

Kerin Backhaus is an archivist, researcher and photographer. An intern for "Storytelling with Sari," she seeks to explore the intersection between contemporary art and social change

A tale of winners

Kerin Backhaus writes about Katakali women represented in the US

The 5pm bus approached the Terminal 1 Bus Stop outside of Mt Rainier City Hall, just two blocks from Washington, DC. Commuters poured off the bus, bleary-eyed and tired. Dazzling visions of red, pink, black, and white cloths blew around in the steamy summer air, filling their eyes, while unfamiliar sounds of a bleating goat, village children laughing and the distant voices of chattering women entered their ears. For the residents of Mt Rainier, this was not a normal day.

June 20 marked the end of three public installation performances known as "Bus Stop Bangladesh," presented by Bangladeshi-American artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose and sponsored by Art Lives Here. Multiple 18-foot collaboratively created block-printed and hand-painted saris hung from the Mt Rainier City Hall and covered the adjacent plaza and bus stop.

The saris stood as representations of the stories of a dozen women from the remote village of Katakali, Bangladesh, an island community and the birthplace of Bose's ancestors. Bose, dressed each day in a collaborative sari made and worn by one of the Katakali women, embodied each woman's personal story as she read from oral histories of their daily lives, recorded as part of Bose's project "Her Words: Storytelling with Saris."

Personal histories about learning to read, growing food, surviving successive cyclones, and adapting to climate change were shared with local commuters, spectators and onlookers at the public site. Postcards featured images of each Katakali woman that participated in the project, and her

Public reactions

The event was received by the locals on several different levels; reactions ranged from local residents baffled by their surroundings while gazing at brightly-coloured and elegant reams of cloth, which hung from their normally banal transit shelter and government building, to routing for more details on these women's way of life and their origins. Many people engaged Bose and her assistants in conversation, prompting them with questions, curiosities and comments. Others noticed the billowing saris as they drove by on Mt Rainier Circle, some stopping to linger or driving twice around the circle to get a better look.



Mt Rainier City Hall

Evan Wilder

The event at a glance

Art Lives Here sponsored the event through the National Endowment for the Arts

It was divided into three parts that took place on June 4, 12 and 20

Each segment featured four saris, telling stories of four different women who survived cyclones, illiteracy and other obstacles and came out on the winning side

More information is available at <http://storytellingwithsaris.com>

personal accounts were translated in English; volunteers clad in saris distributed these cards to passers-by and engaged in dialogue about the project. Sounds of women singing, clapping and dancing emanated from the public space, juxtaposed with the urban noises of bus exhaust, constant cell phone chatter and rush-hour traffic.

Wrapped in a sari, Bose's 13-year-old daughter Tuli, who is fluent in both Spanish and Bangla, interacted with bus passengers during the final Hossain installation/performance. She was particularly moved by one Hispanic resident who proclaimed she too could not read or write, sharing a similar experience to the women of Katakhalī prior to their recent education. Jerome, an African-American male in his early 20s, eagerly helped in hanging the saris on the bus shelter before the performance. High up on the ladder delicately pinning the saris to the shelter, he exclaimed: "What you're doing here is beautiful. This is exactly what this community needs." Similar sentiments were shared by others after they experienced their newly transformed surroundings. Residents began to crowd around the bus stop, fascinated by both the monumental presence of the saris and the delicate ethereal quality of the material, eager to touch the garments, bringing them closer to the lives of the Katakhalī women.

As the stories unfolded through each performance and the public fell deeper into the sounds of Katakhalī and the visual sensation of flowing saris, the complex layers between place, culture and history began to unravel, revealing less of humanity's differences and rather exposing its



A couple of the passengers

Neema Narayanan

common core.

Since 2000, Bose has been an integral part of an eco-empowerment programme in Katakhalī started by Samhati, a US-based non-profit group of Bangladeshi-American women founded by her mother Noorjahan. Bose recently decided to consciously integrate her art with her activism and directly involve the women from her ancestral village in her art making process; the result was "Storytelling with Saris." Bose created Bus Stop Bangladesh for the local residents of Mt Rainier. She said, "I wanted to recreate the experience of making the saris outdoors in Katakhalī – the whole length of the sari blowing in the wind to dry." Bose's intervention was not only educational but also actively engaged the community, demonstrating how art can have a positive impact.

About the performances

Part of "Her Words: Storytelling with Saris," the performances call attention to the issues of global literacy, climate change, and the critical role of women bringing about social change. Through her art, Bose draws out these women's stories in a progressive way, allowing these issues to emerge directly from the women themselves. Primarily known as "social practice," artists since the 1960s have been creating projects that blur the lines between the art object, contemporary art, performance, political activism, and community engagement. Social practice emphasises participatory processes. An antithesis to the contemporary art market, social practice art aims to establish real change.



At the bus stop

Evan Wilder