**Hunter Panther Deerfield**: How did you get into taking photos?

**Yu Yu Myint Than**: Photography is not my first career. My first career was as a teacher's trainer. I was in Hong Kong for postgraduate study, and everything was stressful. I lived in a really small apartment. I was the last student in class. I didn’t want to be at home because it was too small, I didn’t want to be in school because it was too stressful. So, I would just sit in a park. It was a very cheap area where I could afford my apartment and so my neighborhood was very rough. I met a lot of construction workers who were not from Hong Kong. In Myanmar if you make eye contact, you just smile. Because it was my first overseas experience, whenever I met my neighbors, they would look at me and I would look at them and I would smile. But they thought I was flirting with them, and they thought I was a Filipino housemaid looking for sex work part-time. So, they would give me a little strip of paper. They were approaching me with a time and their phone number and this kind of stuff. The first time I didn't know what it was about, but my friend told me “oh, they are approaching you for this purpose” and I was really freaked out. I didn’t know how to respond. I was still quite young, and it was my first experience being overseas, and so I started to bring my camera to pretend that I was a tourist. Whenever I went out, I would have my camera. So, this is how I started photography. With street photography. Yeah, it's crazy. Funny experience…

**HPD**: And after?

**YY**: After teaching I came back. I worked for two years as a teacher’s trainer in Yangon and became a hobbyist photographer. I became more and more serious, and then a reportage workshop came up and I applied, and I got in. Even though I was just a hobbyist I wanted to tell a story. About myself, about other people, but I didn’t know how to tell the story with no training. It was a three-month long workshop and I was the only amateur. Others were professional photographers working for newspapers, some from Bangladesh some from Norway, but I learnt a lot from them. After that workshop I decided “Ok, I’ll quit my job.” I decided to become a photographer, but I had no platform and I had to get experience and build up a portfolio. So, I applied to the Myanmar Times to be a staff photographer, because I thought that being a photojournalist, I would have a lot of room to tell stories. I worked there for eleven months but working with the newspaper didn't give a me lot of room for telling stories because the newspaper worked on daily news and I'm more into in-depth stories, features, long-form documentary. So I quit my job at the Myanmar Times and started working for Myanmar Deita. There I have more freedom to learn new things, such as visual storytelling and curation. I think I made the right choice.

**HPD**: What is Myanmar Deita?

**YY**: Myanmar Deita is an organization that develops resources for local photographers and filmmakers. We do curation, we do workshops, and we are now trying to build up the first photography school in Myanmar, which will start in October 2019. This year we will start with women photographers, the next year we will try to have mixed gender classes.

**HPD**: You mentioned a workshop that inspired you to quit your previous job and focus on photography, what about that workshop was so inspiring?

**YY**: In that workshop we had to produce a long-form story that was two-to-three months long, so I decided to do a positive story on the conflict area in the middle of Myanmar. I tried to build up a positive story connecting the two groups that experienced the conflict. But I didn’t have journalistic experience. I went there as a photographer with no connections. I built up trust and I had a lot of struggles and challenges. A lot of special police would follow me, and I had a lot of people stopping me and questioning me. Sometimes people would show up at my hotel room, because it was a sensitive area. I was really freaked out, but I think the more they tried to stop me the more I wanted to finish it. I noticed that was different than my teaching job. If I had struggles or challenges in my teaching career, I would stop for a while. It wasn’t very exciting. But this new experience, the more they tried to stop me, the more I wanted to do it, so this is where I realized I wanted to be. We don't have a lot of chances to know what we’re interested in.

**HPD**: Can you tell me about Thuma [the all-women Burmese photography collective] and how that came to be?

**YY**: I used to work for The Myanmar Times. Most of my friends in the community were male photographers. As I told you, I’m interested in doing long-form photojournalism. At that time, I was working on a project and I wanted to get feedback from my peers. But it was so difficult to get. Mostly they hung out at beer stations. I do drink beer, but I found that we had a friendly community, but not the kind of community that gave honest feedback and took work really seriously. I need that kind of community. I didn’t find enough support. Not that my peers weren’t serious, but just it wasn’t what I wanted to get.

