



Vibrant Asian Art Scene Update – Virginie Puertolas-Syn



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Virginie Puertolas Syn explores the vibrant South Asian Art scene: from Dhaka Art Summit to Indian Art Fair in Delhi.

I have to confess my ignorance. When I first heard of the Dhaka Art Summit, I felt it was an oxymoron. So I embarked on discovering the Bangladesh art scene with my eyes wide open like a kid venturing into a new adventure. And an adventure it has been. Arriving in Dhaka, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, is an experience. The colours, beautifully painted rickshaws, and the smile and hospitality of the Bangladeshi people make you forget the bad traffic and horrific pollution. Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani created the Dhaka summit in 2012. It is financed at 90% by their foundation, The Samdani Art Foundation and 10% by the government and private donors. The summit takes place every two years in the Shilpakala Academy, with about 500,000 visitors over the nine days of the event. When I ventured through the building, which is like a maze, I was fascinated to see such an eclectic mix of visitors. There are no VIP days at the Dhaka Art Summit, so the general public of all ages and backgrounds cross paths with Carolyn Christov Bakargiev, the curator of Documenta 13 and Castello di Rivoli, Aaron Cezar from Delfina Foundation, Beatrice Ruf from Hartwig Art Foundation, Gregor Muir from the Tate amongst the many international visitors. The summit offers various exhibitions, collaborative projects, screenings, talks and performances. Overall there is a very festive and “bon enfant” atmosphere to it. It is well curated under the helm of Diana Campbell, who invited a team of curators for the various sub-projects of the summit. This year’s concept was Bonna, a common girl’s name and also the Bangla word for “flood”, which in Bangladesh is seen as a way of celebrating life and not as a disaster.



From “Mirage” series by Md Fazla Rabbi Fatiq

160 artists were presented at this year’s edition, including international artists like the British sculptor Antony Gormley who collaborated with six craftsmen to execute a Bamboo version of his Clearing series.

The Belgian artist Miet Warlop reimagined her earlier work, The Board working with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. With humour, the performative piece examines women’s economic empowerment and identity in modern Bangladesh.

I was particularly taken by the body of work “Mirage” from Md Fazla Rabbi Fatiq in the Samdani Art Award exhibition curated by Anne Barlow Tate St Yves.

When I met Md on the opening day before the award’s announcement, he explained that he has been researching over 100 unfinished bridges all over Bangladesh, which symbolise the endemic corruption in his country. He thought about the project in 2020 and started research in 2021. In early 2022 he began taking pictures which is still ongoing, and he intends to continue this in the years to come.

As he told me, “When we see a mirage, it seems like there is water in front of us, but when we go forward, we see nothing. Similarly, when the bridges were built, it was thought that communication between villages and remote areas would improve, but later it did not. Those bridges are, therefore, a mirage to me.”

The young photographer became aware of Bernhard and Hilla Becher’s work when he attended his photography school (Pathshala South Asian media institute) and got the idea of typology from their work. I was smitten by the project’s poetry and aesthetic. Md explained that he takes pictures at a specific season of the year and at a specific time of the day. And yet he is so articulate when he talks about his project and has an accurate political consciousness of the challenges Bangladesh is facing. I was delighted to learn that same evening that he was the recipient of the Samdani Art Award.

I left Bangladesh enchanted by the artistic and human experience of the Dhaka summit. I can’t wait to visit Srihatta, the cultural centre the Samdani are building in Sylhet, the northeastern city where their families originate. It will have an exhibition and residency space and 100-acre sculpture park designed by Aga Khan architecture award nominee Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury.

After Dhaka, I flew to Delhi to attend the Indian Art Fair. It was my first visit to the fair and a pleasant surprise. Years ago, many major international galleries participated in the fair. Still, over the recent years, it has become far more local, with the exception this year of Continua, Aicon and Mark Straus. Being a local fair is precisely what attracted me: it was fresh! I discovered new galleries and new artists I had never heard of instead of the same international roster of players. I had an unconditional coup de coeur for Narayan Sinha’s work presented by Iram Art from Ahmedabad. A science graduate turned sculptor, Narayan creates installations and sculptures from junk automobile parts which have become his artistic medium.



Subodh Gupta in his studio

The Kiran Nadar Art Museum and Sharjah Art Foundation opened a very good, well-curated exhibition, Pop South Asia presenting an extensive survey of Modern and Contemporary Art through the prism of the Popular. The exhibition presents 100 artworks from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the diaspora, Pop South Asia artists.

The highlight of my Delhi stay was my conversation with Subodh Gupta, who invited me to visit his studio.

More than a studio, it is a laboratory where the artist experiments with different materials and techniques. Some pieces done years ago are waiting for the right exhibition to be shown.

Subodh is originally a painter; inside the four storeys building, he has his small painting studio where he paints and reflects.

We had a great conversation about Art: The link between his work and Arte Povera, the stunning Kounellis exhibition at Foundation Prada in Venice in 2019, his latest project at Bon Marche in Paris, his love for food which has become part of his art practice.

We spoke about his life with Bathir Ker, his very successful artist wife, who constantly challenges and nourishes his critical thinking.

I left Delhi conscious that there is so much to discover, and it was only the beginning of my South Asia Art journey.

Words and photos: Virginie Puertolas-Syn ©Artlyst 2023

The Dhaka Art Summit took place from 3-11 February 2023

The India Art Fair took place 1-4 February 2023

Pop South Asia: Artistic Explorations in the Popular at the Foundation (SAF) and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) 9 February 2023 – 30 April 2023

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