

INERTIA

STUDIO VISIT - THIANG UK

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by Inertia Studio Visits



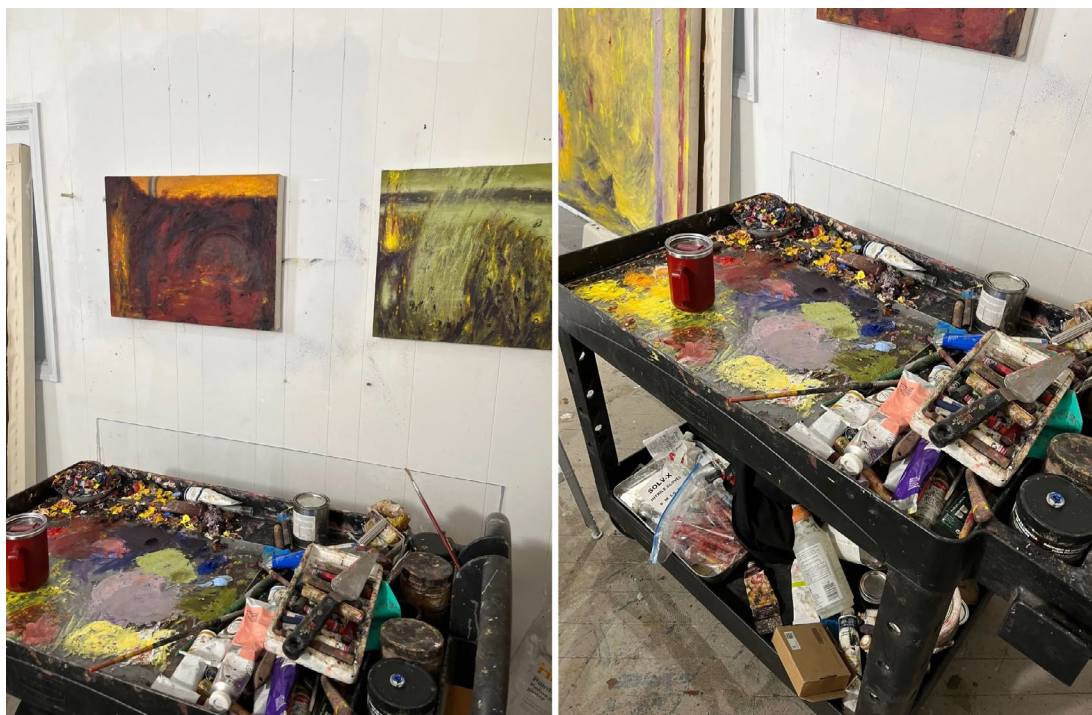
Studio visit with Thiang Uk in his Baltimore studio. March 2023

Thiang Uk is painter currently living in Baltimore, Maryland. Uk arrived in the United States from Myanmar (formerly Burma) after fleeing with his family in 2004. Uk attended university in Florida, Hunter College in New York, and most recently received his MFA from Maryland Institute College of Art. As Uk assimilated to life in the states he used painting as a way to create space for himself and other Burmese American families that had experienced similar trauma related to their country's instability which often lead to breaks in family bonds, leaving them oceans apart. Though Uk is working through trauma with painting, he also creates magical and otherworldly spaces, spaces saturated in color and human mark making, spaces that feel somewhere in between. Uk currently teaches at Towson University and works as a guard at the Baltimore Museum of Art. He is a perpetual student of the world, channeling his findings into atmospheric paintings that contain emotion, raw recordings of movement, and monochromatic mysterious spaces. I visited Thiang Uk in his Baltimore studio in March of 2023 where he shared his life story and approach to art making that includes a rich studio practice that both feeds and challenges.

Where are you from, where did you spend your formative years?

Originally from Myanmar, or formerly known as Burma, I should say how I came here, that's important in my work as well. My dad got to the United States through asylum, because he was a teacher. It was dangerous during the time that he was teaching for a lot of educators because they didn't want teachers to educate the students in different ways than the regime's propaganda and challenge authority. Due to these fears of persecution and lack of opportunities, my father ran out of the country in search of asylum abroad. Years later, he finally received

asylum status in the states and was working towards getting us greencards from Florida in hopes of getting us out of Myanmar. At the same time we moved to the capital of Burma and tried to get a visa for the family. That took years of uncertainty. We didn't know when and if we would get it. If you get it, you have to take the opportunity right away and leave the country and that's what we did. By the end of 2004 we got the visa and we abruptly left within a month of receiving the greencards with few goodbyes.



