

# CHAN CHAO

American, b. 1966, Kalemmyo, Burma  
Lives and works in Silver Spring, MD

## WEBSITE

Chan Chao's arresting portraits are photographed outdoors, with natural light illuminating their subjects' expressive faces and glimpses of contextualizing landscapes. In the late 1990s, Chan traveled to Burma (now called Myanmar), the country from which he and his family had emigrated twenty years earlier. He photographed pro-democracy fighters and activists along the country's remote borders with India and Thailand, people who are among a broad coalition of ethnic and religious minorities, students, and others who stand in resistance to the military dictatorship that took power in the aftermath of British colonization, which ended in 1948.

A land of tremendous natural resources prior to colonization, by the 1990s, Burma was among the ten least developed nations in the world according to the United Nations. Rather than immigrate illegally to Thailand or return to the population centers of their country and risk abuse, imprisonment, or death, pro-democracy groups have worked with the Thai timber industry to log borderland forests in order to fund their subsistence, one of the many difficult concessions of their precarious situation.



Left: Chan Chao, *Sandra & Son*, October 2006, 2021, Country of Origin: Peru, archival pigment print  
Right: Chan Chao, *Ladislav*, January 2004, 2021, Country of Origin: Slovakia, archival pigment print

Over twenty-five years later, Burma's civil war continues largely outside of the media spotlight, as do many other conflicts and conditions in which humans struggle on the planet that we share. In 2003 and 2004, Chao photographed an internationally-composed group of UN peacekeepers in Cyprus. The serene sea and mountains of the island belies its history of colonization by first the Ottomans and then the British, as well as the ongoing dispute between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots over governance and territory. A couple of years later, Chao visited a prison in Peru, photographing women from an array of countries all convicted for having a part in global drug trafficking. As with members of the Burmese resistance and UN peacekeepers, the Peruvian prisoners come from many backgrounds to form a diverse community coexisting in challenging circumstances.



Artworks by Chan Chao and Shahla Arbabi

Chan Chao was born in Kalembo, Burma. His family immigrated to United States in 1978. He has published four photography books: *Burma: Something Went Wrong*, *Letter from PLF*, *Echo* and *Two Places on Earth*. Chao's Burma portraits were featured in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. His photographs have been exhibited at Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York; G Fine Art, Washington DC; and Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica.

Chao's photographs are in the permanent collection of major museums across the United States, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The National Gallery of Art, The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Houston Museum of Fine Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and The Denver Art Museum.