

# Bangladesh's emerging artists focus on social justice in Samdani Art Award exhibition

► The winner of the 2020 Samdani Art Award was announced at the current Dhaka Art Summit



A visitor in front of Ashfika Rahman's work at Dhaka Art Summit. Alexandra Chaves / The National

**Alexandra Chaves**  
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Nature is full of spirals – galaxies, hurricanes, fossils and flora. So for artist Soma Surovi Jannat, it acts as the perfect form to reflect on the relationship between humans and their natural environment.

Her installation *Into the Yarn, Out in the One*, features a spiral-shaped table on which strange and delicate drawings of overstretched human limbs, odd creatures and plants sprawl. In these imaginative visuals, there is both tension and tenderness, as the connections between the elements alternate between harmful and helpful.



Soma Surovi Jannat, 'Into the Yarn, Out in the One' (2019-2020), commissioned for DAS 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Samdani Art Foundation. Photo by Randhir Singh

"The idea of the installation came from nature," Jannat says. "Our galaxy has a spiral shape, so does our DNA and even some honeybee structures. So the idea was to bring this in a white cube setting, to create a space where the viewer can have a physical interaction with the artwork." The interaction the artist refers to the fact that visitors must walk the spiral path formed by the tables to get a closer look at her drawings.

Interested in ecological livelihoods in rural Bangladesh, Jannat sought to produce a work that examines the effects of industrialisation on people. "Dhaka is an industrial landscape, so how can we perceive ourselves as beings of nature in this environment?," she asks. "The connection between humans and animals – it starts from the earth, but now we live in a more vertical landscape. We are very detached from the earth, the ground."



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For her work, Jannat recently won the 2020 Samdani Art Award, announced during the fifth Dhaka Art Summit (DAS), which runs until Saturday, February 15. Developed by the Samdani Art Foundation, which founded DAS, the award provides the winner a six-week residency at the Delfina Foundation in London.

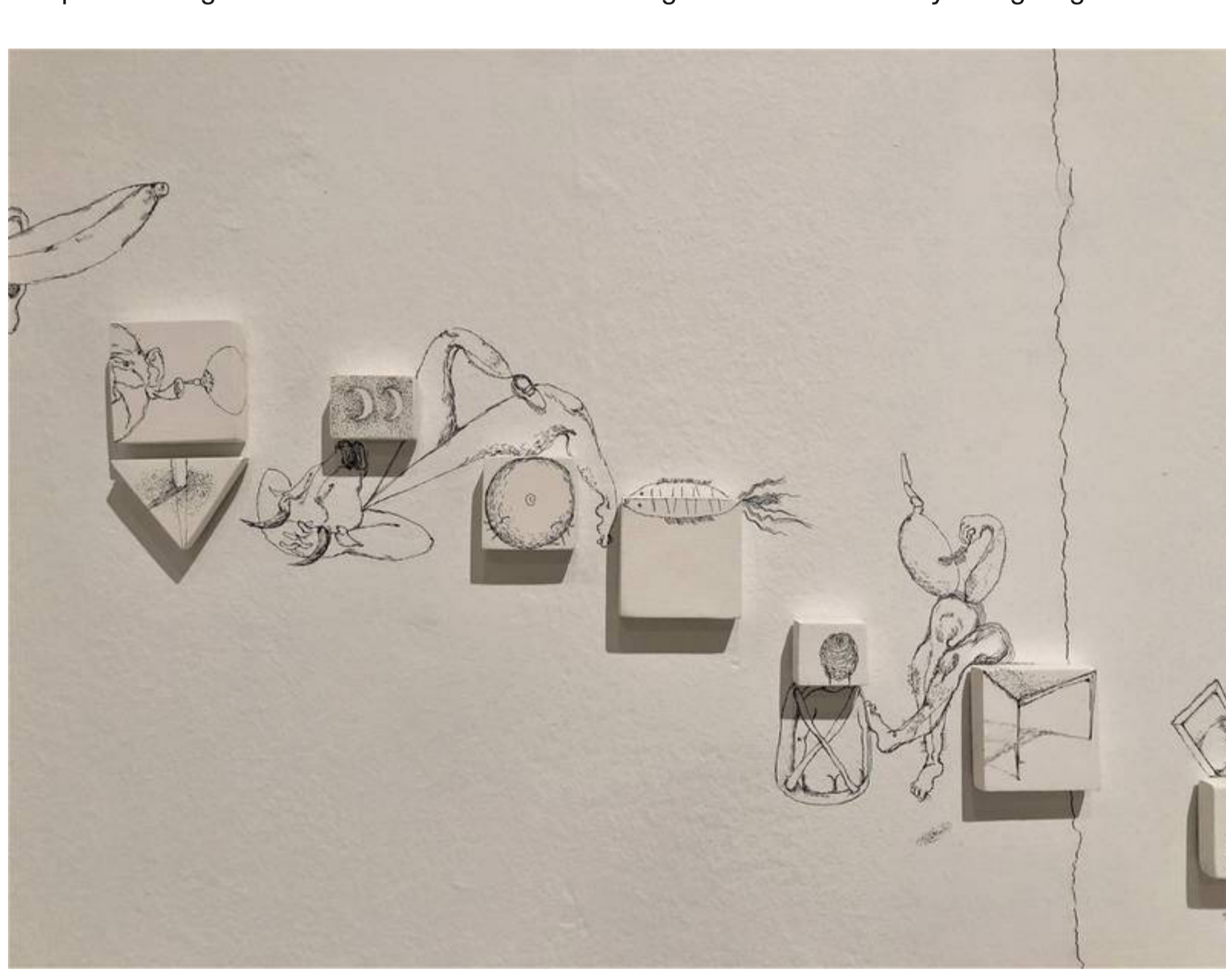
With the aim of highlighting young Bangladeshi artists, the award receives applications from those aged between 22 and 40 via open call. Jannat was among 11 other shortlisted candidates selected by guest curator Philippe Pirotte last year. Her work, along with those of the other nine shortlisted candidates, are currently on view at the summit's Samdani Art Award exhibition.

