



Drowning: Is There Time for Love?  
**Monica Jahan Bose**

Cover image:

**Water 15 (Energy)**

**2008**

**acrylic, paper, and crayon on canvas**

**81 x 100 cm (32 x 40 in)**

## **Monica Jahan Bose**

### **Drowning: Is There Time for Love?**

**23 July - 5 August, 2009**

**La Galerie, Alliance Francaise de Dhaka**

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“We are drowning, saturated with images, news, information, marketing, phone calls, text messages, noise, and color. We are overwhelmed with the conflicting demands of work, society, family, religion, and tradition. We are literally drowning, as the waters rise around us and the storms grow fiercer with the warming of the planet, a consequence of over-consumption by richer countries. As we gasp for air and struggle to survive, do we find time for love? I believe we do. Love – whether for our children, for our lovers, or for nature – is what drives us, keeps us afloat.”

- Monica Jahan Bose

I want to thank artists Shahabuddin Ahmed and Kazi Ghiyasuddin for all their encouragement during the past year and especially for suggesting that I show my work in Bangladesh. Special thanks go to Jacques Bounin and Kazi Abdullah Al Muktadir of the Alliance Francaise de Dhaka for all their help in making this exhibition possible. Especially given their hectic schedules, I thank the Finance Minister of Bangladesh Abul Maal Abdul Muhith and Agricultural Minister of Bangladesh Matiya Chowhury for agreeing to inaugurate my exhibition. I also want to thank Md. Muniruzzaman and Prof. Nisar Hossain for their support and guidance, Dulal Chandra Mondol for framing my work in a very short time frame, and Syed Latif Hossain for his skillful preparation of this catalog. I am grateful to Leah Stoddard, Abul Hasnath, and Takir Hossain for writing about my work. Finally, many thanks to my mother, Noorjahan Bose, “Agunmukhar Meye,” for her help with this exhibition and for telling me the incredible stories of her life, our family, our village, and Bengal.



## Of Exuberance and Activism: Monica Jahan Bose and her Paintings

Monica Jahan Bose is a visual storyteller. Her paintings from the last few years are intuitive images, fragmented picture postcards that evoke life in today's South Asia, particularly the artist's native Bangladesh. Bose's contemporary non-linear narratives capture the sensation of walking down a crowded street, senses bombarded with stimuli. East meets West; ancient details vie with such symbols of Western culture as cellphones, electric meters, Valentine hearts, and mass media advertising. The coexistence of old and new, personified in several works by the image of young women in traditional sarees talking on their mobile phones, is both seamless and uneasy, suggesting that Bangladesh is a place where the visual impressions shift and change from then to now in a single glance, turn of the head, or touch of a button.

The artist's biography itself blends East and West into a multicultural tale. Born in England to Bengali parents – one Hindu, one Muslim, their families divided between Bangladesh and India's West Bengal – she grew up in both Bangladesh and, after age 10, the United States. As an adult she has lived in Japan, the US, and, currently, Paris. This life experience clearly has informed Bose's hybrid approach to painting and her layered content, images that document both present-day South Asia and her own identity, a self split between two worlds, neither of which she inhabits fully. In her words, she “confronts the dualities and displacement experienced by an immigrant taken away from her roots.”

Her painting style is a mix of influences and allusions. She is by no means an outsider artist – she has degrees in art from two universities in India and the United States – but the shallow space, shifts in scale, and simplified approach to faces and figures of her work make reference to folk art traditions worldwide. The style also recalls the Neo-expressionist artists of the 1980s (e.g. Francesco Clemente, Georg Baselitz,

and later, Fiona Rae), and Pop Art, with its love of the everyday object (phones, “hello” nametags). Text sharing the field with ungrounded images also suggests both Western marketing and the Hajj murals of Egypt.

