



ARTIST

Chan Chao

TITLE

Karen Rebel (August 1996)

DIMENSIONS

21 in H x 17 in W

MEDIUM

Chromogenic Color Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1999.005

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 11

CHAN CHAO

BORN

1966

BIRTHPLACE

Kalemyo, Burma

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Burmese-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1998
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2000
Fine Print Program, 2001
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018
Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 102
Contact Sheet 109
Contact Sheet 173
Contact Sheet 198

ESSAYS

Since an army coup overthrew Burma's last democratically-elected government in 1962, military-run or dominated regimes in Burma have been among the world's worst violators of human rights. An already serious level of abuses climbed higher after the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), renamed the State Peace and Development Council in November 1997, seized power in September 1988. The SLORC generals changed the country's official name in English to Myanmar, a transliteration of the country's Burmese language name. This change, done by decree and without public consultation, has been rejected by Burma's democratic opposition. Reports by the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other groups have repeatedly detailed a gruesome litany of abuses, including murder, torture, rape, detention without trial, massive forced relocations, and forced labor. Even before 1988, Burma's army faced allegations of serious human rights abuses, especially in its campaigns against ethnic groups along the country's borders. These severe violations continue today, including arbitrary executions and forced labor of villagers as military porters in combat zones. Children have been particularly hard hit, both as direct physical victims of military abuse and as members of affected families. According to the website of the Open Society Institute, Chan Chao's family left Burma for the United States when he was 12 years old. Eighteen years later Chao returned to Burma with the intention of rediscovering and reconnecting with the culture and people he had left years before. Twice denied a visa by the Burmese government, Chao eventually made his way to the Thai-Burmese border where students had established several camps to launch guerilla attacks against the military regime that controlled Burma with the goal of restoring democracy to the country. During his first visit, and on a subsequent visit a year later, Chao produced over 150 portraits of the students and young rebels in various camps along Burma's borders with Thailand and India. With the knowledge that Burma's military junta is one of the world's worst human rights violators, Chao's portraits are remarkable for the sense of calm and tenderness that he draws out of each of his subjects. Each portrait is made from an intimate distance, generously placing each subject in the center of the frame surrounded by the soft focus of the lush jungle beyond. In many of his portraits the subjects hold simple objects: a sickle, a saw, a large piece of fruit, a live chicken. These simple objects provide an elegant solution to the problem of portraiture where individuals are often unsure of what to do with their hands, and in that uncertainty convey stiff and formal poses. But the objects are also disarming because they signal the activities of a simple agrarian life, not one of armed resistance. This contradiction plays heavily into the power that each image conveys because each person that Chao photographs displays a remarkable range of honesty and emotion that seems to long for a return to the simple pleasures of family, work, and relaxation—not another night of firing rockets or setting land mines. Given the political and military circumstances in Burma, Chao could have followed the lead of photographers like SUnited Statesn Meiselas and Bill Burke whose gritty and dramatic images chronicling rebel resistance in Nicaragua and Cambodia have received wide praise and attention. But Chao's portraits have more in common with the simple style of August Sander's portraits of German workers and Fazal Sheikh's evocative images of refugees in Northern Kenya. Chao's goal for this project is to bring greater attention and awareness to the democracy movement in Burma. It is hoped that the publication of the work here, and in a book he is planning for the future, will help him realize that goal. Public awareness is only one ingredient necessary to resolve conflicts or end tyranny. Chan Chao has provided us with that essential ingredient and has challenged us to add to the mixture with force and resolve. Jeffrey Hoone Chan Chao lives in Washington, DC, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in June 1999. The Open Society Institute, chaired by George Soros, has helped support Chao's work in Burma, and much of the background material about Burma for this essay was obtained from their website located at www.soros.org/burma.