



Freedom & art:  
from BEACON TO BURMA

By M. R. Smith

It's been proven time and time again: great things start with a good breakfast. One such breakfast in Mirka Brzozowska's hotel restaurant in Poland consisted of four artists—Stefan Tunedal and Lars Hansson of Sweden, Angel Kitipov of Bulgaria, and Isabel Lemaitre of Italy—vowing mutual respect and cooperation on future projects and exhibitions. They also vowed to utilize the power of the internet and emerging media, and group together with like-minded artists worldwide to have a positive influence on improving human rights, the stewardship of the environment and non-human life, and respect for the innocent. And of course....more breakfasts.

What started in May of 2007 as a friendly networking alliance has blossomed into a full-fledged international organization including 78 artists from 27 countries, with up to nearly 250 artists connected online via the social networking site artmesh. Named after the gracious hostess of their first meeting, the Mirca Group has begun fulfilling their ambitious mission statement with the *Freedom & Art* project, whose first stop on its book and exhibition tour is this month at Mount Beacon Fine Art.

Mirca Group co-founder Stefan Tunedal knew a great place to start: the plight of Myanmar, formerly Burma, presently ruled by an oppressive and backward military junta, and recently devastated by a typhoon in May 2008. Not only has the reclusive and odious regime cracked down brutally on last year's peaceful demonstrations by Buddhist monks, and purposely not allowed aid workers into the country to save thousands of lives after the storm's devastation while pocketing the aid money for themselves, but they have kept key political figure Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest since 1990, when she was elected National Leader by the people. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her non-violent efforts toward a free Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi has become a powerful example of peaceful humanity standing up against cruel and authoritarian leaders, enduring immense personal hardship.

"I wanted to see what I can do from this safe studio in Stockholm where it would be impossible to even think of imprisoning an elected (official)," says Tunedal when asked about his passion for the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi. "A woman like her should not be treated like this. She has the right to be free," adds fellow Mirca artist, Hungarian Krisztina Asztalos, writing into the forum from the other side of Europe. "Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts...are an inspiration for the many people throughout the world who are striving to attain democracy, human rights, and ethnic conciliation."

Thus was the *Freedom & Art* project conceived: a book of 74 artworks by Mirca Group members, accompanied by a short statement by each artist about the synergy of freedom and art in the world we live in. According to Carla Goldberg, U.S.-based coordinator and senior editor for *Freedom & Art*, "the project has brought our group together in a whole new way. There has been a lot of wonderful back-and-forth on message boards and everyone has been willing to offer their individual talents where needed." On the effort to assemble the artists' works together, she says "it has been like assembling a beautiful puzzle...each piece is unique and, in the end, everything has fit together to create a complete work of art."

All proceeds from the book will be donated to Amnesty International to support efforts being made on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi's release, as well as portions of the proceeds from the sale of the art itself, which will be part of a traveling exhibit. (The artists are covering all of their own shipping costs.) The group is also attempting an unusual promotional concept called "Set A Book Free," where each artist purchases a copy of the book, and leaves it somewhere where it will be noticed, possibly picked up.

First stop on the traveling show: Mount Beacon Fine Art in Beacon. Operated by Eileen McTiernan, Mount Beacon specializes in private instruction and exhibiting newer artists, often giving them their first showings. When Goldberg—also a Mirca artist in the collection—contacted her about selling the *Freedom & Art* book, McTiernan responded by offered her space for the first exhibition of the tour,