

Born to Paint

Burmese artist Chaw Ei Thein grows up painting, and now wants to help children to do the same



There is no lunch hour rush in this 'downscale', unpretentious and bucolic restaurant, with tables and chairs that are made of wood. Set by the Mae Ping River, the place is surrounded by a natural environment for which the northern parts of Thailand are well known. Almost as if embarrassed, the waiters rouse from their slumber, and prepare to serve lunch. Chaw Ei Thein makes eye contact, and smiles, and talks. The Burmese artist has been invited to Chiang Mai to participate in the conference, 'Debating the Politics of Culture, Identity and Globalisation', and is now taking a break, visiting the northern city.

Chaw Ei, wearing a blue denim shirt, speaks of her work. "I paint mostly portraits of people, abstractions and feelings. I do many abstract paintings of women," she says. "Portraits of my mom – her life has not been a comfortable one – and an expression of my attempts to understand women's lives, including my own."

At the age of two, she used to sit quietly watching her

father paint, and then began dabbling with her father's unfinished oil paintings when he was away. Chaw Ei also drew pictures of people, and learned how to mix paints. Her father gave her paints, colour pencils, crayons, and drawing books, and took her out of the house to observe the natural world outside, encouraging her to draw when they returned home. She was fond of drawing people, who still figure in the majority of her drawings today. Her recent works consist largely of oil paintings of abstract portraits of women.



Portrait of a Young Artist

Born in Mingaladon in 1969, Chaw Ei is a daughter of the famed Burmese artist, U Maung Maung Thein. She already showed great promise as a young artist, winning her first International Children's Art award when she was five years old. Since then, she has won several World Children's Art and other prizes in various countries (Yugoslavia, Hungary, India, etc.), including a Unesco's prize. Today, together with her father she runs an art gallery, whose art pieces are usually bought by foreign collectors, expatriates from the embassies or tourists.

During the lunch interview, Chaw Ei comes across as an intelligent, sincere and sensitive woman, soft-spoken and sensual. She's also a law graduate, having graduated from Rangoon University with a Major in Law.



Chaw Ei in Chiang Mai

"I decided to study law because my grades qualify me for Law Studies. But I know myself - I don't want to be a lawyer. I'd wanted to study arts or music but at that time, there was no university for the study of arts or music, so I took up law. In hindsight, I should have taken the other choice of studying philosophy."

Art and children have been her concerns for a substantial part of her professional involvement. She's been teaching children's art at YMCA and YWCA Summer School for more than ten years, and with her father founded (in 1994) the 'Sunflower Gallery', where she also conducts private art

courses. Chaw Ei has also taught at pre-schools, primary and high schools, as well as the Yangon International Education Centre where for three years she was a full-time art teacher. "The international school job was too demanding. I was expected to do a lot – I had eight periods for teaching every day!" she says. "It was too much. I was tired by it, and couldn't even paint, which I wanted very much to."

These days, she says she lives a much more relaxed life.

"I work on articles and other aspects of the magazine, 'Beauty', of which I'm editor, going into the Yangon office on some days. Before, I needed to get up at 7 a.m. to go to teach at the private international school, and finished at 6 p.m.," Chaw Ei explains. "Since last year, however, I have been concentrating on helping my dad with our Sunflower Gallery, and the magazine, and some art tuition. Now, I don't have a routine, and I feel freer."

Patients



Evil, bird and myself

Asked about her concerns for children's art, she expresses her view that art education in Burma is rather poor. "It is not considered a priority, and creativity is lacking because creative thinking has not been encouraged at school. Solving problems, for example, has always required a certain way of thinking and only that way. The curriculum is too restrictive,"

Chaw Ei laments. "My contribution is introducing people to children's art, and children to art, hoping to sustain their interest; children's art is fun, to begin with, and I also publish children's publications relating to arts, design and creative thinking – I want to do many things for the children."

It has also not always been seemingly so easy for her. There was a time a few years ago when she had to earn extra income by singing traditional Burmese songs in a restaurant,

to supplement the family income because her father did not make much as a teacher. For more than three years, she held a day job and sang in the night. "I love singing; it's a big part of my life. After teaching in the school or art classes, I went to the restaurant, and I sang till two in the morning, every night – I enjoyed it," the artist grins, her fingers playing with the ends of her suave, black and long hair, and she continues: "However, I had to cut my hair short because it might help to reduce the illusions of the male audience in the restaurants about who or what I am. I used to have even longer hair than what I have now. When I sang at the restaurant, I wore t-shirt and pants, and did not put on make-up – I tried to look as much as a boy as I could."

That Chaw Ei is also very much concerned with the youth and particularly the young girls of her country is obvious. "I'm from a working family, and have been interested in women's issues since I was a teenager," she reveals. "In my country, the young, especially girls, do not seem to receive proper education on the matters of relationships and sexual interaction, and I see many problems arising from this. My father's generation did not explain to us the complexities of boy-girl relations and sexual experiences. I was fortunate in that I love to read books – and my mum did advise me on hygiene and care as a woman – but what about those who did not learn how to read to understand contraception and health issues, and their parents and teachers could not help them?"

Being an editor of a teen magazine provides her knowledge and experiences about the difficulties of the young. "I see the problems of the girls and boys, concerning their confusion about relationships, and the frustration of not knowing how to resolve issues, or who to turn to," she says.

Similar to the social behaviour in Thailand, where young girls were obliged to inform their parents of their whereabouts, and many could not stay out after midnight, Chaw Ei says that the situation in Burma is changing, with the young engaging in activities that their family are unaware of. "My parents are very open-minded, so I had a relatively liberal up-bringing, but many other families control their daughters, and restrict their movements," she goes on to explain her view that the more the youths are controlled, the more they will stray.

We are not clone



Prayer



Chaw Ei

Chaw Ei switches her attention to her brother. Her brother, who has a condition known as autism, communicates well, is also artistic, and paints but can't read and write. "I don't like it that he's sometimes still treated as a child, or immature adult, and labeled a "Saturday-born." (In Burma, to be born on a Saturday may mean an inauspicious omen when combined with some other factors). She describes her brother as an articulate and sensitive human being, and insists that being autistic does not mean that one cannot contribute to the society. "I grew up with him, and he's one of the most important persons in my life, so I encourage him in his artistic interests," she says.

"My parents are separated, and my dad has a female companion now, but she does not live with him. As he looks after the art gallery, he's found time during the day to spend with her. In the evening, he's with my brother and me," she talks about her family, focussing now on her father, and jokes: "So, he's a Lover by Day, and Family Man by Night!" Chaw Ei breaks into an irresistible laugh, and upon collecting herself, says that she is more concerned about her mother. "I have no problem with whoever she wants to be with, and would encourage her to remarry if she is comfortable with the man. Life is short, and I would like her to feel fulfilled," she says in an introspective mood. "I want to help her – she hasn't had an easy life."

She savours her meal, and eats gracefully, expressing that she usually has quite simple food, mainly vegetables. What will she be turning her attention to when she returns to Burma?

"I'm focused on supporting children in their artistic pursuits, and hope to be able to be involved in more projects," she says. Between 1997 and 2003, she has taken part in arranging and organising art exhibitions and fairs that have displayed more than 1,000 artworks. She reports that over five hundred children contributed the works, including psychiatric patients in Rangoon, and that the shows were attended by about 4,500 visitors.



Newcomer

Next year, Chaw Ei intends to hold an individual exhibition of her work, having taken part in five joint exhibitions. She also hopes to establish her website on the internet. Smiling widely, she leans back on to the back of the wooden chair, adding: "And to run a school myself – some day."