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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Chaw Ei Thein

WANTED

July 28 - September 16, 2023

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, July 28, 5-7 PM

PERFORMANCE

Saturday, September 9, 1 PM



Burmese Dissident Artist Dissects Camouflage, Hand-Paints Buddhas to Craft Complex Tales of Exile and Revolution.

In 2007, Chaw Ei Thein set foot in her home country of Myanmar for the last time. She was organizing an art exhibition in London when she learned that the military regime of her home country had issued a warrant for her arrest. An article on Thein's plight appeared in the *New York Times*, thrusting the artist into a global conversation about the nature of artistic expression and political speech under fascism. **Now living in Santa Fe as an asylee, Thein presents *WANTED*, her first solo exhibition in New Mexico. Opening at form & concept on Friday, June 28 from 5 to 7 pm, the show debuts sculptures, textiles, installation works and a performance piece that ruminate on Myanmar's past, present and imagined futures amid renewed political turmoil.**

"We would have been home right now, but instead I'm making this show," Thein said during a studio visit earlier this year. "You know, I speak out loud. I can't stop." She planned to return to Myanmar with her husband and young daughter in early 2021 after a democratic election seemingly signaled a new, calmer political climate. Soon after the election, however, Myanmar's military deposed the ruling political party and took power, echoing myriad military coups that have rocked the country since it gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. Once again, Thein abandoned hope of returning home, hoping to shield family members from further political fallout. **"If they can't find me, they'll go to my family members,"** she says.

Born in 1969, Thein developed an unusually lucid political consciousness in early childhood. Everything in her homeland's material world – from the dirty, rationed rice Thein spent hours sifting; to the ornate lunchboxes and rich food of classmates whose parents were military leaders; to the market baskets that hid bribe money beneath heavily inflated goods – revealed stark truths about Myanmar. The Southeast Asian nation is home to more than 135 indigenous ethnic groups, many of which represented autonomous nations before British colonization.

Thein's understanding of the racial, economic and political strata that emerged from Britain's colonization have informed her work as an artist and activist. *WANTED*, which appears in the gallery's ground-floor corner and front windows, synthesizes Thein's personal narrative and Myanmar's tumultuous history with ferocity and humor. Thein harnesses quotidian objects, religious symbolism and military paraphernalia to reveal the extreme politicization of public space and material culture during the globalization of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The show features Buddha figurines hand-painted with Burmese camouflage patterns, bullet casings loaded with lipstick, and a protest poster obscured by a mosquito net.

The exhibition's most elaborate and hopeful work is a five-foot swath of Burmese camouflage fabric, adorned with a patchwork of intricate embroideries that honors each of Burma's 135 ethnic groups. **"Even if there wasn't a junta running the country, they've already made their mark by creating so much division and bigotry between ethnic groups. They control us by dividing us,"** Thein says. **"But I have so much hope because I can see a new country. It's not just about making a new government, it's about forming a new ideal of what we are. This revolution is led by Generation Z, and they understand this."**

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For press or image inquiries, please contact Jordan Eddy at jordan@formandconcept.center.

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BIOGRAPHY

CHAW EI THEIN (b. 1969, Yangon, Myanmar) is a visual and performance artist.

Currently based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Thein is a longtime proponent of political change in her home country of Myanmar and has remained a central figure in its contemporary art community despite her spatial separation. Since the February 1st coup that threw Myanmar into turmoil, she has worked tirelessly to support her fellow artists and the Civil Disobedience Movement in hopes of restoring power to the country's democratically elected leaders through peaceful protest. Her artworks interpret her struggle against the oppression of expression and the impact of social transformation.

In 1994, Thein graduated from Yangon University with a Bachelor of Law degree (LL.B). From an early age, she received artistic recognition, securing numerous international art awards, museum and gallery shows, and residencies. With her father, artist Maung Maung Thein, as her art teacher and mentor, Thein developed a diverse art practice comprising painting, installation, and performance.

In 2004, Thein presented her first solo show at the Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF) in Japan. From 2004 on, she continued developing and performing work, showing at TIPALive (2005) in Taiwan, Asiatopia in Thailand (2005/2007/2008), 8 Open International Performance Art Festival in Beijing (2007), Small East Asia Co performance art event hosted in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Toyama, Japan (2008), and the 7*11d Performance Art Festival in Toronto, Canada.

Thein exhibited her second solo painting show at the Espace art gallery in Bangkok (2005) and then at the Hermes' Ear Art Exhibition at the Nitrianska Gallery in Slovakia and Budapest (2006). She held her third solo exhibition at the Balance Art Gallery in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She was an invited speaker at the Asia House Art Gallery in London, where she presented "The Myanmar Performance Art Scene: challenges faced by Myanmar Artists" during the September demonstrations of 2007.

She was awarded The Elizabeth J. McCormack and Jerome I. Aron Fellowship in connection with the Asian Cultural Council (ACC) in residence with the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), New York. She has also exhibited her works at Point B Gallery, Brooklyn, ISCP Open Studios, and the United Nations Plaza. Her awards and residencies include Art Omi, the Sea Change Residency, and GAEA Foundation. She is a fellow of the Art Initiative Tokyo (AIT) in Tokyo, Japan. In 2008, Thein and artist Richard Streitmatter-Tran debuted the collaborative architectural, mixed-media installation *September Sweetness* at the Singapore Biennale.

She has given artist presentations at several universities and institutions, including the School of the Art Institute Chicago (SAIC), Massachusetts College of Art, Brown University, Princeton University, New School, Northern Illinois University at DeKalb (NIU), University of Minnesota, and the Open Society Institute (OSI) in New York. Numerous international art presses, including *Artforum*, *Art Asia Pacific*, *Yishu*, *C-Arts*, *Strait Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, have profiled Thein's artistic practice for its candid portrayals of the conflicts and contradictions of the artist's socio-political environment.

In addition to being an artist, Thein is the co-founder and director of the Sunflower Art Gallery in Yangon, Myanmar. As co-founder and director, she has developed several initiatives and organized several art exhibitions and fairs, including showcases of children's art in Myanmar and Cambodia and shows for psychiatric patients. As an advocate for art, education, and creative expression, she has been a vocal critic of the restrictive curricula in Myanmar (Burma). She has taught art to children for 15 years and serves as an editor for a youth magazine in Yangon. In 2021, she co-founded the Association for Myanmar Contemporary Arts (AMCA) with fellow Myanmar artists and friends in New York. In 2023, she became a member of the Santa Fe Society of Artists. In 2017, director Min Min Hein documented Thein's artistic practice and life in the short film *Listen*.

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