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Contextualising Contemporary South Asian art: Diana Campbell Betancourt on Dhaka Art Summit 2016 – interview

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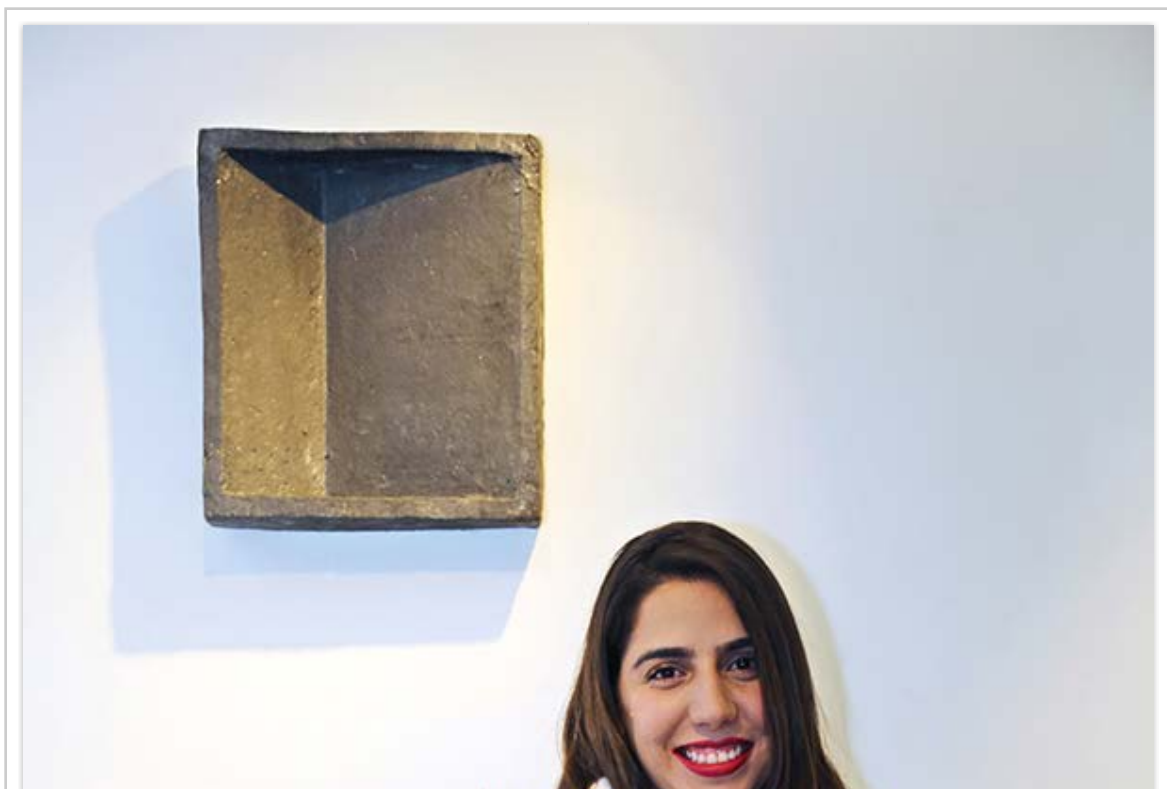


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Chief Curator Diana Campbell Betancourt speaks to *Art Radar* about the third edition of the world's largest non-commercial platform for South Asia's art, Dhaka Art Summit.

Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) returns to Dhaka at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in partnership with the country's National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts from 5 to 8 February 2016. Chief Curator of DAS and Artistic Director of Samdani Art Foundation, Diana Campbell Betancourt speaks to *Art Radar* about the artists, concepts and programming for DAS 2016.





Portrait of Dhaka Art Summit Chief Curator Diana Campbell Betancourt.

Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) is the foremost bi-annual nonprofit event on contemporary South Asian art founded by the **Samdani Art Foundation**. 2016 edition's curatorial team is led by the by **Diana Campbell Betancourt** bringing together international art professionals from international museums including Tate Modern, **Centre Pompidou** and the Kunsthalle Zurich with South Asian partners.

