**Hunter Panther Deerfield**: I believe it was Leo Tolstoy who said the way to have any two people get along is to ask them what they love and what they hate. We all generally love and generally hate the same things. So, I ask you: what do you love, and what do you hate?

**Sai Htin Linn Htet**: I hate I would say, being restricted, rules, and the restrictions of society. Routines, the normal, the typical. That doesn’t excite me. To be specific, the nine-to-five lifestyle. I have nothing against people that live that way. I totally respect why we have these kinds of boundaries and restrictions in order to control society and put everything in order. But for me as an individual, what I hate the most is boundaries. What I love is destroying the boundaries.

**HPD**: Transgression. Is that a word you would use?

**SHLH**: Yeah, that is a word I would use. For example, I used to limit myself within a boundary, by sticking to photography and being loyal to the restrictions of what that medium can offer. But with time I found it's not enough, I wanted to extend the boundaries. By trying other mediums — for example, painting, videography, anything available to me — I always try to get out of the boundaries.

**HPD**: Is there a particular moment that you remember first coming up against a boundary? And the desire to transgress?

**SHLH**: I have been dealing with that since I was young. It’s not a particular moment, it’s the whole profile of my life. My father is a huge fan of art, his friends are writers, painters, and he used to be a comedian. Not a standup comedian, but a comedian from Burmese theatre. His friend is one of the most famous comedians here. But my father decided for a more practical life, because the artistic industry back then is quite chaotic. They didn’t really have boundaries, they had their own definition of boundaries, quite different from my own definition. So, since I was young, I grew up with books and art, but my dad didn’t want me to be an artist. And not because he hated me creating things, but because he didn’t want me socialized within the art industry. He had a perspective of the industry according to his own experiences, and he didn’t want me to the face the same thing. But voila, two decades later, here I am, doing the things he doesn’t really approve of, so I would say I have to get out of my own boundaries too. So, there's no particular moment, but the flow of life in a way.

**HPD**: If I remember from a previous conversation, your father is a dentist, and your mother is a judge. What does your mother think of your artistic career?

**SHLH**: I wouldn't become who I am without the support of my mom. I mean her emotional support, because she can sense my happiness. My dad doesn’t really understand me, because I'm more introverted, and my dad has OCD. I found that out recently, but I’ve been dealing with it all my life.

**HPD**: You, yourself, have OCD?

**SHLH**: My dad has OCD. I have ADHD-ish. [laughs] I don't know where it comes from. I recently found that he has OCD. When I was young my mom had to transfer to other places because she's a judge, so I ended up with my dad. Since he has OCD, he’s very strict. He likes everything put in order. I'm the opposite of that. I cannot be that organized, I cannot be neat and tidy. And he was always stressed because of working for the government as a dentist. I became his therapist in a way, whenever he came back from work. I was just a kid, eight or nine years old. And he would talk about how stressful his work is. I understand what he's going through, but I had to take everything as a kid. So, I become mature when I'm not supposed to. So, I mean, that's the story of my dad. My mom is the other way. She always supported me. She can sense who I am. I did not really open up to my dad emotionally. Of course, I love him, but I did not really open up to him. We are not coming from a very prestigious or wealthy family. My mom can sense my emotions. She wants me to do whatever will make me happy. I'm choosing this lifestyle which is very unpredictable. The art industry as a whole, you cannot predict anything. And especially this country, anything can happen. If you look at the politics, we don't know what will happen. The next ten days, tomorrow, we can't really predict. A *coup d’etat* can happen any time. The political situation is not stable. And what I'm doing is not very practical, I cannot really plan anything, but just try to do the best of course. While living this type of lifestyle my mother has been very supportive.

**HPD**: What was the first medium of art that you got interested in?

**SHLH**: The first interaction I had with a medium of art was literature. We have a very small library in Lashio, which is not a very big city in the Shan state. So, I grew up with that. By the time my dad was working I was an only child, so I don't really hang out with other kinds too. So all I did was read, and then some books about the biography of painters, etc. so I'm familiar with literature, painting, and the fact that I had the chance to live with the Mandalay headmaster of the University of Art and Culture, I spent a while at his place….

**HPD**: How was that?

**SHLH**: It was just for a short while, but I got to understand the inner perspective of how an artist’s life is.

**HPD**: How did you end up with the headmaster?

**SHLH**: So, my mom had to move to Mandalay, which was the former second capital after Yangon. So, we moved there when I was seven. My mom was moving but she could not come yet, as there was a procedure for waiting for another judge to come to her place to transfer all the responsibilities etc., so by the time she would have finished that, school would have already begun, so I had to go to Mandalay and stay with the headmaster of the University of Art and Culture. He’s my dad’s friend. I had to stay there for a while, for like five or six months. I went to the same school his daughter went to, which is very close to the mortuary. It was a very creepy feeling.

