

D.C. Performance Art

A Reflection on Soapbox

by [Erica Jackson](#)

During Eames Armstrong's lecture on Miami Art Basel at last Thursday's Soapbox at the Hillyer Art Space, she began to describe Monica Jahan Bose's performance/installation "Indelible Scent," but then told her audience that it may be better if they saw the performance for themselves, since it was going on in the adjacent gallery. I took her advice, and immediately left the lecture to watch Monica's performance. Although, as Eames noted in her lecture, every experience of performance is unique, it is safe to say that a majority of the audience that experienced "Indelible Scent" were affected viscerally by the performance. The set up for the performance: a canopy of bright pink saris, draped over a white bed with a cutting board at the foot of it. On the cutting board, there was a large, sharp knife and surrounding it were onions, cascading onto the bed. The artist began the performance by lying on the bed in a green and pink Sari, alternating between reading on the cutting board, lying on the bed, hands above her head as if sleeping, and texting on her phone. A post card, handed out at the beginning of the performance, invited the audience to text the artist on her cell phone to inquire about what books she was reading.



According to the post card explaining the performance, " 'Indelible Scent' speaks to love, longing, and loss and questions the traditional role of women as passive and chaste." The onions were a metaphor for love. One of the books she was reading was a memoir that included sexual experiences, entitled "Ka" by Taslima Nasrin, which was banned in Bangladesh and India. However, even without a deep understanding of what was going on thematically, the performance was powerful. There was something very voyeuristic, for me, about watching Monica in the bed, resting in a private space, even if it was in the middle of a gallery. For about an hour, Monica went on with her routine of reading, resting and texting, and then finally she began to cut the onions. It seemed to be a mode of release, and I began to wonder what set her off. In retrospect, I wish I would've texted in and asked her what she was reading, as it may have been one of the books that cued her to chop. Indeed, she seemed frustrated as she committed the act of peeling the onions, almost haphazardly, and then chopping them up, as if something set her off. As she cut more and more onions, her eyes began to water. Towards the end, the cutting of the onion became less methodical; the pieces of chopped onion began to fall on the bed as she hacked away at them. At the end, she lay back down on the bed, breathing heavily into the pillow, almost as if sobbing.

It is interesting that indelible means lasting and unforgettable, as the scent of onions really was. Moreover, since the onions were a metaphor for love, the performance, for me, spoke to love's unforgettable nature. Even as the knife destroyed the onions, they did not disappear, but merely multiplied, pervading the scent through the air. The smell of the onions is something that cannot be articulated. You had to be in the room, as the smell engulfed the air, accompanied by the artist's panting, as she heaved the knife at them. The smell was so strong that it almost moved you to tears and my stomach actually began to turn. As the post card explained, the artist broke away with the traditional female archetype by finally making the decision to cut into the onions, and release their power into the gallery. Monica became a symbol of power in the process of cutting into the onions, perhaps driven by sexual frustration and a longing to encounter love. She was determined in her act, even sacrificing her body in the process—Monica cut her finger at one point, licked the wound and kept on going.

Soapbox: Thursday, December 13, 2012, Hillyer Art Space, Washington, DC.