A few years after migrating to Florida, I remember seeing the news of the Burmese military regime accepting a transition to democracy that was fought for multiple generations. This transition created a lot of optimism and stability (Although the sitting/acting president will be a Military leader). The whole situation seemed bright and fairytale-like; Myanmar, the country of 70 years of struggles, pain and trauma seems to start healing. This promising window of transition to democracy would last from 2011 to 2021. I was a college student at Daytona Beach College and Hunter College during the early period of political change. Although I wanted to visit the country during this period, I was a broke college art student and wanted to focus on my studies, and I also thought that I would have the chance to go back to Burma. My parents visited there twice. I have not visited since my family migrated in December, 2004.

The Junta didn't accept the election won by the National League for Democracy in 2021. The coup d'état began in February, 2021 when the Junta claimed the election results as fraud and declared a state of emergency. Protests all over the country ensued with many deaths and rebels from different tribes rose to fight the Junta. It all sounds too familiar in the hopeless consequences of the wars that were brought by the dictators that I grew up with. The conflicts which push so many families out of the country seem to repeat. Many of us carry survivor guilt and endure the distance.

Due to this trauma and background, a lot of my work is about how that all influenced me as well as being an immigrant, you know, the idea of belonging, that's what a lot of my work is about. I have a desire to create a space in my painting, I don't think there is a word that encapsulates it, but a space of exploration of myself but also a memorial space for the people who are still there and trauma for my family (shared by a lot of Burmese American families). So a lot of it is of a space, sometimes even a little bit influenced by magical realism, but at the same time, I want to express a certain trauma that we share, you know, so that act of conjuring traumas kind of makes sure that I still remember that my origin is really still a big part of me.

That's an important part of my work, to have a balance of beauty, spirituality, but also, to make sure that struggle is a part of my work. Because that's such a big part of my family's story, and my experience.

When you went to Hunter College, did you study art?

Yeah, I actually got my two year associate's degree first because my parents didn't want me to go to art school. They wanted me to use that associate's degree as a buffer. So I did that at Daytona State College; I finally decided that I needed more challenges and I needed to elevate my understanding of the arts. Hunter College BFA was affordable and a great fit, and the city itself really opened my eyes. The program really helped me because they had great painters and artists that really challenged my understanding (lack of) of art. I went back to Florida after Hunter College, worked two years, saved some money, and then finally came to MICA for Hoffberger School of Painting in 2019.



What does your life as an artist look like right now? How do you structure your life?

I mean, right now it's a little bit difficult. I have the Baltimore Museum of Art job for three days as a guard and then I am also teaching at Towson University. I just have one class right now. I really enjoy teaching, especially this semester. My jokes are finally landing! I really enjoy the challenges of teaching in itself and the puzzle of having to verbalize a lot of my thoughts because I don't do that in my studio practice. Hopefully it is also going to make me a better communicator for my work. But also I really just enjoy talking about the students' work and helping them work through their challenges. All that's to say that balancing my studio life, BMA, and teaching has been definitely a challenge the last few months, but I'm probably starting to get the hang of it. I recently made three days open for the studio. Sometimes I take one day off to spend time with my partner. I often also come here after the BMA job, spend maybe two, three hours here after work. So I just make sure that I just build my life around art. And of course I always see art at the BMA, which is great. Almost every regular activity that I do relates to art, that has made it a lot easier for me. That allows me to still be a visually devoted person in those spaces. How do you conserve or allot energy as an artist, how do you take care of yourself?

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This is a great question. I actually talked about this with a few of my friends recently. Because I still need something else other than art. And soccer's actually a big part of my life. One of the reasons why I paint big is because I need the action of painting to be more physical. I love making small paintings too, as you can see. I really enjoy them but they're still very contained, it's a different way of perceiving and spending energy. I have to be more settled when I paint small paintings, but there's also a part of me that has a lot of energy, you know, even a little bit anxious, I think because of the country situation back home. Or, maybe it's just inherently part of my temperament.

To take pressure off of making paintings, I need something that doesn't challenge me intellectually, soccer is really that space for me to get that.. It's a sport, you know? There's a goal, there's a ball and you play with other people, which is also physically great because it takes me out of my own mind. I like the simplicity part of the sport to balance the complexity of painting in my life. Soccer is probably a big part of my mental stability.



