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Worn: Monica Jahan Bose's "Storytelling with Saris"

by Miryam Haarlammert



Installation view of "Layer by Layer: Storytelling with Saris" (2013) at Brentwood Arts Exchange, Maryland, 2013. Courtesy Brentwood Arts Exchange, Maryland.

At the Brentwood Arts Exchange at the Gateway Arts Center in Brentwood, Maryland—less than a mile from the United State's capital—the sounds of Katakhalī, a small community on Barobaishdia Island in Southwestern Bangladesh, can be heard. Following the sounds, and turning a corner, one is led to Bangladeshi-American artist-activist, Monica Jahan Bose's exhibition "Layer By Layer: Storytelling with Saris," which is part of an ongoing conversation about literacy and eco-empowerment for the women of her home village of Katakhalī.

Together with the Maryland-based volunteer-run organization of and for Bangladeshi women, [Sambhati](#)—which means "solidarity" in Bengali—Jahan Bose and her mother have been involved with the [Katakhalī project](#) since its inception in 2000. As an American-Bangladeshi, Muslim-Hindu, former practicing lawyer, and now full-time artist, Jahan Bose's work investigates how to foster a cohesive identity and sense of solidarity in the face of a society that demands fixity in religion, nationality and professional occupation. Through the use of traditional materials and by listening to the stories of the women, Jahan Bose promotes the empowerment of women, demonstrating how art can be a force for social justice.

12 saris make up the bulk of the installation at Brentwood, along with Bose's prints on paper and a 29-minute, three-channel video produced in collaboration with New York-based Bangladeshi filmmaker Nandita Ahmed. The film features 12 women from the community in the process of printing their own saris. The subtitled video is projected upon the textile, which drapes loosely from different parts of the ceiling and walls, making the words slightly difficult to follow as they rest upon the red, pink, white and black patterns. Together, the saris, prints and video present a snapshot of life in the small village, which encourages viewers to think about language, writing and identity.

In the video, Jahan Bose asks the women basic questions about their education and whether or not they enjoy the learning process. Due to environmental, economic and familial circumstances, many of these women had to stop attending school quite early. They are grateful to have been given the opportunity to learn to read and write again. One woman named

Shima is particularly excited at her renewed ability to read and continues to share more about life in the village, citing other instances of good fortune such as the abundance of red spinach this harvest. Each woman introduced has her own story to tell, and with each conversation another layer in Katakali life is revealed in all of its complexity.

This is not the first time saris have made an appearance in Maryland. In June, Jahan Bose's [Bus Stop Bangladesh](#) (2013), sponsored by Art Lives Here—an arts, business and community engagement initiative—took place at a bus stop outside the Mount Rainier City Hall. 18-foot lengths of Sari textile were hung from the building's façade, flowing into the street. The public intervention incited passersby and community volunteers to share some of their struggles with language, literacy and identity with one another.

Since then, the saris have traveled extensively, carrying the stories of the women who made them. The garments symbolize a cross-cultural, intergenerational effort to share and document the struggles and accomplishments of a community. Jahan Bose highlights how, in the midst of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, women continue to be empowered and to contribute to their communities.

[Layer by Layer: Storytelling with Saris](#) is on view at [Brentwood Arts Exchange](#) at Gateway Arts Center through October 19, 2013.

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