This year, the event will be expanding their programming to include architecture, film, experimental writing and exhibitions focusing on historical works from the 20th century.

Art Radar spoke with DAS Chief Curator Diana Campbell Betancourt on this year's concepts behind the exhibitions and programmes.





Anwar Jalal Shemza, 'Untitled (Linear Composition in Green and Red)', 1965, ink on handmade paper, 97x57cm. Collection Amrita Jhaveri.

The Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) was well received in 2014 with 70,000 visitors. What were some of the goals, and accomplishments to date? And what do you hope to achieve with this year's edition?

We wanted to contextualise Contemporary South Asian art within a historical framework and make room for outliers in this edition of DAS and expand out what a regional exhibition can be – which can be seen by the inclusion of “Rewind” and artists such as **Bagyi Aung Soe** and Germaine Krull who often get left out of this discussion, and also having diaspora artists and artists with “unconventional” relationships to South Asia such as **Christopher Kulendran Thomas**, **Lynda Benglis**, and Tino Sehgal.

The names people expect from Bangladesh are not in the programme of the 2016 Summit – such as **Tayebe Begum Lipi**, Mahbubur Rahman and **Naeem Mohaiemen**, to name specific examples who are now widely exhibited in the West. These artists' careers have blossomed since their exhibitions at the first two Dhaka Art Summits and we want to expose all of our visitors to new talent that they might not be aware of. We also

have taken loans from leading collections, both private and public in Bangladesh and wider South Asia, to provide new access to artistic treasures held behind closed doors in the country and region.

The Dhaka Art Summit has registered as one of the most anticipated art events in South Asia – and the success is primarily measured by how the local audience has embraced the summit. We have had to extend the hours of the summit by two hours daily this edition, and also extend by an extra day to cater to all of the schools and parents who are interested in attending the summit. We are launching our Exhibition Guide two weeks before the Summit so that teachers can prepare their classes for their visits.



Left to right: Nadia Samdani, Rajeeb Samdani and Diana Campbell Betancourt in Basel. Photo: Puneet Shah. Copyright Samdani Art Foundation.

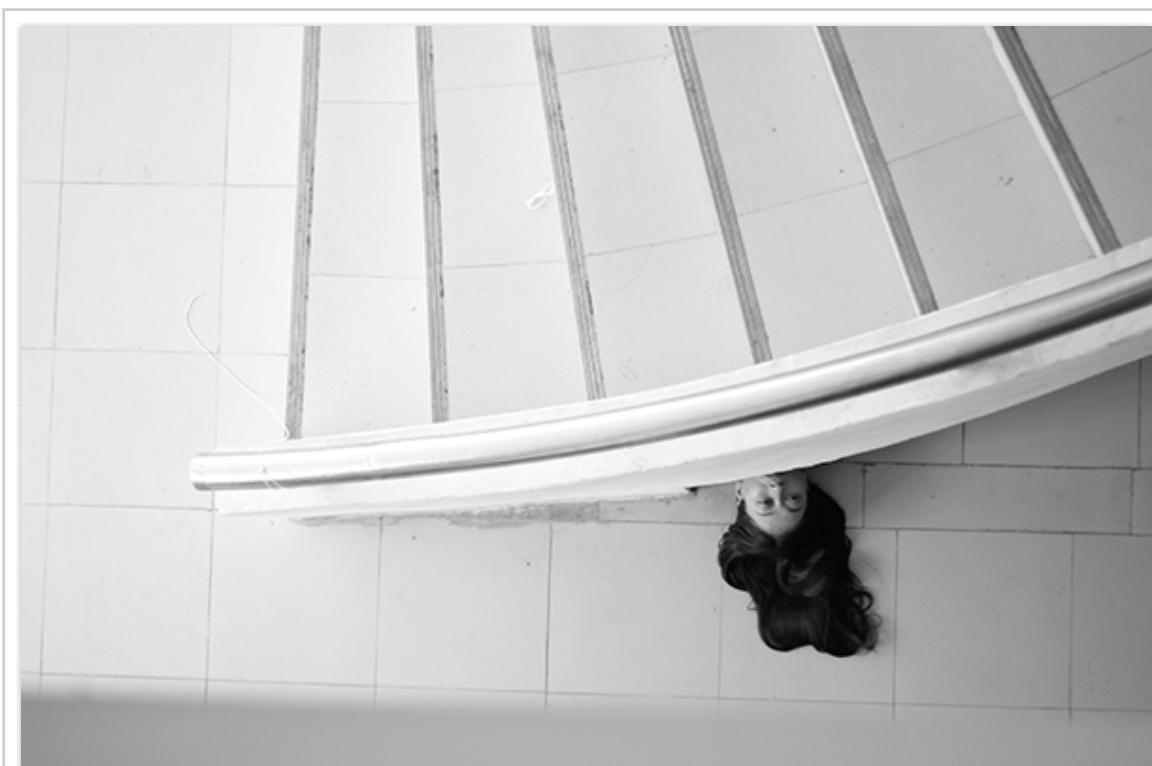
Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani of Samdani Art Foundation, are the founders and visionaries behind the DAS biennial. Could you talk a bit about the collectors, their South Asian art collection and your role as the Artistic Director of the foundation?

Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani founded the Summit and came up with this brilliant idea to have a South Asia focused non-profit platform and to build a dedicated South Asian collection, and to further their knowledge and others' research in this regard. Their contribution is so much more than resources, it is passion, commitment, and vision – and they are the best patrons a curator could ask for.

Part of the brilliance of their strategy is that they do not have any input into the Artistic Programme, which I am fully in charge of – which makes us very unique because finances do not affect the selection process for the programme. In a world where people cater to sponsors and visitor numbers, this special aspect of the summit makes us very unique. I appoint an artistic team, we come up with proposals for our exhibitions and select the artists, and if we need extra funds, we fundraise from the content. We do not let funds dictate our programme.

The Samdani Art Foundation is a very dedicated and personal one and to draw together a collection of Modern and Contemporary South Asian art... there is a lot of field work involved to collect Bangladeshi masters from Pakistan and Burmese masters from unusual sources in Myanmar. We also collect Western artists whose work was inspired by South Asia – from Rembrandt, to Boetti, to Matisse, and Western Artists who influenced Modernism in South Asia, such as **Paul Klee** who was an influence for **Anwar Jalal Shemza, Zahoor ul Akhlaq** and of course Tagore.

I think the dedication to research and the spirit of generosity to share this research with Bangladeshi communities (and the rest of the world who comes to visit and who borrows from the collection) really makes their collection unique. I also advise their collection as the Artistic Director of the foundation, which is why I am constantly travelling sourcing works and furthering our research. They are very committed collectors with a long-term vision.



Yasmin Jahan Nupur, Photo from performance workshop. Image courtesy the artist and the Samdani Art Foundation.

Could you also describe your role as Chief Curator of DAS?

I appoint all of the curators and give input to all of the curators' proposals and propositions. Logistically this means I also have to sign all of the loan forms, proof read and fact check all of the texts, and liaise with our architects and exhibition designers to make sure each curators' needs are met. In a way it can be seen as "curating the curators" and the Architect of the artistic programme – I set up an environment where their propositions can flourish without getting bogged down by logistical constraints – of which there are MANY in Bangladesh. A curator working in London would not be aware of import rules between South Asian countries, but I am.

I also take a holistic view to draw connections across the different sections, which you can see when you visit the summit. We hope to give guided tours that span across shows rather than linear ones within shows. I have an amazing team supporting these artistic decisions – and as the Artistic Director of the Samdani Art Foundation I also manage the team of the Samdani Art Foundation.



Po Po, 'VIP Project (Dhaka)', 2015. Commissioned and produced by the Samdani Art Foundation for the Dhaka Art Summit, 2016. Image courtesy the artist and the Samdani Art Foundation.

This year's expansive programme includes architecture and critical writing with an international team of curators and art professionals participating in the Summit. Could you talk about the programmes planned for the Summit, and how this expansive programme came about?

