

Myanmar's Yangon Film School Wins Japan Art Association's 2015 Grant for Young Artists

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BERLIN, GERMANY: 5 October, 2015 — Little did Anglo-Burmese filmmaker Lindsey Merrison know, when she travelled to Myanmar for the first time in 1989, that 26 years later she would be running the country's first dedicated film school, which trains around sixty young Myanmar nationals a year in the art and craft of filmmaking. Now **Yangon Film School**, the organisation Ms Merrison set up in the country's former capital city in 2005, has won the Japan Art Association's prestigious **2015 Grant for Young Artists** which recognizes a group or institution encouraging young people's involvement in the arts. Bestowed alongside the **Praemium Imperiale** – often regarded as the 'Nobel Prize for the arts' – the Grant for Young Artists is worth 5 million yen (approximately \$41,000). It was presented to Ms Merrison and Yangon Film School students Lay Thida and Soe Arkar Htun by Mr Hisashi Hieda, chairman of the Japan Art Association, at a press conference in Berlin on 10 September, 2015. The grantees were also personally congratulated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a reception held in their honour.



From left to right: Yangon Film School students Soe Arkar Htun and Lay Thida, Yangon Film School Director Lindsey Merrison, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, German Praemium Imperiale Laureate Wolfgang Laib and Monika Grütters Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media

Ms Merrison first got to know Myanmar when she accompanied her Anglo-Burmese mother on a visit and subsequently filmed the feature-length documentary *Our Burmese Days*. Her work brought her into contact with creative young people desperate to learn the art of filmmaking. In 2005 she was able to realise their dream, and hers, when she returned to Myanmar with a group of experienced international filmmakers to hold an inaugural workshop entitled *The Art of Documentary Filmmaking*.



Mr Hisashi Hieda, chairman of the Japan Art Association Presents the 2015 Grant for Young Artists Award to Yangon Film School Director Lindsey Merrison in Berlin on 10 September, 2015

Since then, Yangon Film School has grown exponentially and now offers around ten training courses a year in all aspects of filmmaking, ranging from screenwriting to film history, from investigative documentary to sound design and postproduction. Financed by grants from various organisations including the European Union and the Finnish and German governments, the courses are free to students from all over Myanmar, but selective: shortlisted applicants must convince the School's selection panel of their talent and dedication to filmmaking.

Yangon Film School's core focus remains the documentary. Ms Merrison believes this is an art form which can get to the heart of a subject matter and show audiences both in Myanmar and abroad the uncompromising realities but also the surprising moments of humour and grace in the lives of people from all walks of life in Myanmar's rapidly changing society.

Ms Merrison's faith in documentary has been borne out in particular by the School's multi-award-winning ninety-minute documentary *Nargis – when time stopped breathing*, about survivors of the 2008 cyclone which claimed the lives of almost 130,000 Myanmar citizens. The footage was captured by Yangon Film School-trained filmmakers who braved challenging conditions to create a record of the catastrophe. As Ms Merrison says, "Our students filmed the aftermath of the cyclone and created a very moving work. To this day it remains one of the films of which I'm most proud."

In 2015 Yangon Film School students are involved in a wide range of filmmaking activities, from writing feature film scripts to developing investigative documentaries such as illegal abortion, land-grabbing, internal migration, deforestation and affordable housing. Its outreach programmes embrace Travelling Cinema and participatory video as well as a project to preserve Myanmar's cinema heritage. The School's production arm, Yangon Film Services, has just completed a ground-breaking documentary for 'Document Our History Now' about Myanmar's LGBT community. Yangon Film School's roster of international filmmaking tutors has recently been complemented by Myanmar nationals who, having been trained by the School themselves, are now passing on their knowledge, inspiration and enthusiasm to the next generation of the country's filmmakers.

As the Japan Art Association's award recognises, Yangon Film School, born out of such small beginnings ten years ago, is now an impressive achievement which is making a significant contribution to Myanmar's new and increasingly pluralistic media culture.

The Yangon Film School will celebrate its tenth anniversary at its **Annual Screening**, to be held this year at the Mya Yeik Nyo Hotel in Yangon on **Wednesday, 2 December**.

*More information about the Yangon Film School and how to apply for their courses can be found on the School's website at <http://yangonfilmschool.org/>. **The deadline for applications for the 2016 intake is 30 November, 2015.***

Engaging Young People in the Arts All Over the World

The Yangon Film School is the 19th winner of the *Grant for Young Artists*, which was launched in 1997. Since then, the award has been given to The Zinsou Foundation (Benin, Africa), *Juni Orchestra of Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia* (Rome, Italy); the Sphinx Organization (Detroit, MI, USA); Southbank Sinfonia and The Royal Court Young Writers Programme (London, UK), the Asian Youth Orchestra (Hong Kong), the Kremerata Baltica Chamber Orchestra (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia); the Italian Youth Orchestra (Rome, Italy), the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra (headquartered in Seville, Spain), the National Children's Orchestra of Venezuela (Venezuela); the Kusatsu International Summer Music Academy (Gunma, Japan); the Young Sound Forum of Central Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany); De Sono Associazione per la Musica (Torino, Italy); the European Union Youth Orchestra (headquartered in London); Résidence du Festival (Cannes, France); the Ulster Youth Orchestra (Northern Ireland); the Instituto Superior de Arte (Cuba); the National Film, Television and Theatre School (Lodz, Poland); and the former Hanoi National Conservatory of Music (Hanoi, Vietnam), now

known as Vietnam National Academy of Music. *More information about past recipients can be found here.*

2015 Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award

The Japan Art Association also announces the winners of the *2015 Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award*, which brings with it 15 million yen (approximately \$122,000). Now in its 27th year, the award is one of the most prestigious international prizes in the fields of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music and Theatre/Film. The prize has become a powerful voice for the importance of cultural expression in today's world, bringing international attention to the arts in much the same way as the Nobel Prize brings attention to the sciences.

The 2015 winners, who will receive their award from Imperial Highness Prince Hitachi, honorary patron of the Japan Art Association, at the October 21, 2015, ceremony in Tokyo, are French architect Dominique Perrault, Japanese artist and graphic designer Tadanori Yokoo, Japanese-born British pianist Mitsuko Uchida, German sculptor Wolfgang Laib, and French ballerina Sylvie Guillem. They join 134 of the greatest cultural figures of the 20th and 21st centuries. *A complete list of past winners can be found here.*

The *Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award* was created in 1988 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Japan Art Association and to honour the late Prince Takamatsu, who was the association's honorary patron for 58 years.

Japan Art Association

What is now known as the Japan Art Association was created in 1879 by the Meiji Emperor, who had become concerned that Western influences were threatening to eclipse Japanese art forms and traditional crafts. Eager to encourage Japanese artists and to forge relations with other countries, the Emperor created the precursor to today's art association. Since then, the organization and its museum have played an active role in Japan's cultural life, presenting exhibitions of traditional arts and of art from abroad. In 1988, on the association's 100th anniversary, its leaders created the *Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award* in honour of the late Prince Takamatsu, who had served as honorary patron for 58 years. His wish that Japan promote world peace through the arts is the guiding principle of the Japan Art Association.

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For biographies of the winners and more information about the Grant for Young Artists, the Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award, or the Japan Art Association, please visit www.praemiumimperiale.org/.

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