

FEATURES



34

Painting the Unstable State

**SAWANGWONGSE
YAWNGHWE**

BY KERSTIN WINKING

44

(not) Sorry

CARLOS VILLA

BY LIAN LADIA AND CHLOE CHU



54

UP CLOSE

**YHONNIE SCARCE
AND EDITION OFFICE,
SUN YUAN AND PENG YU,
WANG TUO**

BY THE EDITORS



Since 2015, Sawangwongse Yawnghwe has been producing art under the banner of Yawnghwe Office in Exile, a fictive museum he founded while searching for alternatives to the histories propagated by state institutions. Focused on unravelling suppressed traumas and recovering personal and collective identities from the neglected margins, the painter has an antagonistic relationship to hegemonic state narratives, one that is rooted in his familial past.

Now based in the Netherlands, Yawnghwe has spent most of his life in exile. He was born in 1971 in a tent on the grounds of a Shan State Army camp. The surrounding jungle was part of the contested Shan territories, which today constitutes Myanmar. Before their annexation, the Shan states defended their autonomy and land as well as the survival of their languages and cultures against the imperial interests of the Thai, Chinese, and Burmese empires for six centuries, at times in strategic alliance and at other moments in direct conflict with their neighbors. Then the British invaded in 1885 and gradually subsumed the constellation of Shan enclaves. Under colonial rule, the Shan became a nominally sovereign population headed by Saophas (princes) under the protectorate of the British Crown. After the Second World War, during Myanmar's negotiations for independence from the British, the Shan groups signed the 1947 Panglong Agreement, throwing their weight behind the establishment of an independent Union of Burma, with the guarantee that after ten years they would have the right to secession. That right was never realized. In 1962, the Union of Burma's first president, Yawnghwe's grandfather, Sao Shwe Thaik, died while imprisoned by the Tatmadaw (Burmese army) after General Ne Win's coup d'état, which led to Ne Win's autocratic rule over Myanmar until 1988.

After Sao Shwe Thaik's murder, his wife and Yawnghwe's grandmother, Sao Nang Hearn Kham, founded an armed resistance movement, the Shan State Army (SSA), which Yawnghwe's father, Chao Tzang Yawnghwe, also joined after leaving his job as an English tutor at the Rangoon University. In the year Yawnghwe was born, to address the shortcomings of the SSA, his father established the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), which sought an independent Shan State through political means. However, Chao Tzang left the party in 1976 after disagreements with other members. Seen as a threat to the military regime and without the support of the SSPP, the Yawnghwe family was no longer safe in Shan State, and crossed the border into Thailand on a horse-drawn carriage headed to Chiang Mai. Yawnghwe's father continued his political activities there until 1985, when the family received political asylum in Canada, where Yawnghwe began his art education.

I visited Yawnghwe in Zutphen, a small town in the Netherlands, where he has resided since 2017 with his Dutch partner Kris Berendsen and their two children, Indira and Django. Sitting with a cup of tea at one of several oil-paint-stained tables in his studio, our conversation began with how Yawnghwe's art education in Canada impacted his art practice. "Well, I didn't really learn anything, but I can't blame the institution," he said. "It was really just me. I was 13 years old when I arrived in Canada and I had ten years to adapt to the culture before I got a scholarship to study at Emily Carr University. There, we read [gender theorist Judith] Butler and had [conceptual photographers] Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace and all these guys coming by. The so-called Vancouver School was well known to us. The best thing, however, was getting the student loan and going to the bar," he said, shaking with laughter. He stopped abruptly and continued more seriously. "At that time, in Canada, the social was not really a theme in art. I went through art school quite easily nevertheless, simply because I could draw. I think I learned more about art in Europe. Before I went there, there was no history in art for me. You know, real education happens through looking."

