

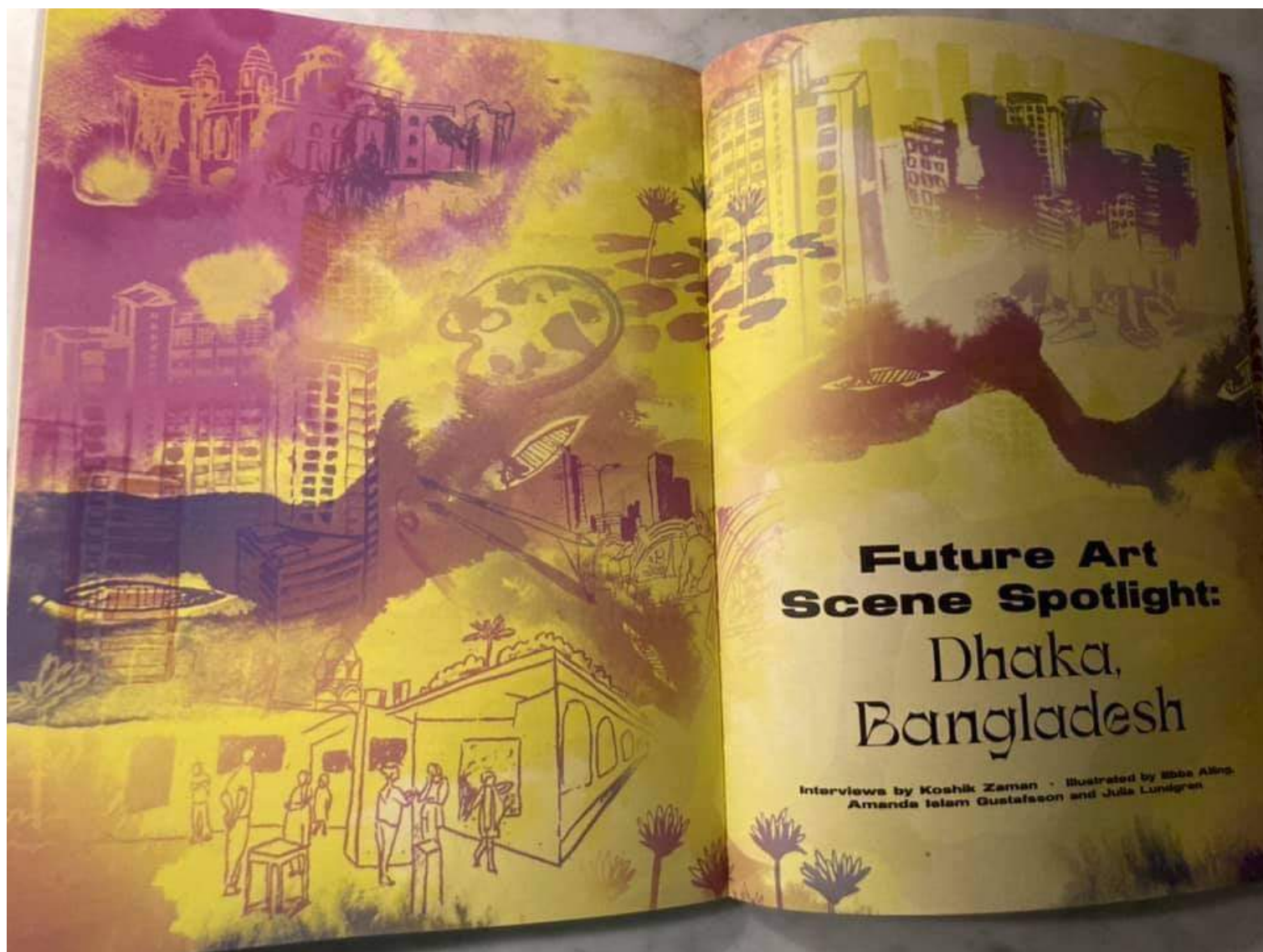
The Future Watch Issue

C-print

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Special Edition





**Future Art
Scene Spotlight:**
Dhaka,
Bangladesh

Interviews by Koshik Zaman - Illustrated by Ebba Alling,
Amanda Islem Gustafsson and Julia Lundgren

The Curator: Kehkasha Sabah

Interview by Koshik Zaman • Illustration by Julia Lundgren

C-P: Hello Kehkasha, our paths crossed a couple of years ago when I was visiting Dhaka and my aunt introduced us. Knowing my interest in contemporary art, she was very keen on us to meet and it turned out that you were living in the same building. Such a coincidence.