Chaired by Aaron Cezar of the Delfina Foundation, the jury for the award that decided on Jannat's victory include Adrian Villar Rojas, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Julie Mehretu, and Sunjung Kim.

The work *Into the Yarn, Out in the One* emerged out of a year-long research by the artist, who travelled to villages near Dhaka to learn more about ways of life outside of the city. "Dhaka is very chaotic, there's no breathing space. If you travel just one hour outside of the city, you can find nature," she says.

As a child, Jannat would often draw on her house's walls, and she credits her mother for fostering her artistic talent and enrolling her in art school at the age of seven. She says her use of illustration was partly caused by the lack of studio space in Dhaka, driving her to use more economical materials. In her practice, she often collaborates local communities such as the potters of Lalmonirhat in northern Bangladesh.

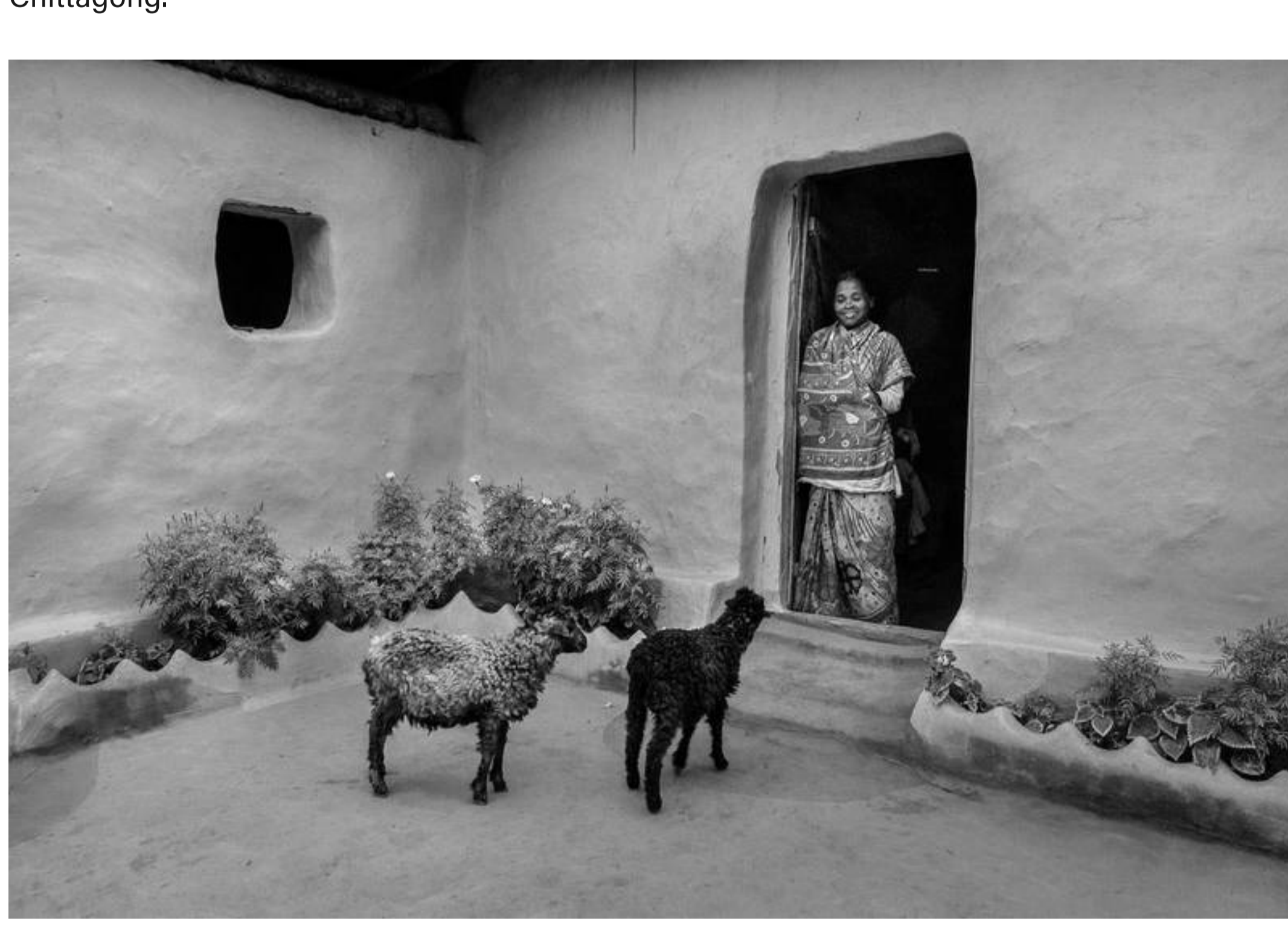
Like Jannat, shortlisted candidate Sumana Akter takes a critical view of industrialisation's impact on human lives, specifically in the context of the Sundarbans region that straddles India and Bangladesh. Her works in the exhibition were created during a performance piece where the artist had moulded sculptures of figures used in traditional childhood games that are slowly being forgotten.