Also, when I met my mentor at the workshop that I had attended, she told me she wanted to teach a woman-only workshop in Myanmar. But at that time, I can only count three women photographers in the scene. That’s not enough to bring her to Myanmar to do a workshop. She asked me to collect portfolios of women photographers, but I could not find good portfolios that suited the qualifications of the workshop. I thought we were lacking women photographers, and I also wanted this kind of community, and so I thought I should start an informal women photographers’ meetup, so anyone could be a photographer, as I myself started as a hobbyist. And so, I started an informal meetup and anyone could join who was interested. We met every month and after nine months we were lucky to have a basic storytelling workshop for women photographers, with the help of my friend from Chile. After that workshop I found that the other women were also interested in storytelling, and although the levels were different, I thought it was ok, we can build everyone’s level as I started very low, and as long as you’re passionate it’s ok. We all had this common ground, we all wanted to tell a story, so why didn’t we start a collective? We started with the eight women from that workshop. It started informally because we didn’t know each other personally. We did a pilot period for the first five months. We ran a workshop where we shot a mini-story so I could know that they were really serious about storytelling. We set a deadline, and some met the deadline, and some didn’t meet the deadline. Maybe I’m a little bit bitchy because those who didn’t meet the deadline were out. Now we have five women photographers and we officially launched Thuma collective because we’re strong and passionate and really want to be storytellers. We started in October of 2017.

**HPD**: Do you think photojournalism allows for a particular kind of storytelling that writing or film or painting or other arts cannot provide?

**YY**: I think photojournalism can tell a story, but there are lots of other ways to tell a story. But I don't call myself a photojournalist, I'm a storyteller. The type of storytelling I do is not always photojournalism. Some stories need a photojournalistic way of telling, some ways we may need a fictionalized way of telling. Sometimes we can tell the story directly, sometimes we have to tell the story indirectly. For example, the story I worked on with a girl who was abused as a housemaid. When I met her, she said that she hated the pictures of her that were in the newspaper. A lot of people told her story directly showing her bruises, her scars, this haunts her memory and that re-traumatizes her. It's not wrong to tell her story directly but what about the people who we’re reporting on? She has been in this trauma, so by telling this story again and again directly this only re-traumatizes her. I decided to tell the story in a fictionalized way, not very journalistic, so I recreated her memories. There were lots of ways to tell a story, I won’t say which ones are better, but we have to think about which ways are effective for what kinds of stories. I don't categorize myself as a photojournalist or a reportage storyteller or a fictionalizer or a fine artist. I don't categorize myself as some stories I choose the style of reportage because I need to show it that way. But some stories I need to do another way.

**HPD**: Can you tell me about this photo series [Jigsaw]?

**YY**: Mostly I pick stories where I can reflect myself. This story I picked because I was in Bangladesh for seven months. I didn't have a lot of friends. Although Myanmar and Bangladesh are neighbor countries, I find it difficult to dwell with the communities in Bangladesh. I felt like a stranger, and I hated this alienation and isolation. I wanted to do something similar to how I felt, so I was shooting symbolic pictures of alienation and isolation. I came to know the Somali community when I went to the immigration office to extend my visa. Because Bangladesh is a very bureaucratic country, even to extend a visa I had to go to immigration offices more than ten times. The waiting time is three hours, sometimes four hours, sometimes the whole day. I met my subjects for [Jigsaw] there. They were also international students waiting to extend their student visas. I met with them, I hung out with them, and found that I had similar experiences with them. So, I mixed my emotions with theirs. I don't think that's a “photojournalistic” way of doing things, because it’s pouring out my feelings into their life. If I consider this a photojournalistic series, it’s not fair because I am projecting my isolation and alienation. Maybe they're not isolated as I'm isolated. So, [Jigsaw] is a reflection of myself on the Somali community.

**HPD**: What did you learn about that community? Did any stories stick out?

**YY**: Mostly they told me about the discrimination they are facing in Bangladesh. That really shocked me because we are in a ‘dark’ country. Myanmar, Bangladesh. We have the same experience being discriminated against by color. For example, in Myanmar we have less opportunities and a lower salary than other international workers, and also in Bangladesh it is the same. Bangladeshis are discriminated against within their country and they also discriminate against Somalians. Bangladeshis talk about being discriminated against, but they also discriminate against other people. I think that's not fair. So that makes me interested.

