

## **The ephemeral body: aesthetics of the body in the new media arts of continental Southeast Asia**

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### **New media arts<sup>1</sup> and body representation: an overview on Southeast Asia**

Since the beginning of the '80s, new media have entered the artistic scenario of continental Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam). New concepts and technologies, ideas, styles and values from global culture have started to interact and merge with specific traditional artistic meanings and expression of local culture<sup>2</sup>.

From the very beginning of Southeast Asian civilization, the body has played a central role as a coherent and living expression of codified aesthetic, artistic and philosophic values. In visual and performing arts, use of the body and the dynamics of gesture are emblematic of the identity and transformation of socially-shared meanings. After a several decades of informal pictorial experimentation, owing to the influence of Western artistic movements (Poshyananda 1992), new media arts have given back to the body its primal role. Indeed, digital, video and performing arts - due to their specific ephemeral and transitory status - can be considered as some of the best media for representing the 'changing body', faithfully reflecting the dynamics of contemporary Southeast Asian metropolitan culture.

In new media arts, the body thus becomes the place where ancient philosophies and new stimulus from contemporary society meet, and where conflicts and desires find their visual expression. In any situation this newly represented body can be primarily

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<sup>1</sup>New media arts from Asia have particular characteristics and possibilities that distinguish them from Western media. A peculiar culture and language affect the way in which new media are employed by artists in countries throughout the region. In other words, the notion of what constitutes new media can take in social and cultural differences that correspond to the Southeast Asian artists' own definition of the term (Silpasart 2007: 79). This is to say that here we use the term 'new media art' to refer to video-art, video-installation, performance, digital and manipulated photography, according to the use of the term by Thai artists and art critics.

<sup>2</sup>The first new media art works were shown in Thailand in 1985, at a *solo* exhibition in Bangkok entitled 'How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock' by Apinan Poshyananda.

conceived as an 'aesthetic body'. Aesthetic research, the pursuit of 'beauty' remains, indeed a distinguishing element in the visual landscape of Southeast Asia (Kraevskaia 2005: 37-38), an element continually interfacing with conceptual research, which represents the answer to more recent, and mainly Western-oriented aesthetic needs.

Among the countries of continental Southeast Asia that share the same philosophical background, the Thai reality stands out as one of the most representative and dynamic art scenes. Despite decades of social deconstruction and economic unrest, experimentation in new media arts is particularly interesting in Myanmar where the forced isolation of both population and culture have given rise to a very particular aesthetics (Naziree 2009: 3). Extremely marginal, in this context, is the artistic situation in Cambodia and Laos: mainly due to the lack of technology, most contemporary artists here continue to employ traditional media in contemporary art and new media are still at an embryonic stage<sup>3</sup>.

### **The ephemeral body: body representation and Buddhist philosophy in new media arts**

In looking at the influences that nourish Southeast Asian art, we should note the primal role of a religious and philosophical legacy. Since its origin, till the birth of modern art introducing non-religious elements, the classical and indigenous art of Southeast Asia has been a Buddhist Art (Phillips 1992). The body represented in sacred paintings and sculptures was the body of the Buddha, offering himself to the eyes of his devotees and followers. A body among other bodies, especially when the paintings' aim is to represent the most salient episodes of the Buddha's earthly life. *Theravada* - literally 'the Ancient Teaching' - is the oldest surviving Buddhist school, and the most conservative. Founded in India and derived directly from the Buddha's original teachings, for many centuries it has been the predominant religion in most of the countries of continental Southeast Asia, that is, in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos<sup>4</sup>. In Theravada Buddhism, the ultimate aspect of existence is represented by suffering (*dukkha*). The cause of this experience is rooted in the illusory idea of the individual 'self', conceived as a permanent reality, opposed and separated from the external world. But none of the five aggregates (*skhandha*) composing a living

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<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, the paper will offer a sketch on what is running through the visual culture mainly in Thailand and Myanmar.

<sup>4</sup> In Vietnam, the dominant Buddhist school is Mahayana.

being – form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness – can be identified as 'self'. This erroneous vision is the very origin of all illusory conceptions of reality and the basis of our 'grasping' (*tanha*) our body and our emotions. Indeed the body, like all phenomena, is impermanent. Direct understanding of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and the concept of 'non-self' (*anatta*) leads to freedom from worldly bonds and attachments, to the state which in *Pali* is termed *nibbana*, which literally means 'extinction'.

