

IKON

Ikon Gallery
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free entry / donations welcome
Registered charity no. 528892

HTEIN LIN

ESCAPE

20 MARCH – 1 JUNE 2025



Htein Lin, *Sitting at Iron Gate* (2002) from the series 000235 (1998-2004).
Acrylic and vinyl paint on textile. © Courtesy the artist.

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

Evoking his lifelong commitment to documenting human experience in difficult times, it shows a comprehensive selection of the artist's paintings made while he was a political prisoner from 1998 to 2004 on prison uniforms and found textile, alongside drawing, sculpture, video and new work. Htein Lin also makes new artworks with residents of HMP Grendon, Buckinghamshire, exploring prison art in Britain and Myanmar.

At Ikon Gallery, Htein Lin's new large-scale painting, *Fiery Hell* (2024), portrays the plight of Myanmar's rural populations, including ethnic and religious minorities, caught up in the ongoing civil war. Red-gold flames surround figures carrying children, the elderly and animals, fleeing villages set on fire. Resilience in the face of decades of oppression in the country is highlighted in A

Show of Hands (2013-), an installation of 12 plaster casts of the hands of former political prisoners from Myanmar. Inspired by the artist's experience of healing a broken arm in a plaster cast after a cycling accident, the ongoing project records the sacrifice of former detainees and enables them to reunite and share their memories while having their hands moulded by the artist.

At the centre of the exhibition are over 45 works from the *000235* series (1998-2004). Titled after Htein Lin's International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) number, they demonstrate the ingenuity and originality of his art made in confinement: printed and drawn labyrinths of swirling arteries, suffering organs and razor-sharp bones marked with the tops of toothpaste tubes, medical bottles and pill packets (*Biology of Art*, 1999); vibrant self-portraits painted with syringes, bowls and the artist's fingers in the absence of brushes (*Self-portrait*, 2000; *Peacock Self-portrait*, 2002), and poignant representations of prison cells isolated by interlocking limbs (*Sitting at Iron Gate*, 2002). The time-stamped paintings record the rhythm and emotions of prison life: excitement for the new millennium (*Happy New Year II*, 2000); longing for pleasure (*Dancers*, 2000); and darkness mitigated by hope, fostered through Buddhism and daily Vipassana meditation (*Parinivana*, 2000).

Htein Lin's visual language is further explored in a selection of drawings from the 1990s and 2000s. Shown in public for the first time, they evidence his early interest in using everyday objects as painting tools and street life in Myanmar. In comparison, *How do you find Birmingham?* (2024), a new painting commissioned by Ikon, forms a vibrant panorama of the bustling city. Part of a wider series featuring cities including London, Belfast and Barcelona, its title references Htein Lin's interpretation of the friendly question from locals when he moved to the UK and visited other foreign countries from 2006. It combines architectural icons such as Birmingham's Central Library and Dhamma Talaka Peace Pagoda, the only Buddhist temple in Europe built in the traditional Burmese style.

Video works give an insight into Htein Lin's writing and performance. *The Fly* documents a 2005 performance in Yangon at the Institut Français following his release from prison in 2004. First performed for inmates while he was in prison, the work was inspired by George Langelaan's 1957 short story in which a fly enters a room and influences subsequent events, reminding him of the flies he had encountered while being interrogated in prison. *When I was a Lousy Millionaire* (2022) revisits the artist's time as a member of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) in a jungle-based resistance movement fighting for democracy and human rights. After a devastating internal rupture between two factions, Htein Lin was severely tortured and saw over thirty of his comrades killed by other rebels. Beginning with an account of the friendly communal removal of headlice in his village, he draws a parallel to his first experience of body lice while chained in freezing mountain temperatures, examining the moral choices made about killing in times of conflict.

A key element of Htein Lin's project for Ikon includes artworks made with residents of HMP Grendon in Buckinghamshire. An off-site exhibition at the prison (1 - 22 May), includes portraits of prison residents and soap block sculptures inspired by the artist's carving technique. The display follows workshops developed in collaboration with current HMP Grendon Artist in Residence

Simon J. Harris, and explores subjects, materials and tools synonymous with prison art in Britain and Myanmar.

“Although I am currently unable to travel outside of Myanmar, knowing that my work is being shown in exhibitions overseas like Ikon keeps open a window for me to look out on the world. It also offers a chance for the world outside to see what is happening in Myanmar”. Htein Lin

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

For more information, press appointments, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Rebecca Small by email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or call Ikon on 0121 248 0708.

