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Image: Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi, Efflorescence. Installation at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge University (2019), as part of the exhibition Homelands

Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation promotes South Asian art with international audience

Durjoy Rahman speaks with STIR about his vision, and plans about his recent initiatives through an art foundation based in Berlin and Dhaka.

by [Rahul Kumar](#)

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A relatively young establishment, based out of Berlin and Dhaka, the Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation has unique and refreshing objective – to promote South Asian art internationally. Gross disparity in presence and acceptance of art from the region in critical global discourse became the singular reason to set up an institution. The foundation has since invested in programmes that brought together cutting-edge art from various countries of the South Asian region and showcased in a well woven curatorial framework. A significant exhibition -

Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, was presented at Cambridge (UK). This was accompanied with a symposium to encourage and enable a critical dialogue. More recently, the foundation's Majhi residency took place at Berlin, culminating into a public exhibition at the Berlin Art Week. The dynamic programming in future is expected to cover socio-political issues like that of Rohingya refugee crisis.

I speak to Durjoy Rahman, founder of Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation, on his aspirations and plans for the future of the Foundation.

Rahul Kumar (RK): What in your opinion were the key things lacking in the art ecosystem that led to the thought of forming the Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation? Further, what are the core objectives and vision for the Foundation?

Durjoy Rahman (DR): We established the Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation in 2018 with the goal of promoting art from South Asia and the region in a critical and international cultural context. The Foundation hopes to be a conduit connecting art and artists between [Asia](#), [Europe](#) and beyond to build greater awareness for South Asian artists on the global stage, which led to the decision to base it in both [Dhaka](#) and [Berlin](#).

Being a collector for over the past 25 years, I have seen how much our art and cultural landscape has progressed, but it was not getting the recognition, especially from the western world, that they deserve. The art scene in Dhaka is slowly becoming more established with a growing number of art events and institutions, and we hope that the Foundation can contribute to introducing these artists to an international audience.

In the past two years, we have supported artists in creating and producing new works, loaned works by South Asian artists to major European museums and exhibitions, and engaged critics and scholars in many exhibitions and publications. This summer has also marked the second anniversary of our landmark Majhi residency programme, which took place this year in Berlin and brought together Asian and European artists to exchange ideas and viewpoints, culminating in a public exhibition during Berlin Art Week.



Snow by Sohrab Hura Image: Courtesy of Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation

RK: Initiatives of the Foundation include working with rural creative communities of Bangladesh, alongside global contemporary artists. How are these ‘extremes’ manoeuvred?

DR: From the beginning of the Foundation, we have been committed to supporting artists and creatives from South Asia and fostering cultural exchange with western artists and institutions. However, the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic asked us to consider ‘what else’ a Foundation can do in these challenging times to support the community around us.

This summer, we observed that many of these families had been greatly affected by the effect of the pandemic on the economy and tourism. These local artisans depend heavily on peak

tourism periods for sales during March and April, and so their annual livelihoods were greatly affected by the lockdown. We were proud to partner with the artist/activist [Kamruzzaman Shadhin](#) and the Gidree Bawlee Foundation of Art to support traditional craftsmen and their families by offering both practical support and engaging them in a collective creative project. In the past few months, for example, Shadhin has been working with the craftsmen to revive an abandoned plot to grow a vegetable garden shaped as a work of 'land art', which the community will be able to harvest food from in the long term in their daily life. In a more immediate initiative, the Foundation also collaborated with Pulse Healthcare to donate thousands of sets of PPE to frontline workers when supplies were scarce during the outbreak.

We are hoping to continue this expanded mission of the Foundation to create more programmes that can support a diverse range of artists and communities, and highlight the connection between art-making and important social and cultural issues in the region.



Left: Blame by Shilpa Gupta; Right: Plate by Seher Shah Image: Courtesy of Kettle Yard – Homeland

RK: In continuation, is pedagogical interventions part of the objectives of the Foundation? What steps are taken for disbursement of content created through the projects of the Foundation?

DR: Education undoubtedly plays a core role in the Foundation's activities and many of our projects feature public programmes and documentation, such as academic panels, publications and in-depth essays to not only support artists but academics and critics working in the creative space.

For example, with *Future of Hope*, we were pleased to invite Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam and Professor Shishir Bhattacharjee, two of Bangladesh's most esteemed scholars, artist and commentators to mentor the project and work with the artists. It has been such a pleasure to witness the lively discussion and exchange between them behind the scenes over long distances and varying time zones. At the moment, we are working on producing a publication that will include critical texts written by the mentors and artists to commemorate this project.



Exhibition installation view Image: Courtesy of Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation

Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation was also proud to support the *Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan* exhibition at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, [UK](#) last year, which included the organising of a critical symposium with notable scholars of South Asian art from the [Tate Modern](#) and Courtauld Institute of Art. This event was very well attended, demonstrating strong appetite and curiosity to learn more about the artists and practices from South Asia.

The Foundation's website also regularly publishes news and reports on artists and news from the regional art scene, acting as a source of knowledge on modern and [contemporary art](#) of the region. Through these activities we aim to promote South Asian art and artists to the world, as well as to build a strong foundation of art knowledge and appreciation within our own community.



Installation for Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK Image: Courtesy of Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation

RK: How was the recent initiative of presenting works of artists on the idea of 'hope' come about? What were the curatorial considerations to select the artists?

DR: During the past months of the global [pandemic](#), people around the world were experiencing such uncertainty in their workplaces and at home. Many of us, including our artists, were undergoing various levels of lockdown in cities around the world. As mentioned, following the launch of the Bhumi project, we wanted to continue engaging artists who we strongly believe to be change makers in our world. Working with our mentors, Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam and Professor Shishir Bhattacharjee, we were pleased to bring together a diverse group of artists representing a wide range of mediums and aesthetic styles, while also reflecting the international Bangladeshi diaspora.

Drawing on their own surroundings, these artists each brought their own concerns and practices to the project to create a unique reflection of the state of the world, from Bipasha Hayat's work which references the [Black Lives Matter](#) protests in [New York](#), to the strangely empty streets and trains of [Paris](#) where Imtiaz Shohag is based.

In particular, we are also excited to highlight artists from the indigenous communities of [Bangladesh](#), such as Joydeb Roaja and Hlubaihu Chowdhuri, who have been working in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Roaja and Chowdhuri's work also actively engaged the participation of their local communities, helping to promote hope and joy among the people. Despite ongoing challenges, we wanted to focus on the idea of inspiring 'Hope,' which has become such a key word in the past few months, as we start looking ahead to a more positive future.



Yog Raj by Nikhil Chopra Image: Courtesy of Kettle Yard – Homeland

RK: Please share with us details of the upcoming projects?

DR: Later in 2020, Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation will be supporting the public programmes for Sunil Gupta's first major UK retrospective at the Photographer's Gallery in [London](#), including a live online performance by Raisa Kabir exploring the themes of Gupta's work on November 25, and a two-day symposium in January 2021 that will discuss the social histories featured in the exhibitions.

In Dhaka, we will also be partnering with the High Commission of Canada to display an important work from the Foundation's collection 'Elephant in the Room' by Kamruzzaman Shadhin, which highlights the important crisis facing the Rohingya refugees.



Durjoy Rahman Image: Kazi Mukul, Courtesy of Durjoy Bangladesh Foundation