

Shwe Wutt Hmon

*In conversation with*

Guo-Liang Tan

**Guo-Liang Tan** I am curious about the exhibition title *Noise and Cloud and Us*. It's very poetic and rather elusive, quite different from the working title you had in mind when we first started talking about the project. Can you say something about it? What prompted the change?

**Shwe Wutt Hmon** When I first started working on this project, I was spending a lot of time with my sister Kyi Kyi Thar, who is struggling with schizophrenia. I had initially titled it Dear Virus, in part due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which influenced me to relate her struggles with mental health to the "virus" that has invaded our lives so to speak. I wanted my work to address my sister, like in a letter, so in my mind "Dear Sister" became "Dear Virus".

Over time, the work evolved to be more of a collaborative journey and so I wanted a title that would better reflect this. In this body of photographs, I try to juxtapose direct observations of my sister's daily life with visuals that are more abstract and metaphorical in nature. "Noise" and "Cloud" refer to the hallucinated sounds my sister has been hearing and her delusional paranoia which can manifest as something abstract and elusive. Spending time and working with my sister, has taught me to be empathetic of her experience and be reflective of my own thoughts. There is something very cyclical about this collaborative process where both our states of being influence each other and are perpetual with the passage of time. In this sense, *Noise and Cloud and Us* describes where I am with the work now.

It sounds like these images were made during a very difficult time for you and your sister. How did you negotiate your position as photographer in relation to something so close and immediate? What made you decide to turn such a personal experience into a subject for your art?

As a photographer, I am interested in telling personal stories from which I can connect and examine larger social issues. Conversely, if I work on societal stories, I aim to reflect and draw upon my own position within the issues examined. In my other works, I share very close relationships with my subjects: my ex, my grandparents, my roommate and myself. As someone who enjoys intimate and small social circles, I have always been interested in those around me the most and my immediate instinct as a photographer is to create and tell their stories.

But I would say turning my lens towards my sister and my family was a more spontaneous act in the very beginning. A very close friend first encouraged me to photograph my sister when she developed paranoia two years ago. Someone struggling with mental health, who is also an artist, might be an interesting subject for some, but I didn't feel a personal motivation or connection to tell her story at that time. But when I was finally confined with my sister in her worst condition to date amidst the first ever Covid-19 lockdown, my emotions led me to grab my camera as a way to deal with a very difficult and suffocating situation. It was a very instinctive and natural decision for me.

I am struck by how you have positioned your sister in the work. You listed Kyi Kyi Thar as your 'collaborator' and there are a number of gestures here that acknowledge her role beyond a passive subject.

First, there are her paintings which are photographed alongside, and at times in absence of, their maker. Then, there is the slide show of Kyi Kyi's own photographs which occupies the central space in the gallery. Rather than a conventional photographer-subject relationship, you clearly wanted to give her a sense of agency.

At which point did you decide to take this approach?

I have never been comfortable with the concept of a photographer as an agent of power and the people whom we photograph as passive subjects. I prefer to build a relationship between the photographer and the subject that is more collaborative and mutual.

When I first started photographing my sister, she was severely schizophrenic and I had to make all the decisions. I had requested her permission to photograph her, and using black and white was a very conscious decision for my own mental state, seeing the whole situation felt very dire and hopeless. I just couldn't find any colour at that moment. On the other hand, I was seeing my sister doing these very colourful paintings in a dark moment. At first, I was very uncomfortable with all her colours but I began to understand how this is very important for her and how her process of coping and healing is negated because of my decision to use black and white photography.

At that point, I was very curious to see how to include her in the work creatively. It was very interesting for me to see her make her own decisions when I asked her to contribute to the work by painting on my photographs. At first, she repainted the same paintings as in my photographs. Later, she started to draw paintings that were different to the ones originally photographed. She told me she wanted to be more free. And when I suggested that she could scratch out parts of the photograph for her paintings, she refused as she didn't want to destroy my photographs.