**HPD**: The University of Art and Culture — this was more traditional art, right?

**SHLH**: Yeah, more traditional art. But back then I didn’t really understand what art was. They mostly relied on technique, not on concepts. So, it's very traditional, typical, propaganda-ish, kind of art. Everything's beautiful. Landscape. Cultural. You know what I mean. But later in my life, I learned about very strong contemporary artists in Myanmar.

**HPD**: And how did you learn about contemporary art?

**SHLH**: I would say that in Myanmar we don't have many institutions to learn about contemporary art. It's all about learning from whatever available sources. The internet, some of the local galleries, Myanm/art, they have some contemporary sources, some libraries. I mean, it's scattered about. It's not like I learned contemporary art in a university or something. It was mainly about educating myself, trying to learn everything by myself. Of course, traveling around workshops and museums really helped. I took part in a few of them. So yeah, that too.

**HPD**: Are there certain artists, artworks, films, or literature that’ve been influential to you?

**SHLH**: Are there particular media that inspire me?

**HPD**: Or people that you’ve been inspired by?

**SHLH**: The first I would say would be photography. And the first and foremost photographer is Daido Moriyama. You know Japanese Photographers. Like we were mentioning the other day, while talking with Kaung Htet [our previous meeting]. I have a huge love for some Japanese photographers. And it started with Daido Moriyama. And then it came to Ikko Narahara, Eikoh Hosoe, and you know, later Shomei Tomatsu — his work “Skin of the Nations” — and Antoine d’Agata. I feel like I'm speaking the same language as these photographers. Another one is the painter Francis Bacon. I would say he's very important in my life too.

And how did I learn about Bacon?Just searching up on YouTube and finding an old documentary about him. And I started buying. When I was in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, I couldn't help myself asking who they liked at their bookstore. I asked if they have Francis Bacon books, because I really love him. I would say my inspiration doesn't really come from just one medium. It's a combination of many things. Of course, when I started to show my interest in candid photography — because candid photography is very wild, it doesn't have many rules, it's more about being authentic and being raw — the first name that popped up when I was doing research was Daido Moriyama. So, I with the help of my friends, I bought his book… I forgot the name... that book that has all the work of his… But I looked at it and I didn’t understand it at all. I was like what the fuck. I don't understand it. I looked through it and I put it on the book shelf for a while. And of course, that was several years ago. And when I started to practice photography, I didn't understand art or photography that much.

Later, as I evolved into my photography, my practice, and my knowledge about art, I found that Daido and I speak the same language. It’s his raw prettiness. I don't know, it's like you just click with somebody. You don't really know that person. You don't really know them in real life. It's just like you found a soulmate. It's your instinct, it's your gut. We speak the same language. And from that I got so much inspiration from his work, but I don't copy his personal style at all. I’ll look at his work again, and then I’ll close the book, and I’ll reflect about what it makes me feel like while I'm looking through the work. And I’ll try to remember those feelings and use them whenever I create my work. That's how I developed my first series of work. The monochrome series. Sorry for such a long answer…

Later, when my work got more and more mature, I realized I had set my own boundaries and I didn’t like that. I had to evolve in a way. Why was I doing documentary work in color but only my personal project in black and white? My personal project has to represent me. So that's why it evolved into color. I started to learn about all these experimental films, all these famous cinematographers and famous filmmakers. From the Czech Republic. From everywhere. I started to think about how to show my own emotions in color. So, I went to this workshop in Penang. My mentor there was Maggie Steber, who is a Pulitzer Prize finalist this year. Just learning things from her totally changed me. I can reveal myself and express myself in color photography now.

**HPD**: What did she say? Anything particular?

**SHLH**: You know that there is some power that you can sense from someone. Especially when near them, you can see what kind of person they are. And then you feel like you already learnt something, spiritually. Maggie Steber is that kind of special person for me.

The same thing with Antoine d’Agata. I really wanted to join his workshop because I'm a huge fan of his work, so I went to Angkor Photo Festival. I didn't have a chance to join his workshop. My mentor was also great, but I wanted to join Antoine’s, so I just talked to him. His main work is about prostitution, sex, desire, lust. It’s very controversial, emotional work. I only chatted with him. Just being near him, talking for ten or fifteen minutes, I think I learned a lot about many things. It's not about how great of an artist you are. It has to be a combination of both. If you are a shitty human being, it shows in your work. People can sense it, you know. Like your aura itself is an emotional medium, people can sense it. If it's bullshit, they know it's bullshit. So, the people I really admire are a combination of both: great artists and also great human beings at the same time. And Antoine d’Agata, people judge him because his work is mostly about sex, the extremes of the human condition, but he's such a gentleman, So, that's how I learn things. Not through institutions or anything, but sometimes I have this opportunity, so I learn, spiritually. It sounds a bit cliched, but yeah.

