone Latt, a well-known Burmese blogger. He says he believes the art project will shed light on Burma's history. "I believe it will make a good

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impression on the public when it is finished," he says.

Nay Phone Latt was arrested in 2007 after posting pictures online deemed unsuitable by the government. Time magazine included him on a list of its top 100 heroes of 2010, and he was also awarded with the prestigious PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, for "writers who have fought courageously in the face of adversity for the right to freedom of expression."

At first it was difficult for Htein Lin to convince ex-prisoners to let him mold their hands, but now people are approaching him. More and more people have started to reach out to him, and word is spreading internationally. Alexandra Munroe, an Asian art curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, recently came to Rangoon to meet Htein Lin.

Spreading awareness can be difficult in a changing political climate like that of Burma, where the creation and distribution of all media has until recently been controlled and restricted by the government. Htein Lin says he hopes his project can help break through this repressive wall and encourage his audience to think about how to memorialize and come to terms with injustices committed during the years of military rule.

He describes "A Show of Hands" as conceptual art, saying it is "the kind of post-art that Burma needs to think about in this messy time of transition, that drives attention away from an old style that does not hold the meaning that people in this society need to understand what is going on around them."

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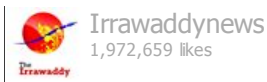
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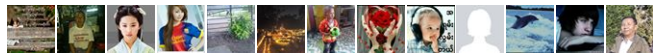
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