Through the process, we became very close, as both sisters and collaborators. At one point, she asked me about my film developing process and so I asked if she would like to try photography too. She was very willing to broaden our collaboration but strongly refused to work with black and white photography as she wants to see colour. In the exhibition, I decided to install a slide projection of my sister's own photographs from our informal sessions in the centre of the gallery to give voice to her creativity and to acknowledge her active role in the exhibition.

I find the pairing of your layered 'noise' images and Kyi Kyi Thar's abstract paintings very interesting. It is almost like you are staging a dialogue between the two. What was the process like in making these images? Did you show them to your sister? Did it have any effect on her paintings, and vice versa?

When I was photographing my sister, I brought up various aspects of her life: her struggles, her psyche, her emotions, her healing process, her daily life activities, her relationship with the family as well as my own emotions and feelings towards seeing all these things. I showed her all my images and while she doesn't comment much on my work, she feels thankful as it has helped her to process all those hard times.

One thing that affected her paintings through this collaboration was that she ended up using brighter colours. She told me the brighter colours can stand out against the black and white tones of my photographs. She recalled that it was an aesthetic response at first but gradually, the choice of colours became more of a reflection of her emotional states. The mood and contents of my images also changed along the journey, influenced by my time with my sister and seeing the changes in her works. In the exhibition, I try to create a dialogue between my photographs and her paintings through the selection and sequence of images in the gallery space, which I hope represents an overall narrative that reflects the varying emotions of our journey together.

The threshold of what is visible and what is imagined appears to be an important part of the exhibition. For me, your choice of using analogue black and white photography and playing with its filmic grains goes very well with the ambient sound recording by your sister. Both embody a sense of ambiguity, allowing us to project our own imaginings onto another mental and psychological space. What was the story behind the recording and why have you included it in the exhibition?

On a night in April last year, my sister took the whole bottle of Chlorpheniramine. When my whole family came together to talk to her and try to understand why she had tried to take her own life, she insisted that I listen to a recording she made on her mobile phone before she took the pills. For her, this was evidence to prove that she took the medicine because “someone” was forcing her to take them. Though I cannot imagine exactly what was going through her mind, I could sense how the sounds and noises appeared to her. I felt that this audio recording speaks a lot about her psyche. It’s very painful for me whenever my sister presents the sound file and asks me to listen to what she has heard. At the same time, it’s like her crying for me to put myself in her shoes. I want the audience to experience the world of a hallucinated person. Without the sound, our story and the work is not complete.

It’s almost been a year since we started working together on this project! It’s been such a challenging year in more ways than one. What was the entire process like for you and how do you feel seeing the works finally coming together in the exhibition?

When I submitted this project for the Objectifs Documentary Award, it was in its infant stage. Thanks to the financial, technical and emotional support I have received, I could keep developing the work in a fruitful way. You are the first non-photographer curator/artist I have ever worked with and I think this work is one which I have produced with the most absolute freedom. Working with you has encouraged me to be more thoughtful and to be more experimental with my medium and presentation. Although it has been very challenging with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, it’s also perfect timing to work with someone whose background and experience is different from mine while I am at the verge of expanding my practice. This is my first ever solo exhibition and I have learnt a lot about curating and presenting my own work.

While we were preparing for the exhibition, I fell into a nightmare of not being able to accept the hard reality of what is happening in my country; the coup, the civil war and

the whole tragedy my country is facing. While I am excited for my exhibition, it has also been really difficult to concentrate and focus on the preparation. For that, I am very grateful to the Objectifs team for being so patient and supportive. Seeing the work finally coming together in the exhibition (at least virtually) has really made me happy and I can't wait for others to see the exhibition as well! "Noise And Cloud And Us" is a very personal work and it's very meaningful to me that I could exhibit such a beautiful work in such a difficult time.

Text by Guo-Liang Tan, May 2021

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