



SUSTAIN

A PUBLIC ART EXPERIENCE
BY MONICA JAHAN BOSE

CURATED BY SARAH TANGUY



LOCATION

The LINE DC Facade and Unity Park, 1770 Euclid St NW, Washington DC
(@ Columbia Rd NW). METRO Woodley Park/Zoo or Columbia Heights.

SARI INSTALLATION & SOUNDWALK VIEWING DATES

JUNE 1-9, 2022 | OPEN 24 HOURS

DEDICATION & POETRY SLAM

June 2 | 7-9 pm

FILM SCREENING

June 3 | 8-10 pm

POETRY & WELCOME FARMERS

June 4 | 10 am-12 pm

WALK-THROUGH TOURS WITH ARTIST

June 5 | 3-5 pm

CLOSING & PERFORMANCE

June 9 | 6 pm

All dates weather dependent.

Details and updates at storytellingwithsaris.com/events.

Livestreaming for all events except film screening. ASL available.

For information email storytellingwithsaris@gmail.com or call

202-509-6282

This project is funded by the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities, Public Art Building Communities Grant Program and supported by community and media partners Boathouse Group, The LINE DC, We Act Radio, Moms Clean Air Force, Licking Creek Bend Farm, Adams Morgan BID, and WPFW.

FILM/LIVESTREAM

Paris Preston

SOUND DESIGN

Sonia Herrero

With poetry, songs, and sari art co-created with women farmers of Katakali Village, Bangladesh and the people of Washington DC.

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“Over the ten-year span of Storytelling with Saris, the climate crisis and food insecurity have gotten much worse, but art sustains us, bringing us together and propelling us forward to take action. Sometimes I am frightened to think about the future but I find purpose in continuing to create communities and stories of resistance through saris, poetry, songs, performance, and film.”

- MONICA JAHAN BOSE

I used to think that it would take penguins swimming up the Potomac River to get Congress to act on climate change. But now I sense it’s smaller incidents that will catalyze us—experiencing the sweet smell of humid soil and the brilliant green of sprouting leaves, feeling the invisible wiggle of spreading roots, and the tacit gifts of water and sunlight. Amidst the rising calls of impending doom, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed and become unresponsive. Artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose, who holds degrees in studio art and law, forged her own path. In June 2012, in collaboration with women from her ancestral village on the remote island of Barobaishdia off Bangladesh’s endangered coast, she launched Storytelling with Saris, a cross-generational and women-driven art project that engages not only with words but also with actions.

SUSTAIN marks a decade of collaborative art-making and advocacy with an outdoor installation featuring printmaking and painting on saris, poetry, sound, and film, renewing the project’s message of connection and cooperation by linking the personal and the communal to empower and affirm our shared commitment to the planet. Inspired by the resilience of the village women and their joyful songs and dances, the public art installation speaks to all of us about gender equality, climate crisis, and food insecurity. While SUSTAIN continues to embrace inclusion, accessibility and mentorship to stage saris hand-painted with woodblocks and text, it introduces a focus on urban and rural eco-agriculture and forges a link between the farmers of Katakhalī and the US. Bose designed new agrarian woodblocks such as seedlings and rice fields, along with the recurrent image of coconuts, a source of sustenance and adaptability on the island in its existential fight against climate change.

Born in England to a politically active Muslim mother and Hindu father and raised in the South Asia and the United States, Bose has lived the meaning of multiple identities, which is reflected in her art. Through the examples of her mother and maternal grandmother and their support of programs such as literacy, solar panels, and better farming techniques for the island women, Bose felt a nascent calling to address the disproportionate burden women face with climate change. She created a series of paintings on climate change and water, and another on women in Bangladesh. Fluent in earth sciences, she calls herself an ecofeminist. The sari, a symbol of continuity and the cycle of life, became a primary stand-in for herself, womanhood and the ongoing challenges women confront in society and at home. Initially, she imaged saris into paintings, followed by collaging sari fragments in mixed media works, often using the simplified language and bright colors of South Asian folk art.