In a deeply Buddhist society, where artistic expression has historically manifested itself through devotional imagery, these concepts can be used as philosophical categories in understanding the aesthetics of body representation in ancient as well contemporary arts. Indeed the ritual gold and red colours, the bodies of the sacred images, and those of the Buddha do not disappear in the experimental research of new artistic languages. Although the new arts interface with international reality and employ the new media to create a global aesthetics, they are still inspired by traditional iconography and ancient philosophy. Especially in Thailand and Myanmar, Buddhism continues to persist as the fundamental element characterizing – in a more or less figurative way – the subjects and aesthetic reference for many contemporary artists. In this sense some of the most important Buddhist philosophical teachings are the key to reading many new media artworks.

The dancing bodies of heavenly beings, represented in traditional mural paintings, leave the walls of temples and palaces to appear as a virtual *mandala*<sup>5</sup> in the videos *Circle of Hope* and *Makhala and Ramasura* (*Figure 1*), by the Thai artist Sakarin Krue On. In its hypnotic turning, the *mandala* invites us to give ourselves up to the whirl and to perceive the illusion of what we commonly think of as real. The movement and colours of the dancing heavenly bodies make us feel lost in an artificial space in which the gods represented let us perceive the illusion of what we suppose to be real.

The concepts of illusion and impermanence are expressed by means of bodies walking on sand, in the Thai artist Amrit Chusuwan's video-installation *Being Sand* (*Figure 2*). The artwork is the artist's own interpretation and understanding of Buddhism and is inspired by the book, *Kham-sorn Khong Huang Po (The Zen*

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<sup>5</sup> A *mandala* "is a strongly symmetrical diagram, concentrated about a centre and generally divided into four quadrants of equal size. It is built up of concentric circles and squares possessing the same centre. Indeed, a great many mandalas are also aids to meditation, visualization and initiation" (Brauen 1997: 11).

*Teaching of Huang Po*), translated by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in which sand is used as a metaphor for explaining the mind. Sand – taking, changing and loosing its shape under the feet of walking bodies – offers us a perception of the transformation and impermanence of phenomena. All these transformations of reality are not involved in the deep nature of the mind which – beyond the illusion of phenomena – is characterized by emptiness (*sunyata*). As we read in the above mentioned book, the mind, like sand, feels nothing, no matter who steps on it, whether a king or a mangy dog.

The absent, and nevertheless present, body in the *bardo* condition<sup>6</sup> is the subject of the video-installation *In Between* by Kamol Phaosavasdi (*Figure 3*). The image of an infinite black hole becoming lighter and lighter represents the 'non-self' in its dancing – during the time between death and subsequent rebirth – in the shapeless space towards a womb, the first abode of the future body. The video is projected over bronze sculptures with different textures, each reflecting the diversity of various characters. To illustrate the issues of emptiness and transformation, Kamol chooses new media as a tool to express the artistic technique and Buddhism to give shape to the truth. Hence, the relationship between these aspects could be termed technospiritual art (Fongsmut 2005: 10).

The body, chained by the senses, is unable to transcend the illusion of a reality with which it identifies and from which it assimilates the poisons of the human condition: this is the body of Aye Ko, one of the most representative artists of Myanmar (*Figure 4*). His work is inspired by the Buddhist philosophical principle that all life is suffering: Even in an ideal, equal, prosperous and peaceful world, the endless *chakra*<sup>7</sup> of individual suffering will never stop turning; likewise the endless *chakra* of *samsara*...The only way to overcome this suffering is to let go and reach nirvana, the state of globalised nothingness. (Aye Ko 2006)  
Finally, the body, now only a dead body, is the visual teaching recalling the concepts of the ephemeral, illusion, transformation and the ineluctable suffering of human

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<sup>6</sup> *Bardo* literally means "in-between" and refers to the 49 days between death and rebirth, in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Phaosavasdi's work has, indeed, been inspired by the relations between birth and death as described in the *Bardo Thödol*, the text book stating the process of dissolution after death and the transformations of the individual consciousness before rebirth.

<sup>7</sup> *Chakra* literally means 'wheel'. In Buddhism the wheel's swift motion represents the rapid spiritual transformation revealed in the Buddha's teachings.

beings, in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's conversations with death (*Figure 5*). Paroxystically, here the body, in actual fact, seems to have reached its 'grade zero' - mere petrified matter, an inert body completely deprived of self.

