

URBAN ART EXHIBITION DRAWS REGIONAL ARTIST

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The organiser of a recent urban art exhibition that brought together graffiti artists from across Southeast Asia says he hopes the show will change perceptions about the much-maligned art form.

“The Rendezvous”, which ran from February 4 to 9, featured works from 17 local and 11 foreign graffiti artists and is the most significant urban art exhibition to be held in Myanmar to date.

Thu Myat, 25, told The Myanmar Times that he and the other local organisers wanted to show the different styles of urban art being produced across the region and also build up links between local and foreign artists.

“We invited very famous urban artists from neighbouring countries so we can learn from them and we also want to share our knowledge. They are enthusiastic to participate in the event,” said Thu Myat, who has been making graffiti-related art since 2008.

The event was originally going to be held in the Philippines but the artists decided to hold it in Myanmar, despite graffiti art being in its infancy here.

While the small urban art community has previously held a number of exhibitions, most notably the “Wunthanu” show at Dagaung Gallery in early 2011, none have come close to “The Rendezvous” in scope.

“We met with [the foreign artists] in Bangkok in November and discussed holding an event in Myanmar including artists from across Southeast Asia,” he said.

“At the moment, the interest on Myanmar is high and we also thought that it would be beneficial for the local artists if we could organise this event.”

Artists from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam came to Myanmar for the event, while the exhibition also features works by Ungga, a Filipino artist. As graffiti artists in Myanmar are mostly quite young, holding an international exhibition posed a number of difficulties.

“When we first thought to hold the event, there were many questions that came into our mind. Who will pay for it? Who will take responsibility? Where can we do the event? We

discussed with other artists how we could make it work.

“Luckily, we got a sponsor for the venue and also financial support.”

The exhibition was held at an under-construction condominium near the corner of Manawhayi Street and Myoma Kyaung Street in Dagon township. The owner allowed the artists to paint the inside and outside of the ground and first floors of the building, while works were also displayed on the walls. There was also a live painting section where participants worked together on a wall.

“Though he is a middle-aged man, the owner of the condominium has a good understanding of what we are doing and he lets us do whatever we like,” Thu Myat said.

He said the event was a rare opportunity for Myanmar graffiti artists, who are unable to practise their art in public spaces. The negative perceptions of graffiti art are the biggest challenges they face, he added.

“Though the local [graffiti] community has not developed much yet in our country, urban art is quite well-known in our neighbours. It’s even reached a commercial level there. We also want to be like them and for urban art to be accepted as an art form,” he said.

“People don’t understand and accept graffiti as an art form. Of course, there are a range of people doing graffiti and some of it is vandalism. But it depends on how you look at it. If you think it’s art, it can be art.

“We want to change these views ... by working closely with our foreign colleagues.”

Alex Face, one of the four artists from Thailand participating in the exhibition, said his visit was about “exploring” the Myanmar graffiti scene – and other recent developments in the country. All four artists are visiting for the first time and will spend about 10 days here.

“It’s quite interesting. We want to know what have happened here [in Myanmar]. It’s also a chance to [learn about] the democracy here,” he said.

“I [will] try to talk to the people and paint in the city. I asked Thu Myat, ‘Hey, can we paint the wall?’ He said ‘No, no, no, you cannot. It’s too dangerous. Just do it during the exhibition.’ But I saw much graffiti in the city,” Alex said, smiling.

Phai, another of the Thai contingent, said the event would create valuable links between artists from across the region.

“We all are from the different countries [and] we have our own styles so the event is like an exchange program for us. We can also invite them to our country and discuss what [our urban art] looks like. It’s good to connect with people from same field especially from Southeast Asia,” said Phai, whose nickname is AMP.

The exhibition was sponsored by Timber Land Furniture, Moe San Pan Media and Heinrich Boll Stiftung.