The programme came about because I wanted a programme to expand the scope of what a regional exhibition could mean – inspired by **Tagore's Santiniketan Kala Bhavan** which translates "the whole world in one nest". Having that in mind, DAS programme combines talks with exhibitions, screenings, performances, an historical

exhibition and much more.



Sandeep Mukherjee, 'Bleach Painting'. Image courtesy of the artist and Project 88.

The "Solo Projects" will present 17 solo projects, from which 13 newly commissioned works and four works reconfigured within the Bangladeshi context. It will include works by Lynda Benglis and Tino Sehgal with **Shumon Ahmed, Tun Win Aung** and **Wah Nu, Haroon Mirza**, Sandeep Mukherjee, **Po Po, Ayesha Sultana, Munem Wasif** and more.



Left to right: Nalini Malani, 'Photograms', 1970 and 'Utopia', 1969-76. Image courtesy the artist

and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.



Waqas Khan, 'The Text in Continuum', 2015, ink on paper, metal, 239 x 270 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Galerie Krinzinger, Wien.

DAS first historical exhibition "Rewind" will show works by 13 artists that were active before the 1980s, from which many will be shared with the public for the first time in over 30 years, such as **Waqas Khan**.

"The Missing One", exhibition curated by Nada Raza, Curator Assistant at **Tate Modern** ties with sci-fi literature, having alienation and dystopia as its plot and includes works by Ronni Ahmmed, David Alesworth, Shishir Bhattacharjee, **Fahd Burki**, **Neha Choksi**, **Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi**, among others.

There's also the "Film Programme", curated by **Shanay Jhaveri** with works by over 35 international filmmakers and artists; "Mining Warm Data", group show with works from artists from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Tibet, Nepal, and Bangladesh and the wider diaspora; "Architecture in Bangladesh", curated by Aurelién Lemonier, Architecture Curator at Centre Pompidou, featuring Jalal Ahmed, Nahas Ahmed Khalil, Raziul Ahsan, Rafiq Azam, Mazharul Islam, Salauddin Ahmed Potash, Uttam Kumar Saha, Chetana Society, Marina Tabassum, Urbana and Shamsul Wares, among others.

Moreover, DAS presents a Performance Pavillion, curated by **Nikhil Chopra**, Madhavi Gore, and Jana Prepeluh; "The Samdani Art Award exhibition"; the new section "Critical Writing Ensembles", bringing together leading writers, critics, poets, philosophers and curators; a Panel Discussions programme; the **Asia Art Archive** first Live Feed Station, DAS edition of the Safina Radio Project; the Children's Workshop by **VAST** Bhutan; an exhibition by Bangladeshi art entitled "আত্ম-অন্বেষ, Soul Searching" curated by **Md. Muniruzzaman** and a section devoted to Bangladeshi art spaces, providing a platform for visitors to experience the work of 10 galleries and non-profit organisations in the non-commercial context of the summit.

The Dhaka Art Summit has a unique format, which is not a biennial, not a symposium, not a festival, but

rather somewhere in-between and removed from the pressures of the art market. It is the main meeting point for art professionals from the region and a generative space to reconsider the past and future of art and exchange within South Asia and the rest of the world.



Shumon Ahmed, 'Land of the Free', 2009. Image courtesy the artist and Project88.

In this third iteration, you've curated "Solo Projects" with newly commissioned and reconfigured works by artists such as Lynda Benglis, Tino Sehgal, Shumon Ahmed, Simryn Gill, Haroon Mirza, Sandeep Mukherjee, Po Po, Wawas Khan and **Dayanita Singh, as well as emerging artists Ayesha Sultana, Waqas Khan and Munem Wasif. Why is it important for DAS to commission new works for this Summit? And how did you select the artists and artworks for this project?**

It is important to commission new works in the region because in some countries like Myanmar, there is little support for artists to create new works, and the same works circulate all over the world. Dhaka Art Summit is a generative space, and we want people to come and see something new and for works created in Bangladesh and for Bangladesh to have lives elsewhere – as the commissioned works belong to the artists after the summit is over (in some rare cases we acquire from the summit, but it is always through the artist and their gallery – as DAS is not a collection building platform).