But the breakthrough came in 2012 when Bose realized the sari itself would make a powerful platform for the women’s stories and an emblem for sustainability. At 18 feet long, saris are versatile and responsive. Linked to an ancient tradition that predates colonization, Bose uses saris



of hand-woven cotton, a natural and archival material. They flow in the water. They wave in the winds. They are rooted in myth and folklore. They are shared across generations, and once worn out, recycled and layered to make kanthas (embroidered blankets). Adapting her practice, Bose began making designs for woodblocks with pen and ink drawings, carved in mango wood by Bangladeshi craftsmen. Then on the island, she collected oral histories from the village women, and together they imprinted the fabric with woodblocks and inscriptions in Bengali. The saris transformed into fluid, dimensional paintings as they moved through space and responded to light. As part of her art practice, Bose also organized climate conferences and adaptation initiatives on the island.

The Farmer’s Market in Unity Park and The Line Hotel DC are hosts to the anniversary installation. Adjacent businesses, the two are rising hubs in Adams Morgan, a diverse neighborhood where Bose and her family have lived for the last 22 years. Taking a cue from Ashanté Reese’s Black Food Geographies, which explores systemic discrimination and unequal food access, Bose honed her vision on food insecurity in the capital city, coupling the voices and art making of DC and Katakhalī residents. She enlisted a mounting number of partners including Licking Creek Bend, an organic farm in Pennsylvania and a regular at the Market, and Moms Clean Air Force, a grassroots nonprofit focused on protecting children from air pollution.

In preparation for the installation, Bose held in-person and online workshops in DC and Katakhalī where participants adorned aqua and fuchsia saris with printing, painting and words. Often the result of poetry prompts, the writing, like the visuals, spoke of growth and sustenance, evidenced in the following excerpts: “I am leaves, I am branches, I am roots” by Dominic Green and “We all came from the ground and we deserve to be nourished” by Jumoke Opeyemi. She also organized urban gardening workshops, which included distributing seeds, soil and plant swapping, and making climate pledges such as composting and using green transportation. On one occasion, herbalist/farmer/artist Geo Edwards offered effective



ways to grow indoors and mailed cuttings to the participants. Most recently on the island, Bose collected human and natural sounds and taught girls bicycling, another carbon reduction measure that shows up in a woodblock design. Visits to open green spaces in the DC area and Licking Creek Bend supplied additional audiovisual material for the project’s soundwalk and documentary.

On the final Farmer’s Market in December 2021, Bose organized a preview of SUSTAIN, joining workshop participants and members of the public in a performance of poetry and singing while unfurling a 50-foot sari along Unity Park. The official premiere in June 2022 coincides with the Market’s return to the site. Twenty-four diaphanous saris draped around the six grand columns of the hotel’s façade, and on trees and light poles at Unity Park form a welcoming pathway to audiences of all ages. Immersive sonic compositions at seven QR-coded stations feature poetry, music and songs in Bengali, English and ASL interwoven with ambient audio. Other highlights include poetry slams and film screenings about sustainable practices and the impacts of climate on agriculture and food security.

With each step near and far, Bose extends her incremental reach befitting the origin of “sustain,” to uphold from below. As she broadens the meaning of family and patriarchy, she and her growing team of collaborators create a collective portrait and open up new possibilities for empathy and care. Now at the ten-year mark, Bose dreams of big shifts and saving her native island. And buoyed by the enthusiastic affirmation of people she has touched she is excited to keep Storytelling with Saris going. In the words of Parveen, a Katakhalī participant: “Every year I feel more confident and empowered...The films are thrilling! I have seen people from another country for the first time as they too work on saris and write environmental messages to us. We think of the women in the US as our sisters.”

- Art historian Sarah Tanguy lives and works in Washington, DC.