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Notes to Editors:

1. **Htein Lin** was born in 1966 in Ingapu, Myanmar. At university in Yangon, he studied law and performed *Anyeint* (traditional Burmese theatre). He first studied visual art in a refugee camp on the Indian border with Mandalay artist Sitt Nyein Aye, while involved in student politics and the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Returning to Yangon in 1992 after four years in exile and escaping detention by student rebel faction, he worked as a comic actor and artist, pioneering performance art in solo and collaborative works. In 1998 Htein Lin was accused of opposition activity and imprisoned. During his seven years in prison, he developed his visual art, using items available to him such as bowls, blocks of soap and cigarette lighters to make paintings and monoprints on cotton prison uniforms and found textile. The *000235* ‘prison paintings’ capture the harsh living conditions, suffering, hope and resilience of prisoners. The hundreds of drawings and paintings which survive from this period are held in the artist’s archive and the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. His multidisciplinary practice spans painting, sculpture, installation, performance and writing, and explores personal and diasporic experience; Buddhist philosophy; and memory and identity in Myanmar tradition and culture.

Htein Lin’s work is held in public museums around the world including M+, Hong Kong; International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva; Singapore Art Museum; and Museum Five Continents, Munich. His work has been included in major exhibitions such as the Singapore Biennale (2016), ‘SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now’ at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2017) and the Asia-Pacific Triennale (2018). In Myanmar, his work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions at the Goethe Institut and the River Gallery, among others. In 2007, an exhibition of the *000235* ‘prison paintings’ took place at Asia House, London. He has worked with social justice and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and was a judge for the Koestler Trust Prison Art prize, UK (2010–2013). In 2021, he co-founded the Association for Myanmar Contemporary Art (AMCA) to support a new generation of artists and audiences. He lives and works in Kalaw, Myanmar.

2. **Art at HMP Grendon**, Ikon’s artist residency at HMP Grendon, Buckinghamshire, has been generously funded by the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust since 2010 and managed by Ikon since 2014. In 2022, with a focus on the development of the prisoners’ artistic practice, Ikon opened the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Studio at HMP Grendon – a dedicated art school-inspired space used for weekly workshops and exhibitions featuring artwork by prisoners and professional

artists. This space was made possible with the support of the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust and the senior team at HMP Grendon.

Ikon has managed three previous residences at HMP Grendon, by Edmund Clark (2014 – 2018), Dean Kelland (2019 – 2023) and James Lomax (2024), resulting in major exhibitions at Ikon Gallery. Simon J. Harris' residency (2024 – 2025) will be followed by a second 12-month residency (2026). In 2025 Ikon commences residencies in two other prisons, including HMP Spring Hill funded by the Rothschild Foundation. The residencies run alongside a public programme of research symposia and events at Ikon, allowing a platform for public discourse on the role of art in criminal justice.

- Ikon** is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art gallery, situated in Birmingham's city centre. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2024. It is an educational charity with free entry for all, and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features international and local artists working in a variety of media, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Ikon aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. ikon-gallery.org
- Ikon** is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am-5pm. Free entry, donations welcome. Ikon is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, and Birmingham City Council.
- The British Council** is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. We do this through our work in arts and culture, education and the English language. We work with people in over 200 countries and territories and are on the ground in more than 100 countries. britishcouncil.org
The British Council's **Connections Through Culture grants** support new cultural collaborations between the UK and the Asia Pacific region. This support assists artists and cultural organisations working across all art forms to create new connections and collaborative projects.
- Arts Council England** is the national development agency for creativity and culture. ACE have set out their strategic vision in *Let's Create* that by 2030 they want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. From 2023 to 2026 ACE will invest over £467 million of public money from Government and an estimated £250 million from The National Lottery each year to help support the sector and to deliver this vision. artscouncil.org.uk
- Birmingham City Council** is the local government body responsible for the governance of the City of Birmingham, UK. It is the most populated local council area in the United Kingdom (excluding counties) with 101 elected councillors representing over one million people, in 69 wards. The council headquarters are at the Council House, Victoria Square in the heart of the city centre. The council is responsible for running nearly all local services, with the exception of those run by joint boards. For more information visit birmingham.gov.uk

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