### **From Buddhism to contemporary society: a controversial body**

But the body is also an instrument representing a glance, through Buddhist philosophy, at contemporary society, where 'the new temples have become modern shopping malls' (Pettifor 2003: 14). In Chusuwan's *Silent Communication*, the artist's body stands in front of a golden Buddha body in silent conversation, wondering about the meaning of sacred teachings in the contemporary world (*Figure 6*). Thus, Buddhist philosophy does not concern only the religious context: as part of the daily life of people in deeply religious countries, it is a way of reading a rapidly changing contemporary society, and of representing it in artistic works.

Often, the body in art – as well as in our increasingly complex daily life – is thus an alien presence in a landscape that it does not recognize, a landscape that no longer belongs to it. In some contexts, this has its origin in the contradictions deriving from over-rapid economic and cultural growth. In other contexts, dramatic political situations make violence, poverty and absence of freedom a peculiar feature of daily life. The body then becomes a controversial presence in a world that gives it hospitality, but does not integrate it. The body becomes a polemical presence looking at the world around it with total disregard, irony, regret or mere impassivity. And the world around it is ill at ease, feeling the glance of this alien body, critically regarding the illusion of a society that apparently distributes wealth, but is in fact more and more illusory and cruel.

*Pink Man*, the emblematic character created by Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom, perfectly embodies the contrasts of a new 'globalized' society (*Figure 7*). His pink dinner jacket represents, for Thai people, typically Western wear, but not in a stylish way, as a symbol of the extraneousness and shabbiness of the needs of the contemporary society. Needs never placated, as shown by the empty shopping cart and the sad expression on his face. 'Buddhism teaches you to live in a very humble way, in a simple way. Now it is the opposite: everyone lives in a complicated manner and desires more and more' (Sriwanichpoom 2009). For these reasons, in the Thailand of shopping malls and fake wealth, the represented body is also a sick body, a compelled body, suffering for its stay in a world that it does not understand and of which it perceives the illusion and the vacuity, as in the Montri Toemsombat's artwork *Fake Me* (*Figure 8*).

In the Myanmar of badly concealed poverty and violence, sometimes the alienated body, on the contrary, tries to escape. It then becomes the body of desire. In the photographs by Phyu Mon, it is a body living in an ideal world characterised by a dreamlike atmosphere. It is the body running away from reality. It is the 'refugee body' – mostly a female body – living in wonderland, a land where wonder means the harmony of poetry and the peaceful landscape of what has been lost; that peaceful landscape where the law is harmony and Buddhism (*Figure 9*). This is just one more

example of how Thai and Burmese new media arts originally attempt to react to the globalizing and standardizing tendencies of most contemporary art. An aim constantly achieved thanks to an original re-elaboration of elements belonging to their ancestral philosophical heritage and to their traditional perception of the body, in the light of the complexity of the contemporary world.

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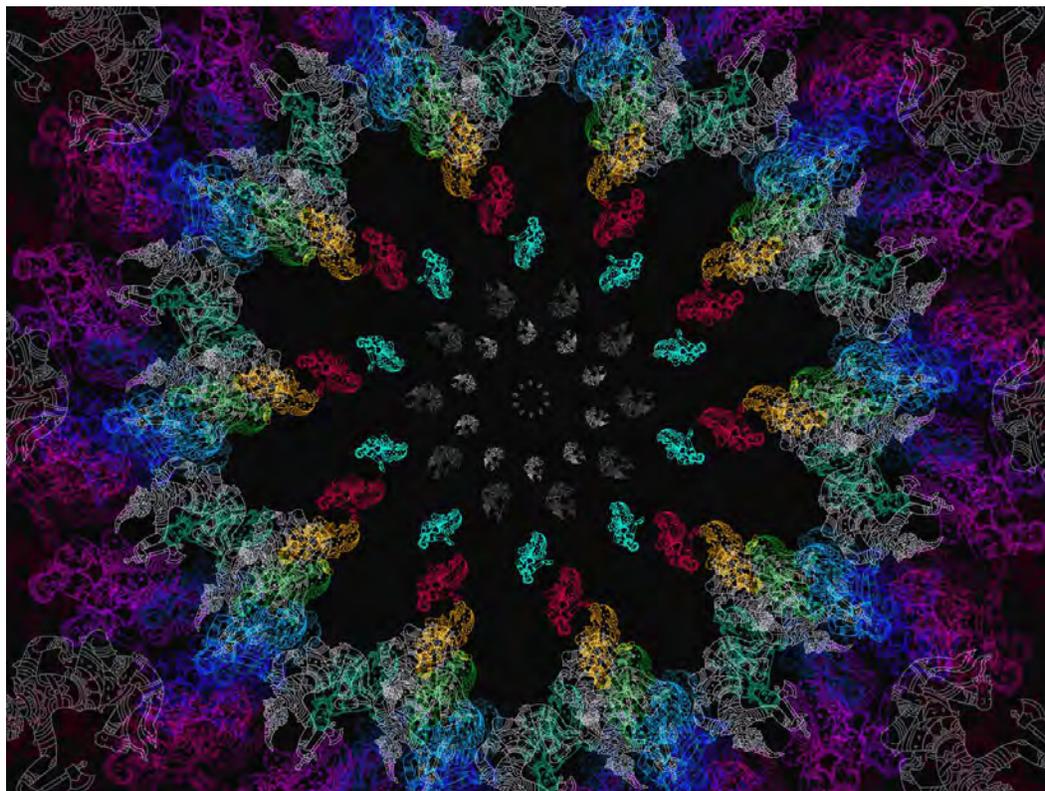


