

Of Exuberance and Activism: Monica Jahan Bose and her Paintings

Monica Jahan Bose is a visual storyteller. Her paintings from the last few years are intuitive images, fragmented picture postcards that evoke life in today's South Asia, particularly the artist's native Bangladesh. Bose's contemporary nonlinear narratives capture the sensation of walking down a crowded street, senses bombarded with stimuli. East meets West; ancient details vie with such symbols of Western culture as cellphones, electric meters, Valentine hearts, and mass media advertising. The coexistence of old and new, personified in several works by the image of young women in traditional sarees talking on their mobile phones, is both seamless and uneasy, suggesting that Bangladesh is a place where the visual impressions shift and change from then to now in a single glance, turn of the head, or touch of a button.

The artist's biography itself blends East and West into a multicultural tale. Born in England to Bengali parents -- one Hindu, one Muslim, their families divided between Bangladesh and India's West Bengal -- she grew up in both Bangladesh and, after age 10, the United States. As an adult she has lived in Japan, the U.S., and, currently, Paris. This life experience clearly has informed Bose's hybrid approach to painting and her layered content, images that document both present-day South Asia and her own identity, a self split between two worlds, neither of which she inhabits fully. In her words, she "confronts the dualities and displacement experienced by an immigrant taken away from her roots."

Her painting style is a mix of influences and allusions. She is by no means an outsider artist -- she has degrees in art from two universities in India and the United States -- but the shallow space, shifts in scale, and simplified approach to faces and figures of her work make reference to folk art traditions worldwide. The style also recalls the Neo-expressionist artists of the 1980s (e.g. Francesco Clemente, Georg Baselitz, and later, Fiona Rae), and Pop Art, with its love of the everyday object (phones, "hello" nametags). Text sharing the field with ungrounded images also suggests both Western marketing and the Hajj murals of Egypt.

She tempers her sense of rootlessness by grounding herself with people. Smiling faces -- her daughters, her parents, her grandmother, politicians, Bengali leaders, random people on the street, even Western presidents -- engage the viewer and celebrate heritage. Often overlaid by maps of the region, men and women float above partial street scenes or rise from swirling waters. In Bose's Water Series, water symbolizes both healing and hardship. Water brings together people, but as cyclones or floods, it also tears families apart. The river Ganga in India becomes Padma across the border in Bangladesh. The different words used for water (pani, used by Muslims, and jal, used more by Hindus and Christians) also divide the Bengalis. Bose repeats these two words in her water paintings as a reminder of her own dual background and the religious fractures in South Asia.

Bose is a self-described activist, seeing her work as political art. Bengali phrases and words appear throughout the artist's compositions, and Bose's professed deep love of the language binds her to her culture and to the Bengali national identity in the same way the language itself historically binds a region marked for decades by cultural diversity. In the Mother Tongue series, Bengali cursive surrounds images of women going to school to learn Bangla, speaking to the low literacy rate for women in the country. More to the political point, using the script directly references the Bengali Language Movement of the mid-1950s. Many individuals, including the artist's parents, fought to make Bengali an official language of East Pakistan, which later became the independent nation of Bangladesh in large part over this very issue.

Another political element in Bose's work is the single red saree blouse -- symbolizing the subjugation of women -- a modern-day "modesty addition" to be worn under the traditional six yards of cloth. When placed on a green ground it recalls the Bangladesh flag, and later shown without sleeves, questions any dress code or law that would limit women's rights. The saree blouse also operates as a stand-in for the artist herself as an observer, overseeing the knitting together of experience, imagination, and memory into composite scenes, as if her own "mother tongue" is the act of painting itself.

A far cry from traditional political art, Bose's work is unafraid to be beautiful, playful, and varied, less centered on communicating message than on offering a joyous, expansive use of paint on canvas. Only after one is drawn close to the active brushwork or vibrant passages does she bring in social content. By way of aesthetics and visual pleasure, Bose's spontaneous scenes take unexpectedly nuanced positions on pressing issues concerning the rights of women, religious fundamentalism, and global warming.

Ultimately, Bose's art is about coming together and rebuilding a sense of self, unifying disparate elements with compositional structure and dominant colors -- intense reds, oranges, and pinks, the colors of sarees. For all the social commentary and nationalism embedded in her imagery, in the end her exuberant narratives find within a world of chaos and constant change a peaceful, renewed, and optimistic whole.

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