She tempers her sense of rootlessness by grounding herself with people. Smiling faces – her daughters, her parents, her grandmother, politicians, Bengali leaders, random people on the street, even Western presidents – engage the viewer and celebrate heritage. Often overlaid by maps of the region, men and women float above partial street scenes or rise from swirling waters. In Bose's Water Series, water symbolizes both healing and hardship. Water brings together people, but as cyclones or floods, it also tears families apart. The river Ganga in India becomes Padma across the border in Bangladesh. The different words used for water (pani, used by Muslims, and jal, used more by Hindus and Christians) also divide the Bengalis. Bose repeats these two words in her water paintings as a reminder of her own dual background and the religious fractures in South Asia.

Bose is a self-described activist, seeing her work as political art. Bengali phrases and words appear throughout the artist's compositions, and Bose's professed deep love of the language binds her to her culture and to the Bengali national identity in the same way the language itself historically binds a region marked for decades by cultural diversity. In the Mother Tongue series, Bengali cursive surrounds images of women going to school to learn Bangla, speaking to the low literacy rate for women in the country. More to the political point, using the script directly references the Bengali Language Movement of the mid-1950s. Many individuals, including the artist's parents, fought to make Bengali an official language of East Pakistan, which later became the independent nation of Bangladesh in large part over this very issue.

Another political element in Bose's work is the single red saree blouse – symbolizing the subjugation of women – a modern-day “modesty addition” to be worn under the traditional six yards of cloth. When placed on a green ground it recalls the Bangladesh flag, and later shown without sleeves, questions any dress code or law that would limit women's rights. The saree blouse also operates as a stand-in for the artist herself as an observer, overseeing the knitting together of experience, imagination, and memory into composite scenes, as if her own “mother tongue” is the act of painting itself.

A far cry from traditional political art, Bose's work is unafraid to be beautiful, playful, and varied, less centered on communicating message than on offering a joyous, expansive use of paint on canvas. Only after one is drawn close to the active brushwork or vibrant passages does she bring in social content. By way of aesthetics and visual pleasure, Bose's spontaneous scenes take unexpectedly nuanced positions on pressing issues concerning the rights of women, religious fundamentalism, and global warming.

Ultimately, Bose's art is about coming together and rebuilding a sense of self, unifying disparate elements with compositional structure and dominant colors – intense reds, oranges, and pinks, the colors of sarees. For all the social commentary and nationalism embedded in her imagery, in the end her exuberant narratives find within a world of chaos and constant change a peaceful, renewed, and optimistic whole.

**Leah Stoddard**  
Independent Curator  
Charlottesville, Virginia  
USA

## মনিকা জাহান বসুর চিত্রচর্চা

প্যারিস-প্রবাসী শিল্পী মনিকা জাহান বসুর চিত্রে সমকালীন বাংলাদেশের নানা অনুষ্ণ চিত্রিত হয়েছে। বিদেশে বসবাস করলেও তাঁর চিত্রে বাঙালির জীবনের দৈনন্দিন জীবনসংগ্রাম, প্রতিবাদ, কখনো-বা অনুপঞ্জ নানা ঘটনা প্রধান উপজীব্য। দীর্ঘদিন ধরে তিনি বিদেশে বসবাস করেছেন। শিক্ষাগ্রহণ করেছেন প্রবাসে; আমেরিকার একটি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় থেকে ও পরবর্তীকালে বিশ্বভারতী থেকে ডিপ্লোমা পেয়েছেন।

প্রদর্শনীর চিত্রগুচ্ছে মনিকা জাহান বসুর জীবন অনুসঙ্গী ভাবনার নানা প্রকাশ আছে। দেশ যে তাঁকে নিয়ত আলোড়িত করে তার প্রকাশ খুব সহজেই উপলব্ধি করা যায়। অভিব্যক্তিতে ধরা পড়েছে বাংলাদেশের সাধারণ মানুষের প্রতিবাদ, প্রেম-অপ্রেম সহ জীবনের নানা ঘটনাপ্রবাহ। মনিকা অন্তর্দৃষ্টি দিয়ে বিষয়কে ধরতে চেয়েছেন। সেদিক থেকে পর্যবেক্ষণ করলে খুব সহজেই উপলব্ধি করা যায় মনিকা খ্যাতনামা পিতা ও মাতার অঙ্গীকারকে করোটিতে কত হৃদয়গ্রাহীভাবে ধরবার চেষ্টা করেছেন। শিল্পীর এই চিত্রায়নে ব্যঙ্গ ও কৌতুকও উপেক্ষণীয় হয়নি। রেখার মৌলিকত্ব ও বিষয়ের সঙ্গে ব্যঞ্জনাময় রং তাঁর সৃষ্টিকে করে তুলেছে তাৎপর্যময়।