Fig. 1: Sakarin Krue-On, *Makhala and Ramasura*, 2003. Single-screen video animation, Courtesy of the artist.

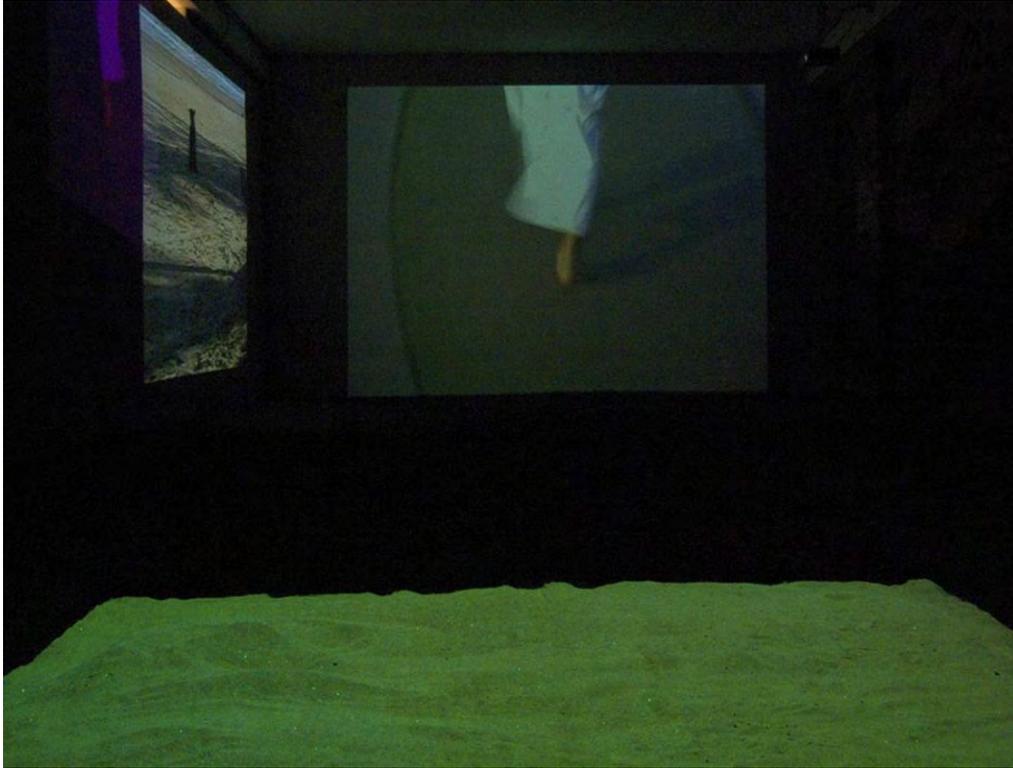


Fig. 2: Amrit Chusuwan, *Being Sand*, 2007. Video-installation in sand room. Courtesy of the artist.

