



## What's Happening

The  
door opener

Piplu Adhikary

“This is my apartment in Paris”, says Monica Jahan Bose, pointing to a photograph of an apartment pasted onto a canvas. “I can see the Eiffel Tower from my window, so I decided to put it in my painting”. We are standing together in Dhaka Art Centre Gallery, where Monica is showing her solo art exhibition “Open the Door” at the moment. It is an exhibition named after one painting. But it is a title and message much deeper than that.

Monica Jahan Bose is an artist with a rich background. She is a Bangladeshi-American citizen, born to a Hindu mother and a Muslim father, and she has herself lived in seven different countries. Since 2006, she is living in Paris, where she has started putting in more political elements into her works, for example through the use of texts. After visiting Bangladesh during the government election in 2008, she came back with several ideas for new paintings. These are the ones she has now returned to showcase in Dhaka.

The exhibition at Dhaka Art Centre Gallery comprises 28 paintings on different issues, such as women's rights, religious fundamentalism and global warming. Her works use 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. The energy of the paintings often resembles naïve South Asian folk art or street art. “My effort is to bring up universal themes such as love and relationships on my canvases. While creating my paintings, I have attempted to reach beyond the complexities and harshness of our confused contemporary world.”

However universal they may be, Monica's assembling of autobiographic notes gives her paintings something that could be interpreted as a feminist touch. Having been actively involved with several women's organizations,

issues like violence against women, the rights of immigrant women and female literacy also stay close to Monica's heart. Earlier, however, she has only represented the female body by a red sari blouse. With this exhibition, that has changed.

In the painting “Open the Door 2”, which was her entry for this year's Prix Marin (a prestigious annual competition for emerging painters in Paris) and also gave the name to this exhibition, the sari blouse has been fleshed out by an actual female body. The woman, likely the artist herself, is standing by an open window, wearing only the blouse and a piece of white cloth 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 song (‘Kholo Kholo Dar’ by Rabindranath Tagore) was the first song I learned when I started taking singing lessons

in Bangladesh as a young child”, Monica says. “It is a love song, pleading ‘Open, Open the door! Don't leave me out here waiting’. For me, opening the door to love is a fundamental human need. But in many societies, love is not a matter of choice. The phrase “Open the door” also has other meanings for me. I dream of a world where doors to freedom and education are open to everyone, where we no longer build walls, but are free to go wherever we wish.”

Monica Bose's exhibition opens many doors — not least the one into her own world. It is a universal exhibition indeed, but one that jumps off from a powerful female, conscious South-Asian mind. And it is an exhibition that aspires to open your own doors too.



Monica Jahan Bose

**Dhaka Art Center**  
House 60, Road 7/A,  
Dhanmondi 1205  
The exhibition goes on  
from 3 pm to 8pm till July  
26.