Can you talk a little bit about the materials that you use and how you feel that they help you communicate your ideas?

I mainly use oil painting, oil sticks, oil pastels and I also use my hands to make marks (mainly on bigger paintings) For me, It's not that the medium helps me communicate my ideas but it's the undeniable connection, sensations and fascination with the paint that make me do painting. The dry marks from oil sticks and pastels help me create a certain effect that I really enjoy. I like seeing the difference of dry and wet together and different surfaces of aging. So I think that it creates a certain effect of time and duration within my work. I think that

there's a different kind of understanding of time and depth through many avenues and surfaces, so that's one of the things I pay attention to. I also use old scraps of paints from my pallets because I like the idea that different things from a different palette can still migrate into a new work.

Making a mark with my hand has opened totally different doors for me, literally feeling the paint and having a different connection with paint. Another thing I want to create in my work is a connection with animism. This was my ancestors' spiritual practice and belief. I wanted to have a better connection with that part of my history. So I think that using my hand and gesture was one way to maybe have that sort of connection with them.

I started reading about and watching YouTube videos of Joseph Beuys – the idea of the artist as a shaman. I certainly don't think of myself as a shaman but maybe as a medium. That's such a big part of painting for me, not just in my own work, but when I look at other people's work. I like the mystery, It reveals itself to me. And I like finding images, excavating, it's such fun.



Can you talk a little bit about what color and mark making mean to you?

Recently I was starting to think something visceral, something primal and spiritual. Those are the main things that I really wanted to focus on, but it is something that I feel like has always been in my being. My Paintings also deal with burmese/burmese American collective trauma along with those things . So I think that a lot of my work has been in a different kind of chromatic space recently.

I want them to have a certain healing power, but also a certain memorial space while they still carry trauma with them. So in order to do that, a lot of them have to be earthy or sometimes have colors that have super transformative power. I mean colors inherently have that for me. Yellow is something that I've really been working with – I like the illumination. Red, of course you can associate so many things. Gray is one of the things that I recently started working with because I only recently started discovering for myself that it's very

mysterious. This velvet gray is very elusive. Right now I like making my gray out of a baby blue and a kind of peach color. Balancing elusiveness and transformative qualities. Blue and green are also prominent in my paintings, they are often part of metaphors of my migrations; like traveling by water, traveling over water and all the space between two Worlds. In terms of influences in colors, some of the artists I think about are Odilon Redon, Rothko, Monet, Turner, Pinkham Ryder, Jack Whitten, Shara Hughes, and Doron Langberg. In their best works, they all seem to know how to work with colors to have this surprising, fresh and transcendental element about them.

What are some things that you're hoping to achieve or goals that you have? This could be with your painting work or for your career.

This is something that I don't really think about often, honestly, but I think that a lot of the time my work doesn't make sense in a lot of Burmese spaces. A lot of Burmese people are first generation, like myself. Which means a lot of them don't really have higher education in art or seek to understand art. A lot of our parents pressure us to do practical jobs, so a lot of us don't go into creative fields. Consequently, my abstract language or the lack of illustrative qualities doesn't make it easy for them to understand. I want people, especially Burmese American people, to be able to relate to my work but there's a visual exploration that is not so direct linguistically so it creates a language gap I think. Although I want to find a sense of relatability, I am not hungry for a one to one clarity; I want more than that. There's a certain mystery to my work that I myself don't fully know that keeps me showing up to the studio. Of course, sometimes I wish it was more relatable to them, but I also don't want to negotiate my own individual language that comes naturally. If not now, in an ideal world, maybe like a second generation, third generation of Burmese American as well as others will be relating a lot more to my work. I think that in terms of what I want to achieve, that's one of the big ones, I mean, it's more personal as well.

I am ambitious in terms of hoping to show in different cities, internationally eventually, and I want to prosper because me and my family know we struggle too well! I don't really have anything that I want to achieve in terms of artwork. Because I don't want to have to be full of intentions with no room for intuitions and improvisation. So it's all about trusting the process, exploring in itself and keep showing up for the paintings.

I'm just more about making sure that I'm just in the head for making art. Of course I should probably learn the business side and stuff like that slowly. I'm starting to, but my problem is I don't mind being just a studio person.