

dhakacourier

An Independent Newsweekly

2 July 2021 | Volume 37 | Issue 51

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CONCRETE DREAMS:

Envisioning a Sustainable Planet through Art and Poetry

Deja Nycole and Maggie Walsh

What does poetry have to do with climate justice? How do racial injustice, gender inequality, COVID-19, and climate change intersect? How can community members use art as a catalyst for social change? In May 2021 in Washington DC, Bangladeshi-American artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose, in collaboration with artist and filmmaker Robin Bell, presented a temporary public art installation -- CONCRETE DREAMS -- to ask all of these questions and more.

The installation involved ten 18-foot-long white cotton saris covered with Bose's woodblock designs that were printed by women in Bose's ancestral village in Katakhal, Patuakhali District, Bangladesh along with handwritten poetry and images placed on the saris by the public in DC. The saris hung from the roof of the DC Arts Center, blowing in the wind for five days. At night, against the white cotton saris, Bell projected the poetry written by participants and video of the women of Bangladesh and people of DC working on the saris. Bose's ongoing project, *Storytelling with Saris* (started in 2012), focuses on the sari as a symbol for both continuity and renewal. The durability of the sari, in contrast to fast fashion, also connects the garment to Bose's passion for sustainable practices.

In addition to the saris, Bose created plaster sculptures, printed using etching and intaglio techniques with lines of community poetry in Bangla and English about the intersection of climate, gender, and racial injustice during the pandemic. The public in DC helped Bose inscribe lines from their poems onto etching plates, which Bose transformed into the sculptures.

These small sculptures were in the form of stele, markers or tablets with inscriptions, and were placed on top of saris on tables and pedestals on the street. The public could come close to read the words on all sides of the sculptures. During the Dedication ceremony, Bose said, "The larger stele sculptures were inspired by poetry we wrote in a Zoom workshop just days after the insurrection at the Capitol in DC by White Nationalists. I was reminded on January 6, 2021 of the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh, caused by the autocratic government





Photo's Credits: Washington DC, Deja Nycole (VuJade Studio), Paris Preston, and Sorane Yamahira. Katakhalhi, Bangladesh, the women of the Mohona Cooperative.

of Pakistan's refusal to transfer power to the Bengalis who had won a massive election victory. The struggle for democracy continues around the world and is linked to the struggle for climate and racial justice."

Over the course of eight months, CONCRETE DREAMS participants devised "concrete poetry" -- poetry written or structured visually to reflect its meaning -- in virtual and outdoor workshops led by Bose and co-facilitated by artist Maps Glover. These workshops were a healing space to connect during the pandemic. CONCRETE DREAMS used concrete poetry and printmaking to highlight the dreams and aspirations of residents of DC and Katakhalhi towards a sustainable and just future.

The opening of the installation coincided almost directly with the DC Mayor's decision to "open up" the city and lessen COVID-19 restrictions. Adams Morgan, where the installation was based, is known for its nightlife and restaurants, so the streets surrounding the installation were full of people, something not previously seen during the pandemic. Bose organized a Dedication Event and a Poetry Slam where participants recited their poems on the street, and the events were live-streamed so that they could also be watched from home and around the world. Hundreds of visitors throughout the weekend visited the DC Arts Center to view the project, and hundreds more looked on from restaurants and businesses on the crowded street.

The installation created an intimate connection between

different people as they experience climate change and inequality in different ways. Bose's work in Katakhalhi, Bangladesh is closely tied to climate change by the very nature of the location: salt incursion, erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and soil erosion from rising waters threaten the village and its agriculture. In DC, participants in virtual and outdoor workshops navigated inequities with technology and access during their discussion of climate and racial justice. Bose was able to secure internet connection and tablets for several low income participants in her workshops who did not have the ability to connect via Zoom. And she provided training on how to use Zoom to ensure that the participants could connect in spite of the pandemic.

CONCRETE DREAMS provided an opportunity for participants across the world to connect and examine their personal relationships with climate justice through art. The project generated a lot of excitement, and a short film about CONCRETE DREAMS by filmmaker Leena Jayaswal will be featured at the Smithsonian Museum's FUTURES exhibition in November.

Visit www.storytellingwithsaris.com to follow the impact of Bose's art and activism. □

Deja Nycole is a documentary storyteller with a Master's degree in New Media Photojournalism. Her work highlights the beauty, struggles, and power of the African Diaspora community. Maggie Walsh is a gender equality advocate and student at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, USA. Studying international affairs and theatre, she is passionate about using art for positive change and making connections around the world.