দীর্ঘদিন প্রবাসে থাকলেও তিনি বাংলাদেশের নারীর অন্তর-বেদনাকে খুব সহজেই শনাক্ত করতে পেরেছেন। তাঁর বেশ কয়েকটি চিত্রের বিষয় এদেশের নারীর দুঃখ-কষ্ট ও বেদনা। এই চিত্রায়নে নবীন শিল্পীর দেশ সম্পর্কে ভাবনার বিচ্ছুরণ আমাদের আশান্বিত করে।

এছাড়া পরিবেশের বিপন্নতাও তাঁকে বিচলিত করে বলে এ বিষয় অবলম্বনেও তিনি চিত্ররচনা করেছেন। এ তাঁর দেশ অঙ্গীকারেরই এক চেষ্টনা।

তাঁকে, এই সৃষ্টিময় ভাবনাকে স্বাগত জানাই।

আবুল হাসনাত  
সম্পাদক, কালি ও কলম  
ঢাকা

## Monica Jahan Bose's Intimate Journey

Monica Jahan Bose is new to Dhaka's art circuit, exhibiting for the first time in Bangladesh. A native of Bangladesh, she has lived in many countries of the world and has garnered various experiences in her career. At present, she lives and works in Paris. Though she lives abroad, her umbilical cord with the country is intact. She is a figurative and objective painter. Her images pulsate with life, being vibrant, provocative, and dramatic. These very elements make her works appear to be a veritable part of our surrounding atmosphere with all its struggles, conflicts, and achievements. Her lively figures cunningly hint at many untold stories rich in their humanity. We can almost guess their hidden desires and wants. The works reveal the artist's eloquent thinking process and her intellect.

Her main themes are the Bengali Language Movement, women's rights, illiteracy, womanhood, global warming, and fundamentalism. Her works plunge deep into Bengali culture, heritage, and tradition, and the impact of globalisation. The Bangla alphabet, saree blouse, rickshaw, and Shaheed Minar are some recurring motifs in her paintings. The motifs simplify her works and help to make a personal mark in her paintings. We can discern many characters in her works, enticing us to think about our own existence and individuality.

Monica is keenly aware of the present socio-economic and political situation in Bangladesh. Her soul is engrossed with our people and their joys, sorrows, and visions, which are clearly evident in her work. Monica is obviously conscious of art movements around the world, yet she has inserted herself in the contemporary art movement of Bangladesh with zeal, courage and creativity.

She is comfortable working with a large canvas to freely explore her themes and complex compositions. Her work is clarified by a powerful engagement with figure, object and space, and with bold and sweeping brushstrokes. She plays with texture and illusion for interesting surface effects.

Monica's paintings appear to chart the artist's own intimate journey across religious, linguistic, and geographical boundaries, while also commenting on the role of these boundaries in our society. Her unique work is a fresh and a welcome addition to the art scene in Bangladesh and the Bengali and South Asian Diaspora.

Takir Hossain  
Art Critic, The Daily Star  
Dhaka, Bangladesh



**Water 3 (Floating World)**, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 89 x 130 cm (35 x 51 in)









Valentine's Day 4 (Seeking), 2008, acrylic and newspaper on canvas, 97 x 130 cm (38 x 51 in)





Water 6 (Ganga/Padma), 2008, acrylic on canvas , 97 x 130 cm (38 x 51 in)





