

## EXHIBITION GUIDE

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# HTEIN LIN ESCAPE

20 MARCH – 1 JUNE 2025  
FIRST FLOOR GALLERIES

Ikon presents a major solo exhibition by multidisciplinary artist Htein Lin from Myanmar.

Born in 1966, Htein Lin trained in law and *Anyeint* (traditional Burmese theatre) before studying visual art in a refugee camp on the Indian border with Mandalay artist Sitt Nyein Aye. Involved in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, he returned to Yangon after four years in exile, working as a comic actor and pioneering experimental performance art. In 1998, he was accused of opposition activity and detained as a political prisoner until 2004. Following his release, Htein Lin moved to the UK, creating works that reflected his travels abroad and diasporic experience. Living in the hill town of Kalaw, Myanmar since 2020, his prolific practice touches on Buddhist philosophy, memory and identity in the country's traditions and cultures.

The exhibition explores the cycles of detention and freedom which have shaped Htein Lin's life and art. It pays tribute to his lifelong commitment to documenting human experience in difficult times. At the centre of the exhibition are paintings on prison uniforms and found textile, made while he was imprisoned from 1998 to 2004, alongside drawing, sculpture, video and new work.

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From 1 to 22 May, an off-site exhibition at HMP Grendon, a therapeutic prison community in Buckinghamshire, features portraits of prison residents and soap block sculptures inspired by his carving technique. Developed in collaboration with Simon J. Harris, Ikon Artist in Residence at HMP Grendon, it explores subjects, materials and tools synonymous with prison art in Britain and Myanmar.

At Ikon, a new large-scale painting, ***Fiery Hell (2024)*** [1], portrays the plight of rural populations caught up in Myanmar's civil war since 2021. Red-gold flames surround people carrying children, the elderly and animals, fleeing villages set on fire. Htein Lin painted the figures using his fingers, a technique he first developed while in prison. Several mouths recall the bars of prison cells; a form that also references his imprisonment.

The resilience of people in Myanmar is highlighted in ***A Show of Hands (2013-)*** [2]. The installation at Ikon consists of 12 plaster casts of the hands of former political prisoners from Myanmar. Their form draws on Htein Lin's experience of healing a broken arm in a plaster cast after a cycling accident. The project records the sacrifice of former detainees, enabling them to reunite and share their memories while having their hands moulded by the artist.

Adjacent to these works is a **portrait of Burmese politician and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi** [4], painted after her release from house arrest on 10 July 1995. ***The Fly*** [3] documents a 2005 performance at the Institut Français in Yangon, following Htein Lin's release from prison in 2004. First performed for inmates while he was incarcerated, the work was inspired by George Langelaan's 1957 short story, in which a fly enters a room and influences subsequent events. The narrative reminded him of the flies he had encountered while being interrogated in prison; an experience referenced in this absorbing enactment.

A panoramic display in the central gallery shows works from the series **000235 (1998-2004) [5]**. The series title comes from Htein Lin's International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) number, which he was allocated after the ICRC received permission to visit prisoners in Myanmar's jails from 1999. Spanning a variety of subjects, scales and media, it demonstrates the extraordinary creativity of his art made in confinement.

The time-stamped works record the rhythm and emotions of prison life, such as excitement for the new millennium (***Happy New Year, 1 January 2000***); longing for family (***Waiting for Father, 5 April 2000***) and isolation (***Sitting at Iron Gate, 11 March 2002***). Events outside (***Eclipse, 16 March 2000***) are contemplated alongside death (***Death Row, 17 May 2001; 2 July 2001***). References to Buddhism (***Parinirvana, 3 May 2000***) evoke the artist's daily Vipassana meditation; a practice that helped him endure seven years in prison. Original tools and techniques surface in figures of prisoners printed with carved blocks of soap (***Three Persons Six Peace, 24 October 1999; Shadow of Hope, October 1999***); self-portraits painted with syringes, bowls and the artist's fingers in the absence of brushes (***Self-portrait, 2000; Peacock Self-portrait, 2002***); and human anatomy marked by the tops of toothpaste tubes, medical bottles and pill packets (***Biology of Art, 1999***).

