In the galleries: Stylish saris tell tales via linked cultures

Review by Mark Jenkins
October 27, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

An installation view of "Nourish: Storytelling With Saris" by Monica Jahan Bose. (Anne Kim/The Nicholson Project)

For Monica Jahan Bose, community organizing is literally an art form. Her work encompasses domestic crafts such as weaving and gardening and enlists dozens of people in two very different locations: Southeast Washington and the village of Katakhali, Bangladesh. Some of the fruits of her ongoing multimedia endeavor, now in its 11th year, are gathered in "Nourish: Storytelling With Saris" at the Nicholson Project.

Adjoining the rowhouse venue is a garden where Bose and her neighbors grow vegetables. This effort is documented by a video that plays near shallow silver bowls filled with rice and spices. Woodblock prints of trees and plants adorn the saris made in Bangladesh, a pair of which are draped across the ceilings of the two rooms that contain the show. (One of the rooms is, appropriately, a kitchen.) The D.C. artist also conducts poetry workshops, and excerpts from some of the resulting verses are printed or written, in Bengali or English, on the saris.

Bose has worked as an environmental lawyer, and climate change is her primary focus. Katakhali, once home to her late grandmother, sits precariously on an island in the Bay of Bengal that's likely to be submerged by rising ocean levels.

Yet other concerns slip or smash their way into her work. Among the decorative wall hangings made from worn-out saris is one whose many images include a bloodied U.S. Capitol, a detail inspired by the Jan. 6, 2021, assault. Bose's collective undertaking is traditional and even pastoral, but it's driven by contemporary crisis. And there's frequently a new one to weave into the fabric of life.

Monica Jahan Bose: Nourish: Storytelling With Saris *Through Nov. 4 at the Nicholson Project, 2310 Nicholson St. SE, Washington DC.*