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THE SANSKRIT EPIC 'MAHABHARATA' WAS A PROMPT FOR THE WATER STREET PERFORMANCE

Sari doesn't cut it: Free-flowing Dumbo Arts Fest performance ends with a fall



Photo by Stefano Giovannini

Virtue-al: Artist Monica Jahan Bose takes questions by text message about her performance at the 2013 Dumbo Art Festival, entitled "Sublime Virtue."

By Jaime Lutz
The Brooklyn Paper

An Indian legend about a holy queen came to life in Dumbo this weekend.

Artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose unwrapped herself from a 216-foot sari that cascaded down Water Street near Brooklyn Bridge Park as part of the Dumbo Arts Festival on Sunday, landing in a soft bed in the middle of the street. Bose meant for the dreamlike performance to echo the story of Draupadi, a queen from the Sanskrit epic "Mahabharata" whose enemy tried to forcibly strip her naked but found, miraculously, that her sari went on forever.

"I use saris in my work as a symbol for the female body," Bose said about the piece, called "Sublime Virtue." The bed where the performance ended, meanwhile, signified sexual freedom and privacy, according to Bose. After the performance, the artist remained silent, directing audience members to text her their questions about the show in order to remain aloof and yet in touch with the crowd of gawkers.

Privacy and freedom of choice are not often givens in Bangladesh, according to Bose, whose family is from there and whose grandmother was forced to marry at age seven.

In contrast, Draupadi's plea against her objectification is a powerful symbol of choice. Bose's sari was not magic — it was sewn together from the saris of women she worked with in an activist program — and at the end of her performance, her protective garment fell from her body as she retired to the bed. But that does not mean that her piece is cynical, she says.

“It's supposed to be empowering,” Bose said. “It's supposed to be a gesture of hope.”

Reach reporter Jaime Lutz at jlutz@cnglocal.com or by calling (718) 260-8310. Follow her on Twitter @jaime_lutz.

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