Detail of Soma Surovi Jannat's work at Dhaka Art Summit. Alexandra Chaves / The National

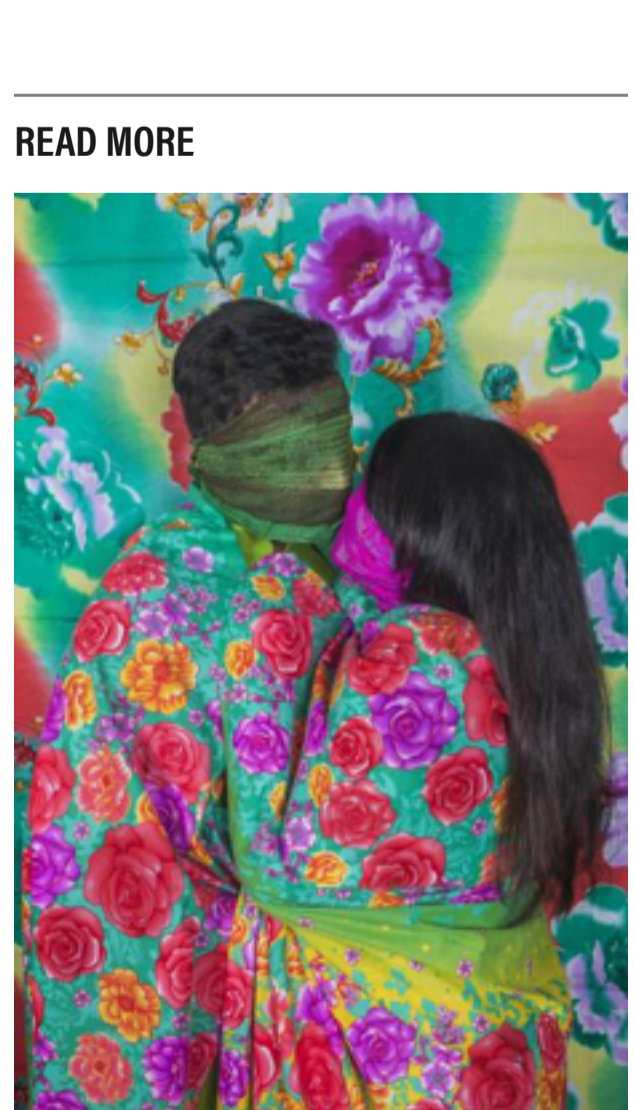
The young artists in the rest of show reveal much of the contemporary Bangladeshi art scene, one that is both mindful of cultural and colonial histories, while remaining tuned in to country's present-day issues. Despite being less than 50 years old, Bangladesh has its own history of arts that traces its roots to Bengali culture, predating colonisation, partition and independence. It hosts one of the longest running art biennials in Asia, the Asian Art Biennale, and has established institutions such as the Bengal Foundation and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute.

The nation faces many challenges, including the Rohingya refugee crisis in its borders with Myanmar, gender inequality, indigenous rights and labour exploitation in various industries. Examinations of social justice permeate much of the work in the Samdani Art Award exhibition, such an ongoing photographic project by Faiham Ebna Sharif titled *Cha Chakra - Tea Tales of Bangladesh*. He chronicles the legacies of colonial British India, which forcefully relocated slaves to work on tea plantations in Sylhet and Chittagong.



Part of Faiham Ebna Sharif's 'Cha Chakra - Tea Tales Of Bangladesh' project, shown at Dhaka Art Summit 2020. Courtesy the artist

Ashfika Rahman continues this look into changing communities. Her installation made from Sitalpati or mats relate to the experiences of the Orav, an indigenous group who, over decades, have been converting to Christianity from Hinduism after the arrival of missionaries.



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For the first time, the jury have selected a special mention in this year's award ceremony. The work of Promiti Hossain explores gender violence, including drawings related to a testimony by a woman gang raped by 16 members of a political party. Through her practice, Hossain focuses on the ongoing adversities women have to overcome in society. Meanwhile, Habiba Nowrose questions gender roles in playful and vibrant photographs that subvert traditional elements and norms.

Other artists shortlisted for the award include Ariful Kabir, Najmun Nahan Karim, Palash Bhattacharjee, Sounak Das, Tahia Farhin Shaik and Jahany Karim. Their work will be on view at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka until the end of the summit.

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