



# SWIMMING

A PUBLIC ART IMMERSION  
BY MONICA JAHAN BOSE

CURATED BY SARAH TANGUY

## Location

Marie Reed Plaza, 2201 18th St NW, Washington, DC 20009  
(Metro: Adams Morgan-Zoo or Dupont Circle, buses 90, 92, 96)

**Sari Installation & VideoSoundWalk Viewing Dates**  
June 6 - 20, 2024 | Open 24 hours

Opening Event, Dedication, Poetry Slam,

Livestream

June 6 | 5 - 8 PM

Artist/curator walkthrough tours

June 8 | 3 - 5 PM

Walkthrough tours and screening

"Swimming" short film as part of Adams

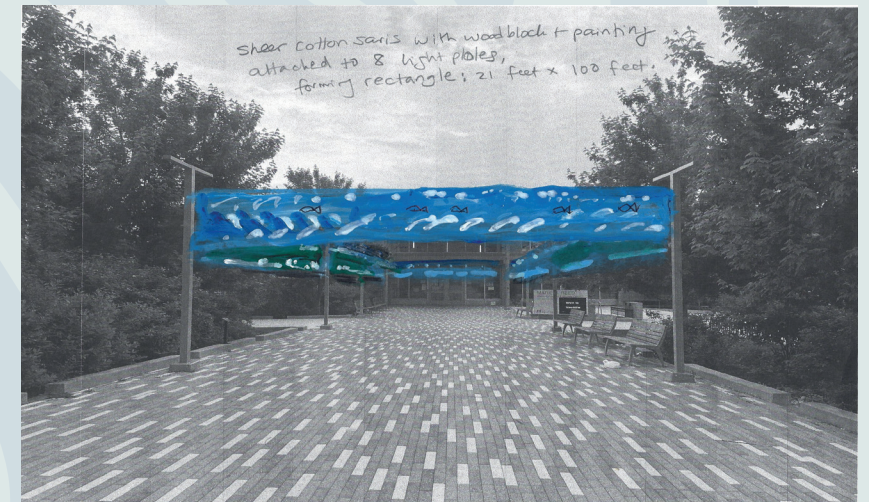
Morgan Movie Nights

June 11 | 7:30 PM



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All dates weather dependent. Details and updates at  
[storytellingwithsaris.com/events](http://storytellingwithsaris.com/events)

ASL available.

For information email [storytellingwithsaris@gmail.com](mailto: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 partners Marie Reed Elementary School, DC Arts Center, Adams Morgan Partnership BID, Calvary Women's Services, and Moms Clean Air Force.

**Film/livestream**

Paris Preston

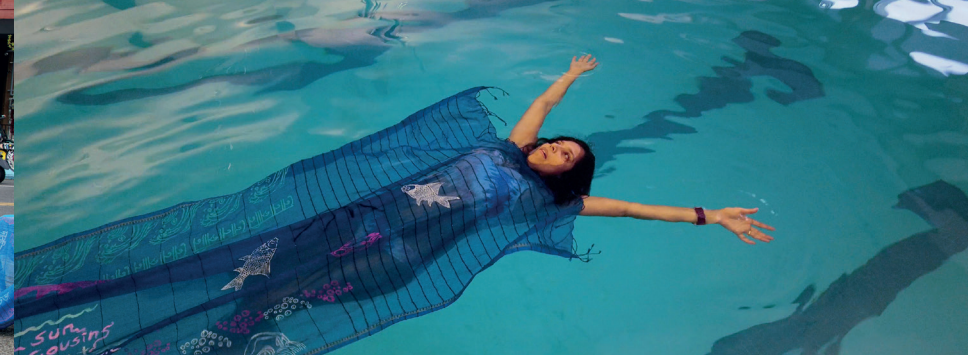
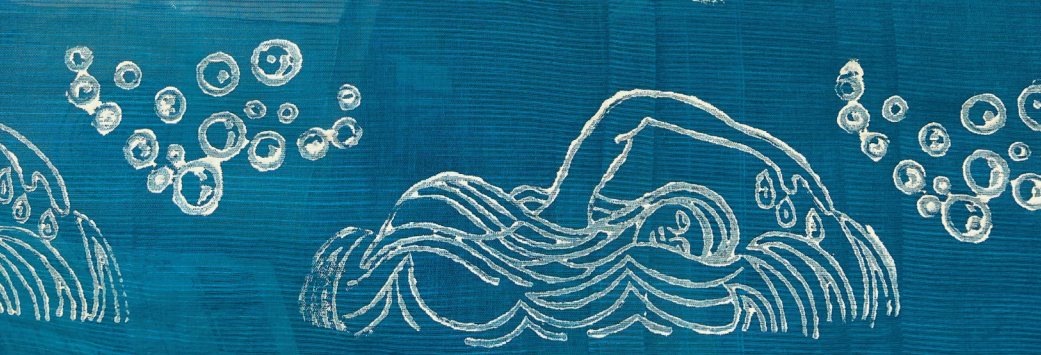
**Sound design and music**

Sonia Herrero

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

"I struggled to learn to swim, starting in my grandmother's pond and continuing with classes in college. My grandmother survived devastating climate events because she could swim. I see the SWIMMING project as healing and community building despite the terrible history of colonialism, segregation and racism."

- MONICA JAHAN BOSE



“Yes, I am made of water,” affirms Rashika in a six-word poem.

