

by Willi Bürgi, Lucerne, 7. February 2009

Burmese monks at the St. Urban monastery

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The transformation is as exotic as it is poignant. Monks in swirling robes float down a long corridor at the St. Urban monastery - the monks of the Burmese painter Min Wae Aung.

The pictures do not tell of life in Burma, now known as Myanmar. Rather they concentrate on a central event in the lives of most people in the country, a country which most often makes the headlines over here because of the brutal military regime, the catastrophic floods, the widespread poverty. Almost every Burmese person, at least for a short time, goes into a monastery where he or she will read the old writings, meditate, unify the soul with the transcendental. Min Wae Aung, born in 1960 in Danubyu and today living in the city of Rangoon, himself spent six years in a monastery.

During that time the images of the monks' lives impressed themselves upon him and he now paints these in ever-changing variety on the canvas. He has them moving through the blazing heat in various groups. Umbrellas floating above them ward off the sun. They step unspeaking away from the observer towards a distant goal which is somewhere in the infinity of a pale sand, not infrequently in a magical golden space. Closer inspection reveals that this space which surrounds them is applied in unending succession by the use of short, regular brush strokes or repetitive dabs of colour. The clothes of the monks or novices, filled with movement, fall in long folds on which the artist has depicted with unending patience the rich play of light and shade. Sometimes the acrylic covers the canvas completely; sometimes its structure is allowed to show through on the clothes so that the textile character of the canvas defines the texture of the clothing.

The monks' feet seem to float in the space, the clothing to sail above it like butterflies. Some monks are carrying their pots in which they collect food from the population. Sometimes a little novice looks out from the picture back towards the observer, more as invitation than out of fear for what awaits him ahead. At times the monks and their billowy robes take up the whole visual space or become, as with the travelling monks in "Travellers 1", white and beige before a gold background, a mountain landscape, dissolving as if they had become one with their surroundings.

Min Wae Aung was not merely practicing the oft sought reduction of materials here, said the artist, writer and philosopher Wilhelm Kufferath von Kendenich before the numerous guests at the private view. "Art is the taking in of images and experiences of this world, taking them up into the soul with no actual goal, simply out of an inner freedom. And when the soul is filled with impressions the artist takes them, mixes them with his own experiences and begins, out of inner freedom, to paint them onto the canvas or to compose. Anyone coming into contact with the pictures must be able to feel and absorb the artist's inner freedom. Here now the artist has reduced the life depicted to stillness, calm."

art-st-urban

To close, Kufferath pointed to the fact that Wae Aung, like Aeschlimann, had invested a great deal in the development of artists in his country. Something which must be very important considering the political situation. He has the good fortune to create a connection with foreign countries with his pictures, or as Heinz Aeschlimann of art-st-urban said, to participate in the dialogue between East and West.

The Zurich based art agency Global Art Source, who have already facilitated one successful exhibition for the Burmese artist in Zurich, have helped a great deal in this regard.

Alongside the theme of monks, in a separate room the artist is showing a few portraits of Burmese women which vaguely bring to mind Gauguin's south sea paintings but which in their joy of colour and form pay respect to Burmese women.

The exhibition also includes a room in the artpavillon-st-urban where there is plenty of room for the best pictures. The corridor which leads there is also worth a look because it shows how untiring Heinz and Gertrud Aeschlimann are in developing the St. Urban cultural centre.

Author: Willi Bürgi

The exhibition in the St. Urban monastery and in the Museum artpavillon-st-urban is on until 3rd May. Telephone for an appointment before visiting on 079 697 79 73