Ikon's presentation is loosely chronological. Small pieces are followed by larger canvases, reflecting Htein Lin's move from Mandalay to Myaungmya Prison in May 2000, where solitary confinement made it easier for him to work unobserved. While these pieces were smuggled out of prison, others were lost or destroyed, highlighting the risk undertaken by Htein Lin and those who helped to preserve them.

Accessed from the central gallery, ***When I was a Lousy Millionaire (2022) [6]*** revisits Htein Lin's time as a member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF). The ABSDF was part of a jungle-based resistance movement that fought for democracy and human rights after the 1988 Uprising against the Burma Socialist Programme Party, which had governed Myanmar as a totalitarian one-party state under the leadership of General Ne Win. After a devastating internal rupture between two factions, Htein Lin was severely tortured and saw more than 30 comrades killed by other rebels. Beginning with an account of the communal removal of headlice in his village, the video draws a parallel to his first experience of body lice while chained in freezing mountain temperatures. The Burmese title *Kyanaw Than Kywe Thahteh Phyt Khae Sin Ka* contains the homograph 'Than', which means both lice and millions.

The final room presents paintings from ***How do you find...? (2006-) [7-9]***. Reflecting Htein Lin's interpretation of the friendly question from locals about his experience of living in the UK and visits to other foreign countries, the selection includes ***How do you find Birmingham? (2024) [7]***, a vibrant panorama of the city that includes the Dhamma Talaka Peace Pagoda, the only Buddhist temple in Europe built in the traditional Burmese style. **A selection of drawings from the 1990s [10-19]** evidence his early interest in street scenes and everyday objects as painting tools. They include views of Yangon's bustling night market and intimate sketches of family and friends.

## EXHIBITION SUPPORTERS

This exhibition is supported by the British Council through the Connections Through Culture grants programme and ai. gallery.

## FREE DIGITAL GUIDE

Discover more about the exhibition with our free digital guide on Bloomberg Connects, the arts and culture app.



## EVENTS

**Spotlight Tour with Kyel Sin Lin, CEO and Curator,  
Coming from Kalaw**

**Thursday 20 March, 1-1.30pm**

**Free, booking essential**

**Exhibition Tour with Vera Mey, art historian and independent  
curator**

**Friday 25 April, 3-4pm**

**Free, booking essential**

**In Conversation with Vicky Bowman, former British  
Ambassador to Myanmar and wife of Htein Lin and  
Melanie Pocock, Artistic Director (Exhibitions), Ikon**