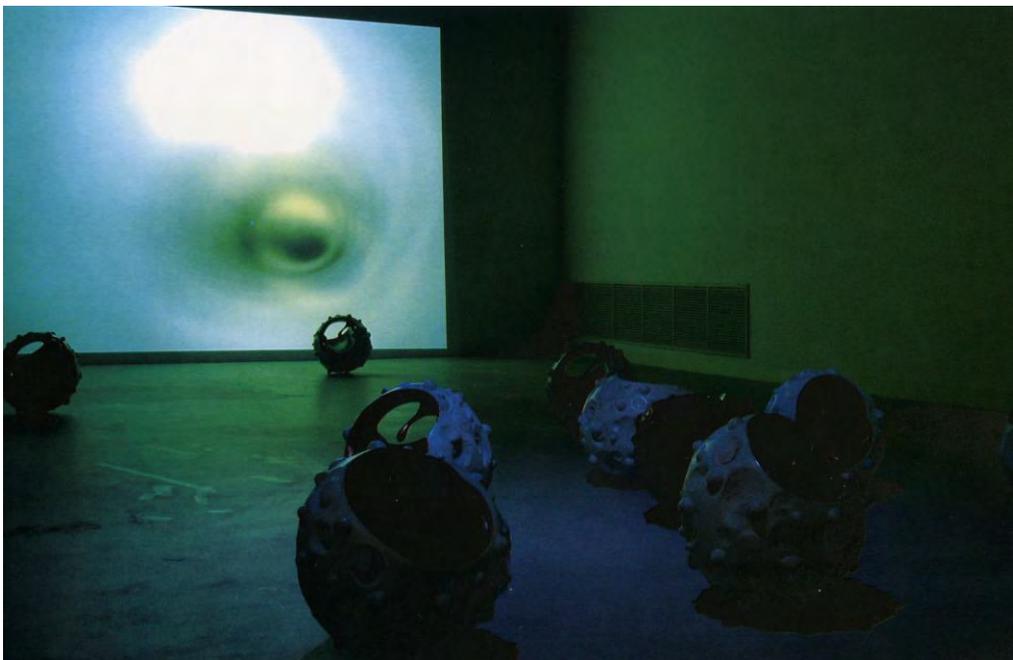


Fig. 3: Kamol Phaosavasdi, *In Between*, 2005. Video-installation. Courtesy of the artist.

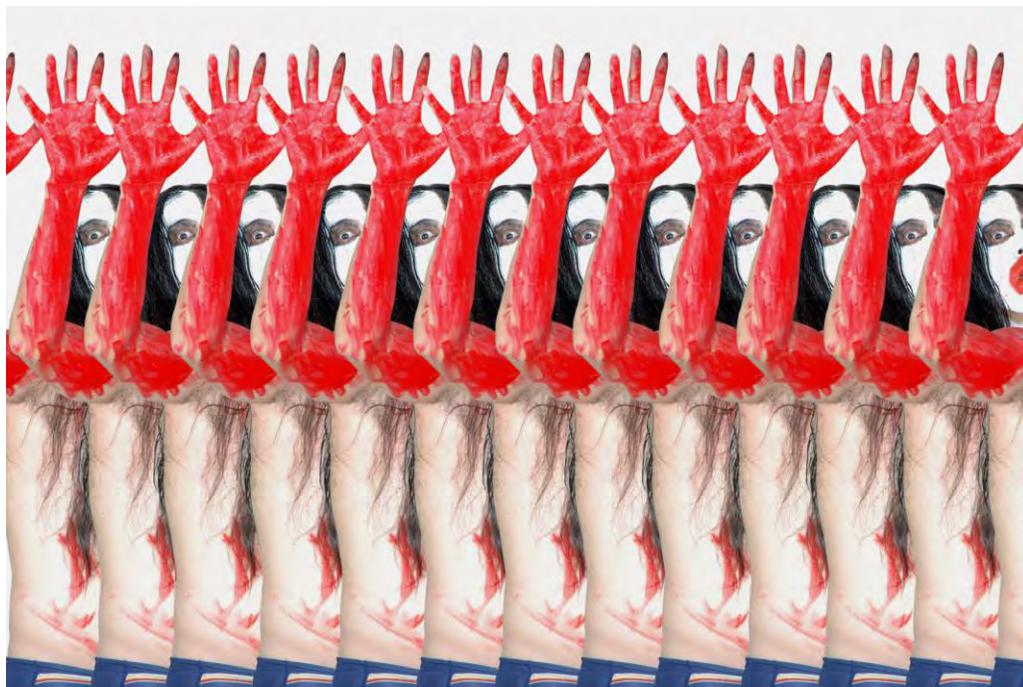


Fig. 4: Aye Ko, *Transfixed: Where am I?* 2008. Giclee print on archival paper, 90x136 cm. Courtesy of Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok.