**HPD**: I was just yesterday reading Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s book of interviews, which was at Myanm/art, and he said in the introduction that one question he always asks people in all of his interviews: “do you have an unfinished project or an unrealized project that you'd like to do.” So, I’d like to ask you that question: do you have an idea for something you haven't done yet, but that you'd like to do?

**SHLH**: Oh man, yeah of course. I think like — I’m sorry I always try to beat around the bush whenever I answer something because I have more answers to each question — but yeah, I used to think that if I just focus on my own practice I don't really have to care about any other thing, but that’s not how the world works. Now everybody can be a… I totally forgot the name, anyway, the lady shot with Rolleiflex all her life... and then she…

**HPD**: Oh, like the nanny, who did self-portraits in all the mirrors.

**SHLH**: Yeah, I totally forgot her name.

**HPD**: Nan Goldin? Wait no, that's a famous photographer.... [It was Vivian Maier]

**SHLH**: I mean not everyone can be like her. She died and left all her boxes of films. I used to think that way, that I'd just create works and I didn’t really care about what happened to them. But it doesn't work that way. Everybody these days is creating. It’s not that special anymore. I have this whole vision for a project, not just for myself, but somehow, it’s a very important political, environmental project that I’ve developed. And I’m thinking about it right now, by means of a concept, by means of how I’ll execute it, visually, with multi-media, motion films, sounds… I already have this plan. I just cannot materialize it. That frustrates me.

**HPD**: What is that plan?

**SHLH**: It's very related to environmental issues here. I have to do it now. Time is ticking. I have to do it as soon as possible, but the thing is… I don't have the budget for it. It’s very related to what can happen. So, the project I want to do relates to the danger of the environmental situation in Myanmar. It can happen at any time, and I want to work on that. But we don't know when that danger can happen.

**HPD**: You want to do your work before the danger can happen?

**SHLH**: Yeah, I want to find a way that I can have a grant or funding for that. Let’s see whether I can do it or not. I think it would be very important. Not just for myself, but for the country and for the people.

**HPD**: But you wish to be very secretive about the nature of the project, and its purpose?

**SHLH**: Yeah. Sometimes you're talking about it and it doesn’t happen, so what's the point? It will spoil the fun. Of course, as I am working as a curator and as a visual artist, sometimes it's hard. The earning is not there all the time. So of course: the budget. Sometimes you have great plans for a personal project, but you don't have the budget for it.

**HPD**: In your opinion, what does the Myanmar art scene need?

**SHLH**: Institutions. Better institutions. We have a tremendous weakness in state-provided institutions, especially for contemporary art. Myanmar has started to open up. People are saying there are so many possibilities. But we have a University of Art and Culture that doesn't have a photography department. They have a painting department, a cinematography department. Cinematography is like more progressive these days. But here people don't really consider photography as an art. We need more education. For the artists, as well. We need more state-funded art spaces. State-funded artist exchange program. I think what we need is education in every sector. Education is the main component here, so that people know the importance of art. So that artists are more empowered to create, empowered and confident in their creations. That’s what we need for now.

**HPD**: And what is the importance of art?

**SHLH**: As you may know, especially these days, in the contemporary art industry, social change and art sometimes become companions. Many of the artists have issue-based artworks. I think sometimes it has an impact on social change, too. In Myanmar there are so many things that we need to change, because our traditional and cultural values sometimes aren’t very fitted to the contemporary timeline. We have discrimination based on identity, based on beliefs, based on religion, gender and sexual orientation. And based on age. If you’re young and capable some will think you don’t know as much as someone who’s old and stupid. So, Myanmar is still very closed. We have so many unresolved social issues.

**HPD**: Unlike the West that's resolved all of its social issues...?

**SHLH**: I mean look at the United States. There are laws and mechanisms that people can report too. We don't really have that kind of rule of law in Myanmar. You already might know about freedom of expression here. Freedom of speech, freedom of press, we don't have that kind of thing fully yet. I think art is a way that is very important for social change. With art we can directly address the audience about what is actually happening. That is why I think art is really important. You know the recent issue with the Reuters journalists [Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were jailed]? And how people responded to it? That's one of the reasons I stepped out of my classroom. I used to teach peace building. After doing that for a while, I thought that the more efficient way to social change is through art. When people are coming to an art space, they are not expecting to learn a lesson. They are not mentally prepared to debate. They just come and enjoy the artwork. If you can deliver something about social change through the artworks, I think that is really wonderful.

