

OPENING THE DOOR TO MONICA JAHAN BOSE'S PAINTINGS

Monica Jahan Bose has titled this exhibition “Open the Door,” referring in part, no doubt, to two recent canvases she created bearing the same title. The larger painting, “Open the Door 2,” was her entry for this year’s Prix Marin.¹ In “Open the Door 2,” we see a young woman, likely the artist herself, standing at an open window, wearing only a red sari blouse—a recurring motif in much of her work—and a white cloth or slip around her waist. Her bare arms are spread wide open as she reaches out to the world. One hand seems to be moving toward a doorknob, near a streaming Bengali text proclaiming “Kholo Kholo Dar,” meaning “Open, Open the Door.”

This painting merits particular attention, not only because it inspired the title of the exhibition, but because it marks a point of departure in Bose’s oeuvre, a revealing of what was previously not seen nor meant to be shown.

Here Bose decides to paint female flesh and the body while her recent practice has been to depict only the red sari blouse, a loaded signifier standing in for the female body or the artist herself and referring to feminine sexuality. The mere depiction of the sari blouse – or choli as it is popularly called across the subcontinent -- may be interpreted as provocative given that it is usually a garment hidden under the sari. Her recent works create a unique personal language, using floating sari blouses (sometimes Rauschenberg-like collages using actual sari blouses with portions cut out), red boots on hot pink or red backgrounds, text messages, and cutouts from Bengali matrimonial columns or the artist’s own photographs. Bose rarely paints the female nude as she feels that the female body has been over-depicted and objectified in art.

But in “Open the Door 2” she has dared to “open the door” and actually show a female body inside the red sari blouse. She depicts an unveiled face (in contrast to the two veiled orthodox women in the bottom right foreground), bare arms outstretched, and just below the red sari, she paints the figure’s bellybutton and bare stomach--perhaps a signifier for what lies behind it-- the womb, the center of creation.

The open lotus blossom floating on the picture plane at the level of the womb serves as a perfect symbol for the meaning of this painting as well as the show--a blossoming of this artist’s work, an opening of a new door. Just as the figure stands at an open window, we cannot help but be reminded of the way paintings themselves are open windows inviting the viewer inside.

Bose’s oeuvre cannot be fully appreciated without some knowledge of her fascinating biography which provides insight into her subjectivity and the diverse influences at play in her work: Born in England to Bangladeshi parents – one Hindu, one Muslim- and brought up mostly in the United States though now living and working in Paris, Bose has studied art, law and mathematics and has been an artist, lawyer, activist and teacher.

A powerful juxtaposition exists between her work’s sophisticated conceptual content/symbolic significance (the works are dealing with issues such as women’s

¹ The Prix Antoine Marin is a prestigious annual competition for emerging painters in Paris in which twelve senior painters are asked to nominate twelve junior painters. Shahabuddin Ahmed nominated Monica Jahan Bose for the 2010 Prix Marin.

rights, religious fundamentalism, and global warming) and the pure joyful energy that the paintings emanate, often resembling naïve South Asian folk art or street art.

She draws on her South Asian heritage yet assembles the parts of these autobiographical fragmented narratives in a manner that would be a dream for any feminist semiotician. The works are vibrant in part because of the bold South Asian palette and in part due to the interplay between simplicity of form and complexity of content, the discrepancy of which is in a constant process of reconciliation.

What does it mean to be a feminist contemporary painter in the 21st century, especially one who has had exposure to multiple cultural traditions East and West? How does Bose grapple with her multicultural upbringing and the often contradictory sets of values or world views? How is this revealed in her art?

What does it mean for her audience, when these paintings can be shown in France, the US, and Bangladesh? How differently are they received and understood? Perhaps this helps us understand why Bose often seeks the “universally human” in her work by treating themes such as love and relationships, rendering them with a certain freshness and innocence so her art can transcend the complexities and contradictions of our confused contemporary world. These lively paintings are simultaneously comforting and challenging.

Her œuvre is an ongoing reconciliation. On one level she reconciles cultural differences through integration, combining and juxtaposing on the picture plane Western and Eastern symbols in a fragmented fashion. On another level, she reconciles cultural differences through transcendence of all differences, seeking instead to express the universally human – like love and joy and using red to represent heat, energy, passion and blood. Even so, her bold use of red can be an act of political defiance, harking to the banning of the color red in Saudi Arabia in February 2009 to prevent Valentine’s Day celebrations.

Bose must continually navigate her way through the multiple layers of possible meanings, a result of the depth and richness of the cultures and traditions she has juggled throughout her life. The large painting “Open the Door 2” signals on the one hand, Bose’s beckoning her viewers to come inside and visit her blood red landscapes of semiotic significance. At the same time, the painting declares the artist’s own acceptance of the world’s invitation for her art to pass through a new open door.

Dr. Deborah Zafman, Director and Curator, Galerie Deborah Zafman, Paris

Essay for catalog Open the Door Exhibition, Dhaka Art Center (in cooperation with the American Center of the US Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh), July 2010.