**Water 12 (Ganga, Padma, Reunion)**, 2008, acrylic and crayon on canvas , 89 x 130 cm (35 x 51 in)

















**Valentine's Day 2**, 2007, acrylic and newspaper on canvas, 73 x 100 cm (29 x 39 in)









**Elections 3 (Mobile Phones)**, 2009, acrylic and newspaper on canvas, 89 x 116 cm (35 x 46 in)









**Saree Blouse and Bridge**, 2009  
acrylic and newspaper on canvas  
81 x 116 cm (32 x 46 in)







**Mother Tongue 4 (February/Homeland)**, 2007, acrylic and paper on canvas, 89 x 116 cm (35 x 46 in)









**Water 18 (Agunmukha 2)**, 2009, acrylic, marble dust, and newspaper on canvas, 81 x 100 cm (32 x 40 in)









**Saree Blouse 3**, 2009  
 acrylic and oil bar on canvas  
 130 x 97 cm (51 x 38 in)







**Mother Tongue 11 (Rikta and Father)**

acrylic on canvas  
97 x 130 cm (38 x 51 in)





# MONICA JAHAN BOSE



## Education

BA, Studio Art (painting), Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, USA

Diploma in Indian Art, Viswa-Bharati University, Santiniketan, India

Juris Doctor, Columbia University School of Law, New York, NY, USA

## Selected Exhibitions

**Drowning: Is There Time for Love?**, La Galerie, Alliance Française, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2009 (solo)

**Reflection/Narration: Where Are We Going?**, Special Exhibition in Commemoration of International Mother Language Day, U.N.E.S.C.O Headquarters, Paris, France, 2009 (duo)

**Water, Love, Language: Fragments of Identity**, Galerie Médiart, Paris, France, 2009 (solo)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, USA, 2006 (long-term loan exhibition)

**Summer Flavors**, DFN Gallery, New York, NY, USA, 2001 (group)

**Tokyo Scenes: Intersections, Balconies, and Interiors**, Genkan Gallery, Tokyo, Japan, 2000 (solo)

**Twenty-Third International Art Exhibition**, The Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, 1999 (group)

## Selected Bibliography/Publications

Shiro Yoneyama, "Concrete Jungle Inspires Lawyer-Artist," *Japan Times*, February 26, 2000.

Kyodo, "Feature: Bangladeshi Lawyer Pursues Career as Artist," *Asian Economic News*, February 28, 2000.

Monica Jahan Bose, "Multiple Identities," in Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, *Struggle for Ethnic Identity: Narratives by Asian-American Professionals*, 1999.

Monica Jahan Bose and Michael B. Gerrard, "The Emerging Law of Environmental Justice," *Chem. Waste Litig. Reporter*, September 1997.

Monica Jahan Bose and the Lawyers' Collective (Bombay), **Domestic Violence**, Kali Press, 1992.

## Biography

Born in Britain to Bengali parents, Monica Jahan Bose has lived in England, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, the United States, and Japan, and currently lives and works in Paris, France.

Her family is both Hindu (her father's side) and Muslim (her mother's side) and is divided between Bangladesh and West Bengal in India, giving her a special perspective on religious and geographic divisions. Her husband is American and his parents

are Catholic and Protestant. Monica's parents were both political activists and fought to make Bangla a national language in East Pakistan, before it became the independent country of Bangladesh.

Monica was a young child in Bangladesh during the liberation war, when her family was forced to flee as refugees across the border to India. She returned to independent Bangladesh when the war ended and spent some formative years in the newly-born nation. She won first place in a children's art competition in Bangladesh at age seven for her painting of a women's rights rally that she attended with her mother. Her family moved to the US when she was ten, but she has maintained her ties to her homeland and her mother tongue. Her mother's family comes from Borobaishdia, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal that has been ravaged by numerous cyclones and storms.

An artist and activist, Monica has degrees in art and law. She has been actively involved with several women's organizations, focusing on violence against women, the rights of immigrant women, and female literacy. She has also taught and practiced law, representing many poor women, immigrants, and environmental groups. She serves on the board of directors of a non-profit organization that works to increase female literacy and improve the lives of poor women and children in Bangladesh.

## Website

<http://monicajahanbose.com/>









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