**HPD**: Can you talk a bit more about your background in peacebuilding?

**SHLH**: I worked with World Learning for several years, since 2013. I took part in some of the World Learning programs, which is a program in collaboration with the School of International Training (SIT), and so I used to work as a peace educator at an institute called Institute for Political and Civic Engagement, which is based at the American Center. And I worked there for four or five years. I have interests in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, peace education, and advocacy, as I told you the other day. Everything started because there was an organized religious conflict in my hometown. It was organized by an unidentifiable group of people. I think mainly it was a tactic of the military. That's what their strategy is. The whole town isn’t pluralistic, but my family circle is very pluralistic and diverse. We hang out with many different religions and ethics groups. That’s normal for us. So, when the conflict started to happen, all of our family and friends were impacted. I didn’t like that, and I was trying to find the answers, and that's how I came to have a huge interest in peacebuilding. That's how I got interested in resolving the conflict in a positive way.

**HPD**: Amazing. Thank you for these answers. Finally, do you have any questions for me? Or advice for this project that I’m working on?

**SHLH**: How did you start? When did you get the idea to start this?

**HPD**: Essentially, after I finished my studies in Singapore, I was intending to move to Vietnam, to pursue my own art practice. My focus for my thesis was on conceptual art dealing with archives, and I wanted to continue this with my own project. When I started meeting artists in Vietnam, I realized there was a lack of archives and a lack of experimental platforms. But there was also a lot of willingness amongst artists to meet and share their work. It was really the inspiration of the Surrealist magazines that you find in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s — Andre Breton's *Minataure*, George Bataille's *Documents* — that gave me the idea to do something like this for Southeast Asia. That’s what set me off on this project. And it has shifted and evolved as I've gone along and realized, “hey I want to include photojournalists, I want to include traditional craft artists, I want to have conversations with academics and people outside of the contemporary art frame,” and so it has organically come to where it is now.

**SHLH**: What is the influence of your grandfather [Mark Shaw]? You mentioned he is a very well known, internationally famous photographer. So, what was your childhood like, living with him, learning from the artist? His influence?

**HPD**: My grandfather died when my father was eight, so I never knew him, and my father really never knew him either. To be honest growing up I was completely uninterested in photography. I was surrounded by it, but I could care less about it. It was only in my studies in Singapore that I realized I could tie myself, genealogically, to my grandfather and that this would open certain doors. Purely as branding or a PR move, not that I really cared at all. Actually, I was able to do an exhibition with Leica of his photographs that got me a free camera. That was very lovely. And then I was able to do my thesis project on archives, relating them to my family's archive. But it was always sort of a sleight of hand that I did. Because emotionally I have no attachment to him, or even really to the images. Or to photography per se. It was never a medium that I was particularly interested in. As I embark upon this project it can be a nice frame to use to describe what it is that I'm doing. My grandfather took lots of images of celebrities and socialites and artists in his time, and he was particularly known for taking candid images, unposed images, and that's something I'm gradually becoming more interested in doing myself. Particularly taking shots of artists with their artworks in their studios. Really though, my relationship with my grandfather is something mentors have more suggested that I bring up, rather than it being naturally at the forefront of my mind.

**SHLH**: It's a stupid question, but what do you want to achieve in life? What do you imagine yourself doing in the future? Because you're young and you're doing so many important things right now, meeting with artists and having so much momentum.

**HPD**: You sound like my PR agent.

[laughs]

**SHLH**: You need to start paying me. I mean like, now you are twenty-one. Twenty-two?

HPD: Twenty-three. I'm old, man.

**SHLH**: Old, yeah. I used to say when I was twenty-three that I was old. But like now you’ve started to engage with artists from Asia, and you’re trying to do experimental approaches. After this project what do you want to do next? Like you asked me, what is the thing you really want to do?

**HPD**: Well I'm still interested in working with my grandfather's archive. But more thorough the lens of poetry. Poetry and philosophy are my first loves and I think that I am feeling a pull back to really rigorously both engage with philosophy, but also rigorously engage with poetry. And whether that engagement is through an abstract frame like conceptual art, or through something more comparatively straightforward as writing, I'm not yet sure. But I think that's generally where things would lead me. I'm also just interested in having conversations and seeing where they go. I think long-term I would be very grateful and eager to have conversations with people across different disciplines as diverse as politics, religion, etc. and I don't know what the containers… I don't know what the excuses for those conversations might be... but I'd be interested in trying to have them. Just learning. I guess I'm curious. I just want to learn about things.

**SHLH**: Never lose the wonder. That's the thing.