Driven by restlessness and curiosity, Yawnghwe moved to Europe in the mid-1990s. As a Canadian citizen, he could only stay in the European Union for three months at a time, so he moved continuously between Italy, India, and Thailand until he ended up in Berlin in 2009 and secured a German visa for artists that enabled him to stay in Europe for longer periods.

Before settling down, it was in the historic city of Florence that he started to think about the possibility of making the Shan State and his family's past a subject in his work. He shared a studio with a painter in Italy's Chianti region, where he met art historian Max Seidler, who supported him by occasionally buying his work and eventually publishing the first scholarly text about his practice. In his article, Seidler discusses the iconography of *The Disasters of Military Rule in Burma* (2007–08), an early series of drawings by Yawnghwe that depict the violence of the military junta against Buddhist monks during the Saffron Revolution in 2007. The compositions took as their inspiration Spanish painter Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810–20), a series of gory, figurative prints centering the suffering of citizens during the French invasion of Spain and the subsequent period of civil strife. Seidler equated Yawnghwe's characterization of the military as a brutal force with the artist's promotion of democracy and the independence of the Shan State from Myanmar. However, when seen retrospectively, the drawings can also be understood as the artist's first steps toward forming a postcolonial critique of state violence, and his deconstruction of nationalism as a hegemonic approach to organizing societies.

Over time, Yawnghwe developed this critical attitude toward Myanmar and the construct of nationhood in paintings and displays characterized by painterly know-how. For example, in the group exhibition "Kamarado," presented by Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, he showcased *Yawnghwe Office in Exile* (2015), an installation comprising paintings and drawings of different sizes based on photographs from the Yawnghwe family archive that feature his grandfather, father, the SSA, other family members, and war victims. Some of these paintings contain blurred figures and blank, monochronic areas suggesting a blackout, a loss of memory or information, reflecting the erasure of resistance narratives.



Installation view of *Yawnghwe Office in Exile*, 2015, installation, dimensions variable, at "Kamarado," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2015. Photo by Ernst van Deursen. Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam.



Detailed installation view of *Yawnghwe Office in Exile*, 2015, installation, dimensions variable, at "Kamarado," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2015. Photo by Ernst van Deursen. Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam.



Four Figures at the Base of a Mountain, 2019, acrylic on linen, 300×400 cm. Photo by Gert Jan Van Rooij. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.

The way that Yawnghwe presents fragments of historical evidence, in the fictionalized form of *Yawnghwe Office in Exile*, draws on his real experiences and the knowledge he acquired through his life-long involvement with researchers and eyewitnesses of the Burmese military regime's activities and atrocities. The Yawnghwe family has always been conscious about the importance of preserving its history against the threat of eradication. Writing and documenting the family history is a question of survival, a part of the struggle against the disappearance of the Shan people. The artist participates actively in this struggle together with other family members, such as his aunt, the princess Sao Sanda Simms, who recently published *Great Lords of the Sky: Burma's Shan Aristocracy* (2017), an extensive overview of visual materials and histories she has collected over the course of her life. To the artist, her book is a rich source of inspiration, but he also keeps in touch with his father's circle of friends including academics, journalists, and activists such as Bertil Lintner, whom he has known since childhood. By staying connected, Yawnghwe remains "always informed by the latest developments in Burma. I'm not really on the ground, but the conversations stir my studio-based practice."

When asked about his process, Yawnghwe explained that he has different approaches to image making. "Sometimes I use a photograph as a starting point and then I would play with that image. If there's no photographic record but a story I try to imagine the scenario. And then there is the drier, conceptual way when I base a painting directly on a written piece of information. Broadly speaking, I mainly collect visual and textual information and then I develop a certain attitude towards how the painting will be made," which leads to careful juxtapositions of figurative and abstract elements.

Through his political iconography, Yawnghwe assumes the role of a history curator—a key facet of his practice that was explicitly denoted on a bronze plate bearing the inscription "Curator's Office" outside the entrance of the *Yawnghwe Office in Exile* installation. His practice is memory and perception articulated through representation, an extension of transnational historiography and a form of resistance against claims to authority over Burmese history by the nation's institutions.