Dayanita Singh, 'Museum of Chance', 2015. Image courtesy the artist

Commissioning is not the right route for every artist, so it takes a lot of research to see who one wants to embark on this journey with. These artists were selected for the strength of their overall practice and brought together to show the diversity of work happening in the region, and we worked together on projects that as a whole show the wide variety of factors that shape an individual – from trauma, to genetics, to self-esteem, to physical bodily reactions to the environment. This is very important today in Bangladesh – where a common saying is that Bangladeshis are in the midst of an identity crisis of whether to be Muslim, Bengali or Bangladeshi.

The "Solo Projects" open up the viewers' thoughts to explore the space for plurality of identity and cultural self-determination. I also curated a group show called "Mining Warm Data" and the Talks Programme, as well as the overall structure of the summit.



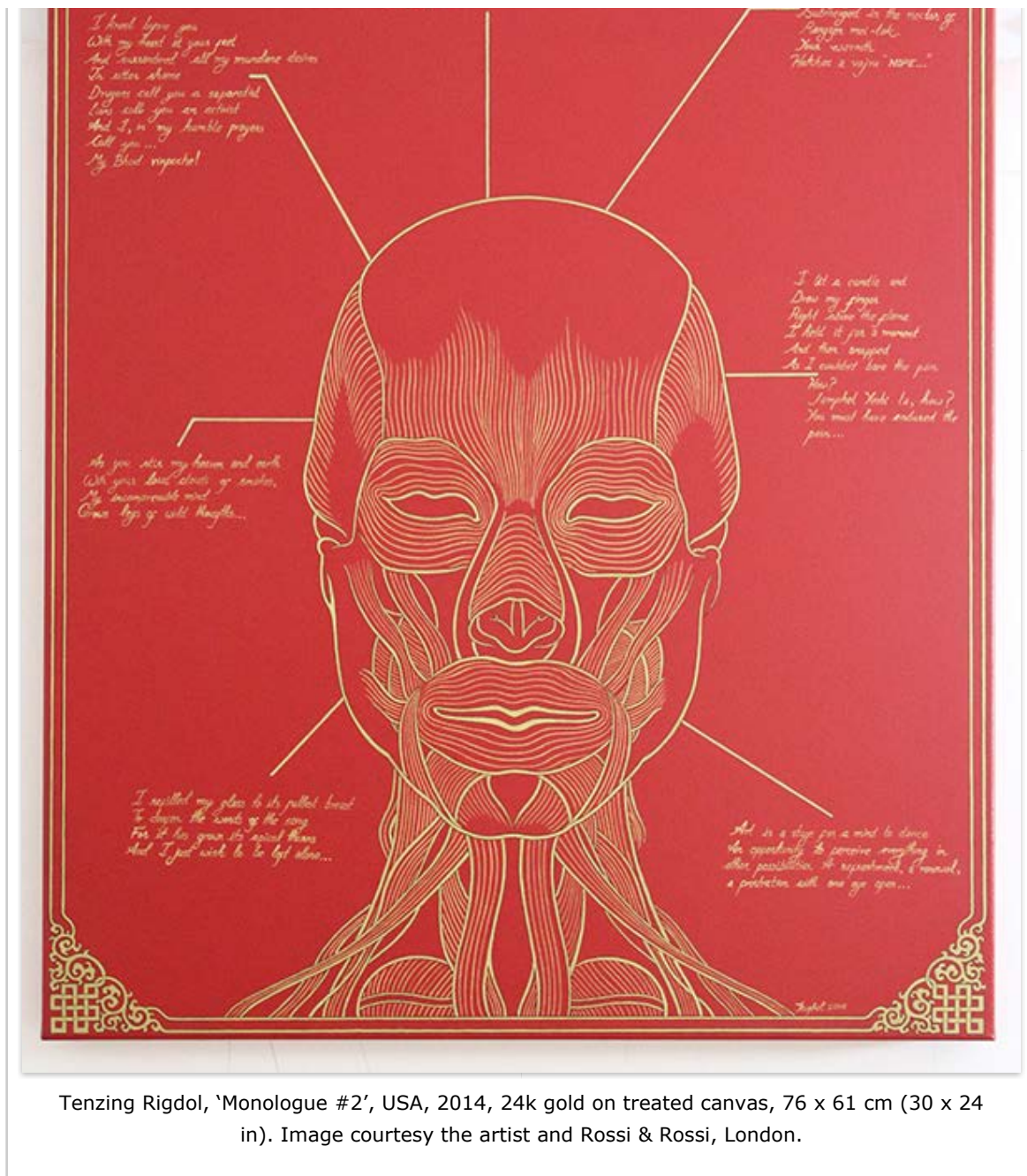


Haroon Mirza, 'The National Pavilion of Then and Now', 2011, Anechoic chamber, LED's, amp, speakers, electronic circuit, approx 800 x 700 x 330cm. © the artist. Image courtesy Lisson Gallery, London.

In 2014, there were over 250 artists exhibiting their works at DAS. Could you highlight some of the artist and their works from this year's Summit?

Haroon Mirza's *National Pavilion of Then and Now* (2011), Zihan Karim's *Eye* (2014), Maryam Jafri's *Getty vs. Ghana* (2012), Lida Abdul's *Speaking and Hearing* (1999-2001), SM Sultan's watercolours from the 1950s on loan from the **Bangladesh National Museum**, Ali Asgar's performance in the performance pavilion, Lynda Benglis's phosphorescent works in the solo projects, **Ali Kazim's** beautiful watercolour *Other Land* (2013), Kashef Chowdhury's models in Aurelien Lemonnier's architecture exhibition... there are too many to choose from! Of course Waqas Khan's monumental books will also be incredible.





According to DAS press release, this project will “celebrate pluralism and look at the fluid continuum of birth and experience in becoming an individual”. Could you elaborate on this theme?

Please see catalogue essay. [DB quotes from it] “The approach I took as Artistic Director of the Summit has opened up new spatial constellations to break up an exhibition that might be dictated by geopolitical coordinates to instead allow for an emphasis on exchange – cultural, regional, trans-regional, national, intergenerational – in a serious and profound way that illuminates how South Asian visual culture and heritage and its makers are interacting with other (art) histories.