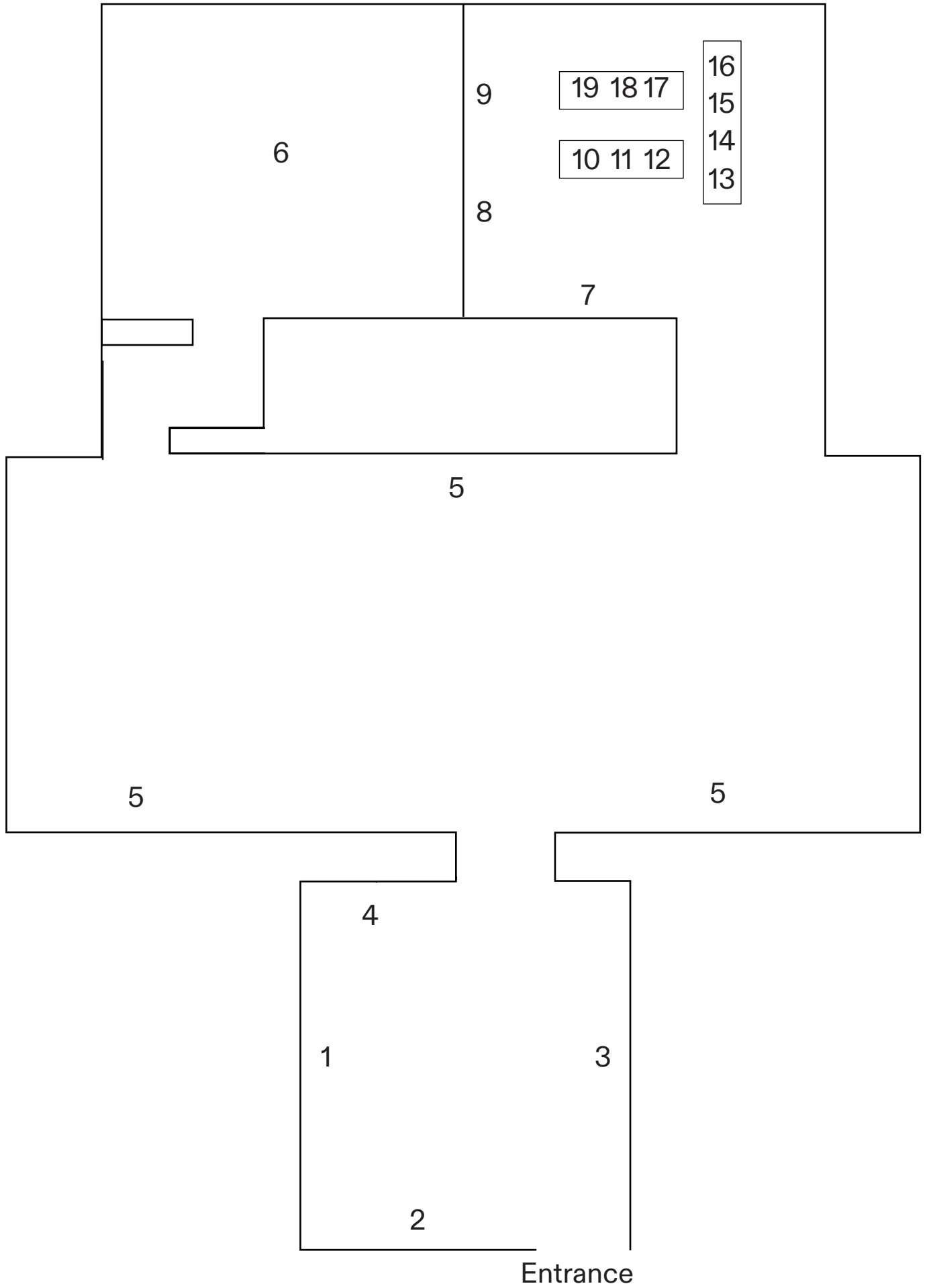
**Saturday 17 May, 6-7pm**

**Tickets £3, booking essential**

Book your place on our website [ikon-gallery.org](http://ikon-gallery.org).



# GALLERY MAP



## LIST OF WORKS

1. *Fiery Hell* (2024), acrylic on canvas
2. *A Show of Hands* (2013-), 12 plaster cast sculptures
3. *The Fly* (2005), video, colour sound, 7:39 minutes
4. *Aung San Suu Kyi* (1995), watercolour on paper
5. *000235* (1998-2004), mixed media on found textile
6. *When I was a Lousy Millionaire* (2022), video, colour, sound, 24:56 minutes
7. *How do you find Birmingham?* (2024), acrylic on canvas
8. *How do you find London?* (2013), acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Niya Hill
9. *How do you find Belfast?* (2008), earth, glue and shan paper collage on canvas. Courtesy Tasneem Gallery, Barcelona
10. *Night Market* (1994), ink and watercolour on paper
11. *The Little Bug in the Ear I*, (1995), acrylic on paper
12. *The Little Bug in the Ear II* (1995), ink on paper
13. *Hledan Market* (1993), ink on paper and card
14. *Sugar Cane Juice Shop* (1994), ink on paper and card
15. *The Joyful Ones* (1994), ink on card
16. *The Lorry Parked in the Night* (1994), ink on card
17. *Artists and Model* (1996), acrylic on paper
18. *Father, Mother & Daughter* (1997), acrylic on paper
19. *The Dance of Two Souls* (1997), acrylic on paper

All works courtesy the artist unless otherwise stated

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