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In the galleries: Images in ‘Weather the Storm’ are both reassuring and ominous

By Mark Jenkins April 13, 2018



Monica Jahan Bose’s “Take the Oars and Row (Bailing),” acrylic on canvas, on view at Civilian Art Projects. (Monica Jahan Bose/Civilian Art Projects)

Artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose was born in Britain, lives in Washington and has recently staged or planned performances in Miami, Paris and Athens. But no spot is more fitting for her climate-themed work than Katakali, her mother’s ancestral village in Bangladesh, which is among the countries most at risk from rising sea levels. “Weather the Storm,” Bose’s Civilian Art Projects show, includes the contributions of women who live in Katakali, near the swelling Bay of Bengal.

In the middle of the gallery hang handmade saris, previously used in performances and decorated with a woodblock-printing method that Bose learned in Katakali. On one wall are prints the artist made with woodcut and other techniques; on the other are her impressionistic paintings of her performances. These are documented by two videos of her waterfront rituals, one of which occurred along the Anacostia and involved homeless women from Calvary Women’s Services.

Much of the visual imagery involves water, fish or fabric. Bose draws from the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize- winning Bengali author whose lyrics were adapted for the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh. (Bose gives a Tagore song a feminist tweak, changing “boatman” to “woman.”) The suspended saris include comments written by the artist’s female collaborators, including Bangladeshi women who didn’t learn to read and write until they became adults.

The paintings, all horizontal, feature blue seas and swirling pink saris. They’re rendered in a loose, drippy style, perhaps in an attempt to convey the vigor of the events they depict. The prints, mostly vertical, are tidier and more assured. Although such elegantly composed pictures as “Bay of Bengal (Shad Fish)” could be visions of nature in balance, “Rising” and “Surge 2” are more foreboding, and more reminiscent of textile design. The contrast between traditional handicraft and urgent communicate is striking, but then it’s everywhere in this multilayered show.

Monica Jahan Bose: Weather the Storm Through April 21 at Civilian Art Projects, 4718 14th St. NW. 202-607-3804. civilianartprojects.com.