Study for Head No. 2, 2019, acrylic on linen, 50 × 43 cm. Photo by Gert Jan Van Rooij. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.



Study for Head No. 3, 2019, acrylic on linen, 50 × 45 cm. Photo by Gert Jan Van Rooij. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.

Particularly important archival sources for Yawnghwe are his father's book *The Shan of Burma: Memoirs of a Shan Exile* (1987), a classic within the field of Southeast Asian political science, and article "The Political Economy of the Opium Trade: Implications for Shan State" (1993). In the latter, Chao Tzang describes Shan State as part of the Golden Triangle where opium production flourished. The profits from the drug trade in turn fueled the operations of political and military power-players. In *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), political scientist James C. Scott studies the sociopolitical conditions of the people living in the Zomia highlands of Southeast Asia who have fled efforts of state domination for centuries. While their success won them partial independence from state power, it also created enhanced conditions for the thriving drug trade. In the last few years the production of synthetic drugs (amphetamine-type substances, or ATS) has become more widespread (in the highlands and elsewhere) and has overtaken the old opium business. In 2019, newspaper reports indicated the continuation of militarized conflicts between different armed groups who fight for control over the Burmese-Chinese and Burmese-Thai checkpoints—key nodes for the drug distribution network—among other issues.

Zomia Zombie Apocalypse (2019), Yawnghwe's series of paintings, depicts nightmarish visions of the synergy between the drug trade, state military, and armed rebel groups in the Golden Triangle. Spanning four meters in width, *Four Figures at the Base of a Mountain* (2019), from the series, appears like a drug-infused bad trip set in an apocalyptic landscape. Against the background of a mountain, fatally injured zombie soldiers play with their intestines, evoking the moment after a fight between government troops and rebel forces, before the insurgents could escape to their highland hide-outs.

Yawnghwe is an avid reader of the critical theory of Slavoj Žižek, who traced the notion of parallax in philosophy and defines the parallax gap in *The Incontinence of the Void* (2017) as the manner in which “the ‘truth’ is not the ‘real’ state of things, that is the ‘direct’ view of the object without perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism which causes perspectival distortion. The site of truth is . . . the very gap, passage, which separates one perspective from another.” In Yawnghwe’s oeuvre, painted mind-maps or diagrams are a recurrent device. When I asked whether his father encouraged him to observe things in detail and draw connections between them, the artist replied, “Yes, I think there was a lot of intrigue. I was told he had meetings with CIA agents in the 1970s and ’80s. When we were driving together, he would give me little tasks. He’d say: ‘This is a fun game. We are looking at the license plates and if you see the same license plate twice, you make a notice of it.’ So this was a game for me, but later I realized it was CIA training, because if you see the same plate twice, you know you’re being followed.” In his own work, Yawnghwe uses diagrams to organize his observations and the information he receives through his family archives, family friends, and his own research activities. Often these diagrams are the central pieces in his installations around which the other paintings are arranged. With the notion of the parallax in mind, Yawnghwe’s maps and diagrams can also be seen as attempts to distort and visualize the gaps of knowledge.

In the monumental diagrammatic canvas *Peace Industrial Complex* (2017), Yawnghwe utilizes the mind-map format for a similar purpose. The work is a satirical peace plan for Myanmar, of Yawnghwe’s own design, and includes names of the “peace experts” who could be involved in such a process. Obsessed with theorizing and mapping, these experts overlook the crucial fact that peace cannot be achieved without the people caught up in conflict. For a long time, the world held on to Aung San Suu Kyi as a symbol of human rights in Myanmar. Ironically, in December of 2019, the Nobel-prize winner defended the Tatmadaw, the same military that took her freedom away for over 20 years, at the International Court of Justice trial accusing the military of atrocities including rape, expulsion, murder, and possible genocide against the Rohingya, a Muslim minority. Without the involvement of the people caught in Myanmar’s inner conflicts, Yawnghwe’s thinking goes, there is no hope for a change to this sociopolitical situation.