SWIMMING, the latest collaborative public art project of Storytelling with Saris, explores the deep and essential connections we have to water as the world faces increased flooding, drought, rising sea levels and melting ice caps. The global climate justice initiative, now in its twelfth year, is the brainchild of Bangladeshi American artist and activist Monica Jahan Bose, and her first in partnership with a school. Bose chose the plaza at Marie Reed Elementary, Community & Aquatic Center in Washington, DC’s Adams Morgan neighborhood because of the site’s origin story and her ties to the community. Since 2000, she and her family have lived in this thriving hub known for its vibrant multiculturalism. That wasn’t true during segregation, when there were two elementary schools, the Morgan School for Blacks, and the Adams School for Whites. The community came together peacefully to desegregate the two schools in 1955, giving rise to the neighborhood’s name “Adams Morgan.”

In the 1960s, the Morgan School was rebuilt through grassroots efforts, and renamed in honor of Marie E. Reed, a strong advocate for de-segregation and co-locating education and other services within schools. Swimming pools remained segregated until the 1970s, and Black people continued to face discrimination in accessing water. DC’s swimming program at Marie Reed is a way to redress that racial inequity. Now children from all over the city’s public schools learn to swim at the Marie Reed Aquatic Center.

“Swimming makes me feel so calm,” writes a fifth grader for his six-word poem; “I went swimming today! Swimming is really fun. It’s my most favorite class ever,” a fourth grader chimes in.

Above the entrance plaza to Marie Reed, billows upon billows of eighteen-foot-long, blue saris evoke the rectangle of a pool. A wall of saris nearby suggests a shimmering wave. Rich in saturated color, the yards of diaphanous fabric draped from light posts reveal water-inspired images and text. The saris come from the Tangail region of Bangladesh, known for its fine saris. Back at her DC studio, Bose creates project-inspired designs and drawings for hand-carved woodblocks used for the saris’ adornment. She further develops decorative details with dedicated workshop participants from DC and Katakhalī, her mother’s ancestral village on Barobaishdia, a remote island off Bangladesh’s endangered coast. SWIMMING marks the first time

that so many young students and parents joined. Workshops were held at the school and across the city at DC Art Center, Nicholson Project, Calvary Women’s Services, and Moms Clean Air Force. During these guided sessions, the team used colored inks to stamp and inscribe the saris with woodblock, painting, and freeform text arising from Bose’s poetry prompts. In addition to her previous woodblocks of waves and fish, SWIMMING features nine new designs, including some with community poetry, such as “breathing, stroking, moving forward” penned by Sherri, and goggles, bubbles, and a fire hydrant based on community feedback about memories of swimming at the beach and splashing in the water from a fire hydrant in communities without pools.

“I remember trying to learn to swim when I was three or four in my grandmother’s pond with a banana trunk. That’s what they use as a noodle in Bangladesh because they float,” Monica recounts.

Born in England to politically active parents — a Muslim mother and Hindu father— and raised in South Asia and the US, Bose is a living map of multiple identities. To this day, the enduring impact of her mother and maternal grandmother drives a passionate charge for climate justice, sustainable practices, and women’s rights. Over the years, water and saris have remained constants in Bose’s practice. She uses the sari as her storyboard and material because it is a precolonial garment and a perfect symbol of sustainability. Saris are handed down across generations and when worn out, recycled into embroidered blankets called kanthas. Water and swimming have featured in many of Bose’s performances, from the Capitol Skyline pool (Unwrapped at (e)mmerge, 2013) to Miami Beach (Floating/Drowning, 2016) and the Bay of Bengal. The shape-shifting sari takes the form of waves, rivers, and now a swimming pool.

“The walls of segregation become borderless bodies of water,” pens Isaiah.

In final preparation, the saris are sewn together and installed on Marie Reed Plaza for SWIMMING’s premiere in early June when they transform into a beacon of transnational cooperation and engage 24/7 with the elements while framing views of their urban surroundings and casual passersby. To amplify the themes of resistance and renewal, SWIMMING includes activities for all audiences. An immersive “VideoSoundwalk” available at QR-coded stations, interweaves poetry with sounds of water, nature, and music and images of Bose and participants creating, wearing, and interacting with

the saris. Improvised performances and poetry slams, all centered on water and swimming, enliven special events. And a short film, screened at Adams Morgan Movie Nights, offers a dynamic overview where an original score, spoken words, and a medley of water sounds blend with images of saris being made in Katakhalī and Washington, DC, and of Bose swimming with them at Marie Reed pool. For two weeks, city and nature converge. Borders collapse. Water becomes storyteller and we, the story.

“I know how to swim. But I never got the chance to swim in the ocean even though it is only 30 minutes away from our village. Last year, eighteen of us women went swimming in the Bay of Bengal as part of Storytelling with Saris. It was the best day of my life,” exclaims Shima of Katakhalī village.

Bose notes SWIMMING is more intergenerational than previous collaborations: “Kids can sometimes show us a freer way of expressing and making marks...they don’t always follow the rules.” She hopes people come away with a sense of joy, of feeling bigger than themselves as they reflect on the importance of swimming and water and of access to these resources: “It’s a visual representation of sustainability and resilience, of healing and community building despite the terrible history of colonialism, segregation and racism.”

More broadly, she’s heartened by the ongoing enthusiasm of Storytelling with Saris whose reach has already touched audiences in France, Greece, Italy, Bangladesh, Canada, and the US. Recently, her vision extended further. In December, she was an artist delegate to COP28 Dubai (the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference), and in March, she engaged with Bangladesh’s Minister of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and other dignitaries at her show in Dhaka that was supported by the US Department of State: “I’m trying to reach everyone. Ordinary people and decision makers as well.” Above all, by engaging the community in cocreating the project, Storytelling with Saris shows us the power of art to nurture stewardship and change. It’s about a better future and building it together.

- Sarah Tanguy is an independent curator and writer based in Washington, DC.