The Dhaka Art Summit defines and then challenges the concept of the region itself, all from a place previously considered peripheral even within South Asia. In the spirit of diversity of the region, seventeen Solo Projects explore the elements that shape human experience, going beyond self-fashioning to examine darker moments of trauma, barbarism and displacement. These, primarily new, works break away from literal definitions traditionally ascribed to the region, and take a humanistic approach...”

To read the full essay, please click [here](#) (PDF DOWNLOAD).



Lida Abdul, 'Speaking and Hearing', 1999 – 2001, Video. Image courtesy the artist and Giorgio Persano Galler.

One of the shortlisted Bangladeshi artists of Samdani Art Award, Ayesha Sultana, was selected for the residency programme at Delfina Foundation in 2014. Could you talk about some of the noteworthy artists on this year's list, and why do you find the artist and their artworks interesting or relevant?

This would not be fair to the jury – so I have to pass on this – but you can take a look at their works in the guide and decide for yourself. What I can say is that the shortlist was meant to only have ten artists, but Daniel Baumann insisted on having 13 because the works were just so strong!

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in South Asian artists with exhibitions such as "No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia" by Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative in 2013. Why do you think there is an increasing international focus on South Asian art now?

The quality of the work being created is exceptionally strong, and it has been for a long time, the rest of the world is only now waking up to it, as current shows of artists such as **Gaitonde** and **Nasreen Mohamedi** can attest to. It's also important to note that the work of Tayeba Begum Lipi in "No Country" had its debut at the first Dhaka Art Summit.

What are some of the challenges faced by South Asian artists?

A lack of resources (which mean many do not have studios, like in Myanmar and Bangladesh), a lack of conservation and a difficult climate in that regard, a lack of government support to help them travel and obtain visas, and a lack of basic infrastructure, from framing to art insurance.