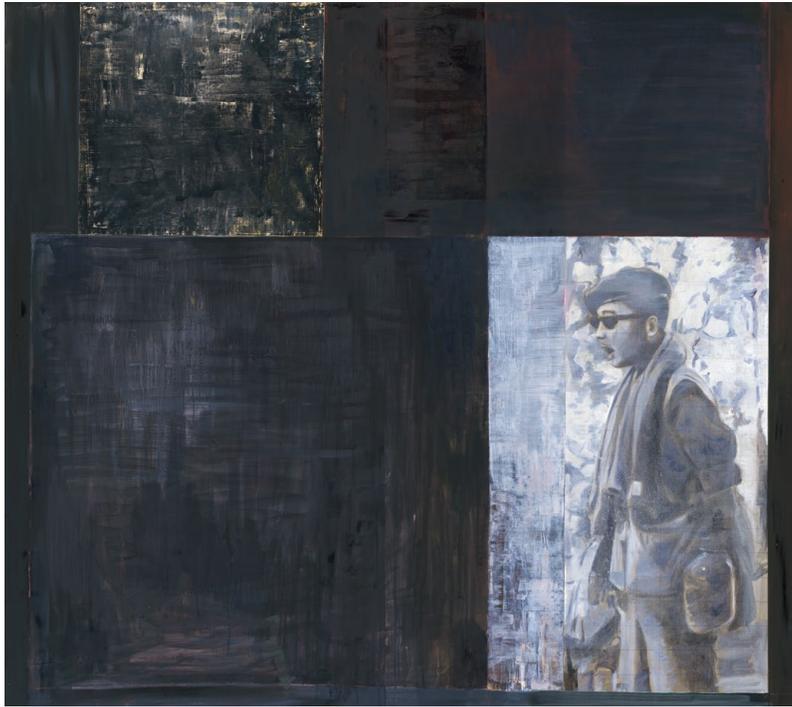
Yawnghwe himself has abandoned the idea of ever again having a life in the Shan State. He closely follows the reporting and scholarship about government actions in Myanmar and continues to produce works about Shan culture, while offering critical comments on nationhood from the perspective of an exiled Shan. Though deeply engaged with his family history, his concerns extend to transnational power structures. Incorporating diverse references and techniques, Yawnghwe has marked his own artistic path, engaging with broad contemporary audiences, and going far beyond the politics of personal identity.



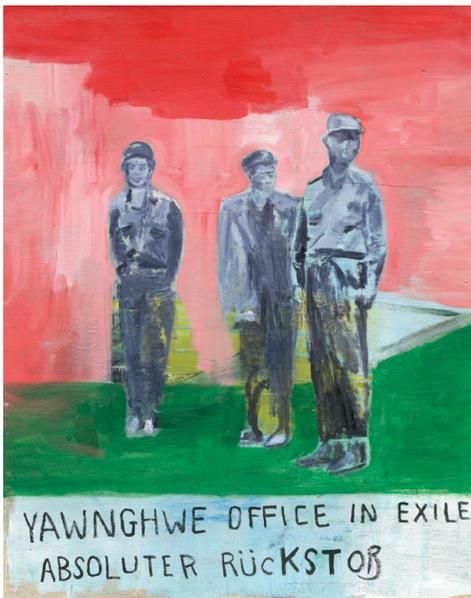
Student union building 1962 Rangoon, 2018, oil on linen, 200 x 203 cm. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.



The Funeral of Aung San, 2019, oil on linen, 153 x 247 cm. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.



My Father (black), 2019, oil on linen, 182.8×208 cm. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.



Office in Exile, 2018, oil on linen, 100×80 cm. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.



Untitled (green and grey), 2019, oil on linen, 64.5×115 cm. Courtesy the artist and TKG+, Taipei.