Another thing is that the Somali are missing home. Of course, they are isolated. They don't have friends. They study in a Bangladeshi international school. I visited their class. There was a grouping of local Bangladeshi students. I met with one Somali girl who was sitting in a corner. She was the only Somali girl. Nobody talked to her. Other people were talking, going around. I asked her “do you have friends.” She said, ‘I don't have friends, I have classmates, but they don't talk to me.’ Also, I talked to several Bangladeshi students and they said, “Yu Yu be careful, they are not good people, they make fakes, they do drugs.” Who knows! Bangladeshis also do drugs. Other international people, other foreigners also do drugs. And yet they discriminate against Somali people, saying they are drug dealers, they make fake money. Bangladeshis don't know exactly what it is, but in their mind, they have a ‘black concept’ for the Somali community and they even stopped me from making friends with the Somali. Bangladeshi people said they never talked with them. Even my teacher from school said, ‘oh Yu Yu be careful.’ Why? We are the same. So, I met with a bunch of international students, and from them my friendship circle got bigger and bigger. I met with ten guys and five girls, and they took me to their friends’ homes and their cousins’ homes. I visited their houses, and farewell parties, and birthday parties and their school, and this kind of stuff. It’s different from my experience. For me I don't have a community. I am isolated and alienated. But for them they have their own community and they are creating their own bubble. So that’s my impression of how they’ve made their life positive.

**HPD**: What were you doing in Bangladesh?

**YY**: I was doing the international photography course at Pathshala.

**HPD**: How long were you there for?

**YY**: Six months, but actually I stayed seven months because I couldn't get a visa to return home.

**HPD**: You couldn't get a visa to return home to your own country?

**YY**: I kind of like officially overstayed because I couldn’t extend my visa.

**HPD**: Where would you like to see your work go? Are there certain goals that you have?

**YY**: I’d like to see my work in book form. Because the book will give you time to think. Once you see through all the pictures, you’ll also have time to re-see and re-think. I’m making a self-published art book. I've already finished the printing, but I need to wait a few more months to start the publication.

**HPD**: What do you think of photography? Of telling stories through cameras. As opposed to telling stories through painting, or poems, or fiction writing?

**YY**: Photography and painting may be similar because we’re telling a story with visuals. But what I think is if you tell a story with a picture it will give you time to think. We see a lot of movies right. I don't remember one scene in my mind. But for example, I have a lot of pictures that stick in my mind. Photography lasts longer than video. Maybe because I’m interested more in photography than other forms of art. And about poetry… I think some people do poetry with images, and so I don't think there are lots of differences in telling stories. With different types of photography, we have prose form or poetry form or reporting form. For example, some pictures are poetic so let’s say it’s poetry. Some pictures are very direct, so let’s say it’s reporting. So, I don't think there’s a lot of differences with words and visuals. But because we have different types of people, some people more easily remember images, some people more easily remember words, some people more easily remember sound… We have different types of learners, so maybe that answers your question or not.

**HPD**: Is there anything else you want to talk about in this interview?

**YY**: In my photographic journey people always tell me that “we tell the story of other people in order to hear from the voiceless.” I don't agree with that. Nobody is voiceless. We just cannot hear them. So, my way of photography is that I’m telling stories, but mostly I’m telling myself. I'm not doing it for other people. I'm not working for the Somali community. I'm not working for the girls who are being trafficked. Actually, we are kind of selfish, as we are working for ourselves. For my kind of photography, I am echoing myself. My position is not that I'm superior to them. If we say that I'm telling their story it means that I’m superior to them. My position in photography is that we are on the same level. We are doing a collaborative job. I’m echoing myself in the stories I’m telling. Sometimes I tell a story directly myself, like I'm shooting my self-portrait, or I'm telling a story by myself. Sometimes I'm telling other people’s stories, to echo myself. I'm not in a higher position than other people I'm shooting. We are on the same level.