Fahd Burki, 'Saint', 2011. Image courtesy the artist and Grey Noise.

Bangladesh has been described as the art hub of South Asia. What is the current art scene in Bangladesh?

It's extremely vibrant and I think Daniel Baumann, Director of **Kunsthalle Zurich**, captures this very well in his introductory text to the Samdani Art Award. There is no market for contemporary art in Bangladesh, so

artists are not churning out commercial works – they are really pushing experimental boundaries. Most photography experts will agree that the best photographers in South Asia of the “next generation” are in Bangladesh, even Pablo Bartholomew says that.

Daniel Baumann writes about the works by shortlisted artists for Samdani Art Award: “What made me think that “something was going on here?” First of all the quality of works by these twenty artists... The artists obviously knew the language of art (thanks to education and the Internet), but they firmly and proudly applied it to their current context. This was best visible for the numerous photographic positions, many of them coming out of the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute... Their works and approaches seem to form a strong current at the moment, a current that I tried to understand as an urge to build up a visual memory and culture for a very young country at the brink of maybe a new era. All of their work pick up important issues of the moment such as the menacing destruction of places and subcultures such as Old Dhaka, the highly problematic, nevertheless fascinating dismantling of ghost ships, the huge social differences Bangladesh is built on, and the potentially taboo-laden relationships between the sexes and religion.

Beside this large group of photographic works, the selection for the 2016 Samdani Art Award and its exhibition emphasize on singular positions in painting (Farzana Ahmed Urmi), sculpture (Rupam Roy and Shimul Shaha), film and photography (Rafiqul Shuvo), film and performance (Palash Bhattacharjee) and printmaking (Ashit Mitra). Farzana Ahmed Urmi offers light and deep variations of portraits, Rupam Roy and Shimul Shaha venture into alternative forms of sculpture, Ashit Mitra transforms printmaking into an art of time and beauty, Palash Bhattacharjee virtuously combines film, performance and memory while Rafiqul Shuvo sets film and photography free from their duty to document. Initially, I was asked to choose ten artists for the final list. However, the quality was such that I could only narrow it down to thirteen. What more of a compliment is there to the thriving Bangladeshi art scene? Something is definitely going on there.”

What were some of the responses from the media and visitors for the past two Summits?

It has been overwhelmingly positive! All of the reviews, in fact, were positive both from visitors and the press.



Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu, 'Ipso Facto', 2011-2013, 6 paintings (emulsion on linen, net, 275 x 580 cm each) and video (colour, with sound, 20 min. 54 sec.), approximately 7 x 16 x 3 m

overall. Work realised within the framework of the exhibition at the Atelier Hermès thanks to the support of the Fondation d'entreprise Hermès. Image courtesy Atelier Hermès and nnncl workshop.

How do you see South Asian art in the global context now and in five years?

2017 will be a huge year in terms of Indian (and possibly South Asian) art in the UK – as there is a pool of funds called “imagining India” that institutions in the UK are vying for – and many of these institutions are coming to Dhaka Art Summit for their research. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has just hired a brilliant curator (Shanay Jhaveri who is on my Dhaka Art Summit team) to be their first curator of Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art and the **Met** is expanding this department over the next five years into a new wing as well as the Breuer Building, the Venice Architecture Biennale is including Bangladeshi artists, Documenta is including South Asian Artists, so there will be a lot of opportunities to drive and inspire artists internationally, as well as in the region with initiatives like the **Kochi Muziris Biennale**, which also used Dhaka Art Summit as their research platform to select artists for the 2014 edition – and Bose and Sudarshan will both be attending the summit, which we hope means much to look forward to in 2016.

We have 61 institutions and counting from outside Bangladesh visiting the 2016 summit as a research platform – which we hope means at least 61 new places for South Asian art to flourish in the future.

And I also cannot leave off the Samdani Art Foundation Art Centre opening in Sylhet in 2018 – which will be a “permanent” Dhaka Art Summit in a beautiful rural 100+ acre plot in North East Bangladesh.

Christine Lee

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