Fig. 5: Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Conversation with Death on Life's First Street*, 2005. Video-installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6: Amrit Chusuwan, *Silent Communication*, 2003. Video-installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 7: Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Pink Man in Paradise # 2* (Garuda Wisnu Kencana Cultural Park), 2003. Pink Man performance: Sompong Thawee. C-print, 80x99 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

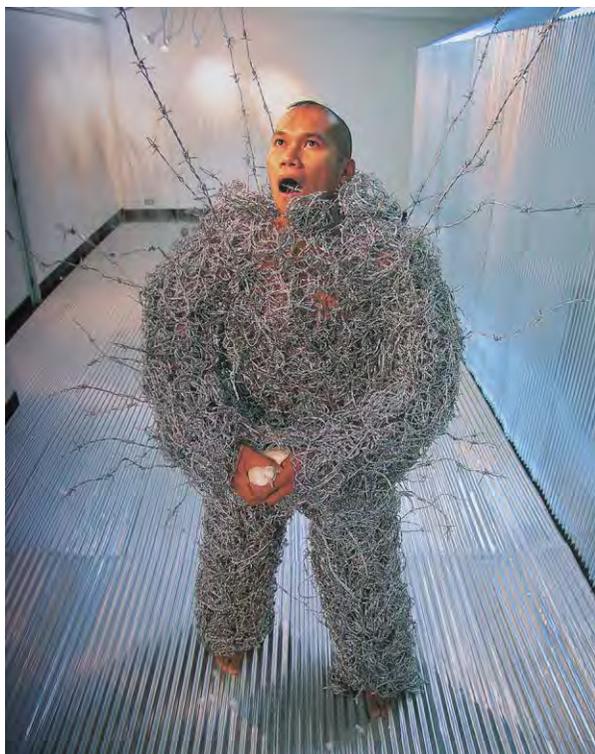


Fig. 8: Montri Toemsombat, *Fake Me*, 2002. Performance and installation. Courtesy of the artist.

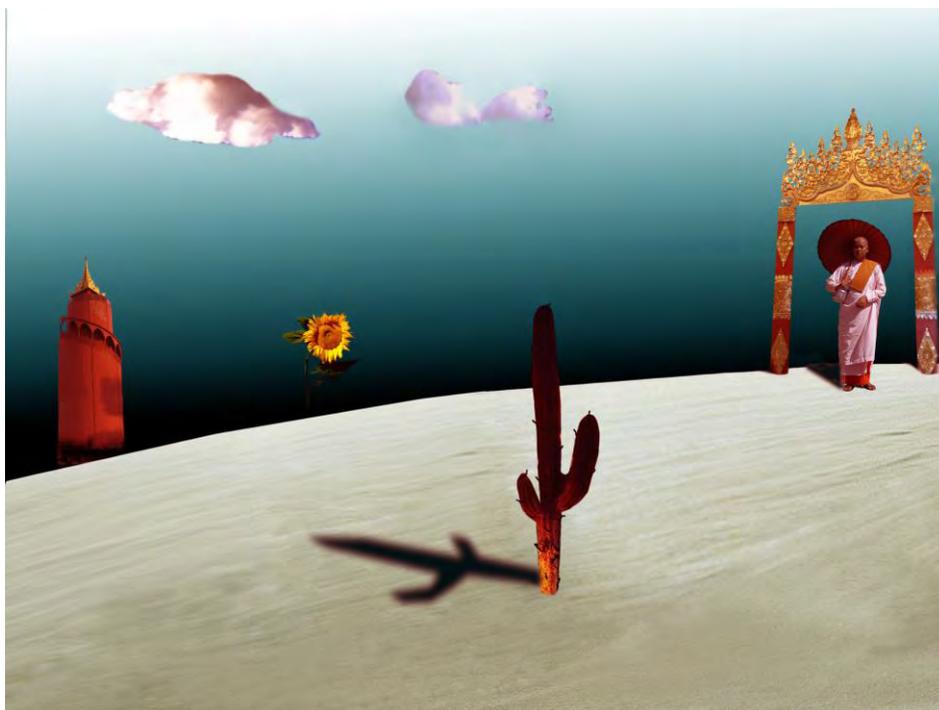


Fig. 9: Phyu Mon. *Hope (3)*, 2008. Lambda Print on archival paper, 60x91 cm. Courtesy of Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok.