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# Myanmar: Transcending prison walls through art

As a political prisoner artist Htein Lin fought for democracy through artwork and is now giving a hand to his subjects.

[Mark Fenn](#) | 07 Sep 2015 13:08 GMT | [Human Rights](#), [Arts & Culture](#), [Myanmar](#), [Asia](#)

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Artist Htein Lin continued creating art while a political prisoner in Myanmar despite the horrors [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

**Yangon, Myanmar** - Artist Htein Lin talks calmly about the beatings, torture and abuse he suffered during the years he spent fighting for democracy.

As a political prisoner under the former military government, he experienced many horrors in the country's notorious prison system.

But the worst torture, he said, came before he was jailed during a power struggle with fellow student activists who accused him and some friends of being police spies.

Sometimes they would hold a knife over a fire then press the hot blade against the skin of suspected informers. Others had their fingers cut off - and one man was even decapitated, Htein Lin told Al Jazeera.

He was beaten "countless" times and had his head held under water by interrogators hoping to make him confess to spying for the ruling military.

"It was really brutal torture, you know, really cruel."



Htein Lin says he grew as an artist while in prison [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

The 49-year-old artist last month held the first major exhibition of his work in Myanmar, two years after returning from exile in London with his wife, a former British ambassador to the country.

Much of the artwork draws on his experiences as a political prisoner and activist as he tries to make sense of the brutality he suffered.

The centrepiece of the exhibition titled "A Show of Hands" is an engaging multimedia work featuring hundreds of plaster casts he had taken of the hands of former political prisoners, as well as videos, photos and text.

So far he has taken more than 430 plaster casts, and he is aiming to get 1,000 former

political prisoners involved in the project.



"A Show of Hands" exhibit was created from the cast of hands of former political prisoners [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

There is no shortage of candidates - since 1988 thousands of people have been jailed for their opposition to military rule and other political "crimes".

Most have been released during the country's difficult transition to democracy in recent years, but there are still more than 100 prisoners behind bars, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners of Burma, which is based in neighbouring Thailand.

Htein Lin said this particular piece of work is extremely important to him, as it explores "why people will fight and sacrifice their lives for society".

The idea was sparked by a 2008 bicycle accident in London, in which he broke his arm. Doctors put it in a plaster cast and he began reflecting on how they "can fix everything broken in your life".

As he saw it, "political prisoners are like a fracture" - indeed, Myanmar society was broken and the plaster is a metaphor for fixing it.

Since 2013, he has travelled around the country meeting former political prisoners in their homes, in teashops, parks, markets and elsewhere.





The artist aims to collect 1,000 hand casts from former political prisoners [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

While creating a cast of one of their hands using plaster of Paris, Htein Lin talks with them about their experiences behind bars, and the process is filmed or photographed for his multimedia piece.

"Some people who survived have an amazing sense of humour," he said. Some would write poems and songs or play music on handmade guitars while in prison and after their release.

Htein Lin's own experiences inspire some of his subjects. He was born in the Irrawaddy Delta region in 1966 and became active in student politics while studying law at Yangon University in the 1980s.

After a failed rebellion on August 8, 1988 - known as 8/8/88 - he was among the many students who fled to the jungle to escape a brutal crackdown by the military.

In a refugee camp on the Indian border, he studied with a well-known artist from Mandalay before moving to a camp on the Chinese border run by the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, an armed anti-government group.

It was there that he and other students were detained for nine months and tortured as suspected government spies.

He eventually escaped and made his way back to Yangon, where he finished his law degree before working as a film actor.



The artwork was inspired by experiences of torture and imprisonment [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

But in 1998, he was arrested and accused of planning activities to mark the 10th anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprising. He was sentenced to seven years in jail, serving six-and-a-half years before his release in late 2004.

The conditions in prison were grim for political prisoners. Htein Lin once spent seven months in solitary confinement. On one occasion, he and other prisoners were forced to run the gauntlet between two lines of prison guards who beat them with rubber pipes.

But he continued to create paintings and monoprints using "coloured substances" smuggled in by a sympathetic prison guard.

However, the guard refused to give him a paintbrush, so he improvised by using his hands and objects such as hypothermic needles, cigarette lighters, pieces of broken glass and soap.

His "canvasses" were old prison uniforms, sarongs and other pieces of cloth given to him by fellow prisoners or exchanged for the cheroots that many people in Myanmar smoke.



Prison clothes and sheets served as canvas for the artist while in prison [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

This is how he managed to create about 300 paintings while behind bars - hiding them in his cell and asking friends to smuggle them out whenever he could.

Htein Lin was inspired to create art despite - or perhaps because of - his surroundings and his lack of formal training. "I just learned from the military government and from the prison and my experiences," he said. "My artwork developed in prison."

After his release, Htein Lin met the British ambassador, Vicky Bowman, through an art project he was involved in. At that time, he said, "the situation was quite tense; everywhere there were informers".

Afraid that his prison paintings would be seized and destroyed by the authorities, Bowman smuggled them out of the country in diplomatic bags, sending them to the International Institute of Social History's archive in Amsterdam, where most remain to this day.

They married in 2006 - the same year she quit her job - and the couple moved to London, where their seven-year-old daughter was born. For seven years, they couldn't return to Myanmar.

"They wouldn't give [Bowman] a visa, and they told me if I came back I would be arrested," he said.

They eventually moved back in 2013, after a civilian government enacted reforms, and Bowman now heads an NGO, the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business.





Htein Lin's work explores the idea of freedom [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

Htein Lin was asked to hold the exhibition titled "The Storyteller" by the local branch of the Goethe-Institut, the German cultural association, which recently bought a dilapidated old house in Yangon for its new premises.

It wanted to put the space to good use before restoration work starts in November, at the end of the rainy season.

The building itself has an interesting history, according to Htein Lin. It was built about 100 years ago by a Chinese businessman, and during World War II it was used as a headquarters by the Japanese secret police, the Kempeitai.

It was later taken over by a group fighting for independence from British rule, and in the 1960s the building was converted into the Yangon State Fine Arts School.



Yangon State Fine Arts School building was used as a headquarters by the Japanese secret police during WWII [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

Some of Htein Lin's prison paintings, brought back especially for the exhibition, were put up in former student dormitory rooms that bear an eerie resemblance to jail cells.

Other exhibits included a giant monument made out of colourful fabrics and dedicated to the artist's 80-year-old mother, who would sew pieces of cloth together to make bags for her children when they were growing up.

There is also a sculpture dedicated to his father, who died in 2001 while Htein Lin was in solitary confinement.

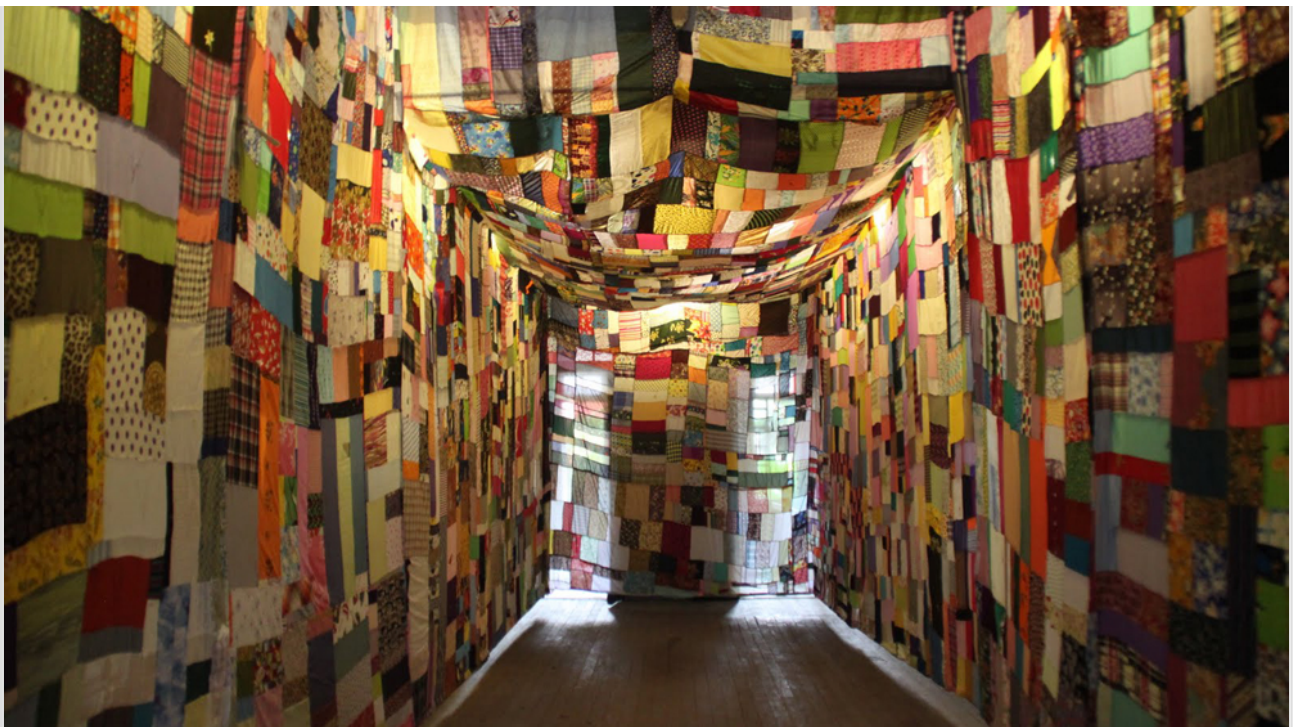
Another is made of plaster casts that he, his wife and his daughter wore after breaking their bones in separate accidents - together with the dried placenta he took home after his daughter's birth.

Htein Lin has exhibited his work around the world - including the UK, Germany, Italy, Finland, India and Hong Kong - and said he would be happy to take his latest show elsewhere, if he receives any offers.

Among his enthusiastic supporters is his old friend Bobo, with whom he escaped from the jungle camp and later shared a prison cell.

"If you want to know what happened in our society, you can get so much information from this exhibition," said Bobo.





The artist created the colourful patchwork art in honour of his mother [Mark Fenn/Al Jazeera]

Source: Al Jazeera

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