Would you like to tell me a little bit about your background and how you got engaged with the local art scene?

K.S: Yes, our meeting was such a pleasant surprise. I remember prior to meeting, that I was traveling to Sweden for a conference and your aunt asked me to visit you, but sadly I couldn't find the time then. But there we were in Dhaka, destined to meet!

Well, the engagement with the art scene started with my BFA studies at the Department of Drawing and Painting, the University of Dhaka, known as Dhaka Charukala. It was a place for artistic junction, a place that dominated the art scene

for decades. Back then, the academy and institutes were majorly focused in modern art. The contemporary languages were seen as alternative practices and led by only a few artists or collectives. During my MFA, my passion grew for contemporary art mediums, which wasn't possible pursuing inside the art academy, so I had to reach out and my real engagement with the art scene started.

According to my MFA research, contemporary art started to rise in 2000, but institutes didn't have the proper infrastructure to accept. Curated exhibitions were rarely visible and practiced in limited venues helmed by a few initiatives. The practice was immensely needed to be taken by the major art institutes, to accommodate the new art languages and to elevate the art scene. Delving between art history and practicing different art mediums led me to steer towards curating as a profession.



Kehkasha Sabah.

Rolling up the sleeves, I jumped into the battling ground of learning by doing! I started exploring diverse practices with different organizations, developed my own projects, and worked for two years as a Curator at Kalakendra, a non-profit artist-run space in Dhaka. By then, I had been able to curate dozens of shows with most of the contemporary artists here, prevailing my focus on experimental works, socio-political discourse, gender equality and identity, and social inclusion.

In 2019, I received the Exceptional Talent Recognition award for being the country's first female curator by SPBA - Society for Promotion of Bangladesh Art. I feel very glad; the decision I took after my graduation came as my blessing.

C-P: You've worked with the Dhaka Art Summit, a biennial which has been generating quite a bit of buzz

internationally, and helped put Dhaka on the international art map. I haven't been able to attend yet but I'm dying to visit. What was your experience working with the biennial like? Also, I'm wondering how the biennial has been received by the general public?

K.S: Indeed, it's been quite a buzz! You should definitely visit. First, Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) rejects the traditional biennial format to create a more generative space for art and exchange. It is a non-commercial research and exhibition platform for art and architecture, which appears bi-annually. It has been creating a positive impact in a brief time span. The first edition of DAS started in 2012 and by 2014 the second edition massively intervened in the Dhaka art scene hosting international artists and curators' large-scale works and curatorial discourses - introduced by Diana Campbell Betancourt, the Chief curator and artistic director of Samdani Art

Foundation. Overwhelm, suspicion, and critical observations were there, but the local art scene witnessed the shift and transformation. Since its inception, DAS has dedicatedly presented five fascinating editions, each remarkable in terms of scale and volume. DAS always offers several kinds of live programs for layers of targeted audiences, from art scholars to school children, or for the VIPs to the general people, no one should feel left out to enjoy the event. For instance, half a million visitors visited the fifth edition, which is huge for any art event!

To critically observe the general public's reception, my opinion might not be on a high note. People love to visit it for sure, but the event's contents are rich and complex, so it is inaccessible to a major number of visitors who are not well aware of contemporary art forms or expressions. However, from the last two editions, DAS is trying to train a group of art mediators for audience engagement - and people are learning to receive new art expressions, which is commendable.

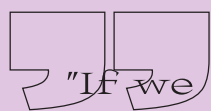
The last edition was my first experience of working at DAS, as a guest curator. The project they assigned me, *Collective movement*, co-curated by

Diana Campbell and Kathryn Weir, was an exploration of the art collectives' movement, with multilayered collaboration and introducing local cultural identity with vernacular aesthetics. It was massive in volume, workload, and process-oriented. We had to deal with over 200 artists and curators for this single project. It also had overlapping live programs, performances, talks, symposiums, and exciting workshops. For me, managing a huge number of artists, curators from these collectives and installing the works, including the live ones, was nerve-wracking but rewarding of course. For instance, when you know the next Documenta curator is working on this project; what else do you need? No, truly, working with such internationally celebrated curators and collectives, that are creative, humble, and passionate, listening and learning new methods from them is always an invaluable experience.

C-P: I'm curious to ask you about the Samdanis; the Bangladeshi collectors/art patrons who for the last few years have been featured in Art Review's Power 100 list and seem to have been paramount for the local art scene with various initiatives under the helm of their Samdani Art Foundation.

"When you know the next Documenta curator is working on this project; what else do you need?"





"If we look at history, great artworks came out of challenging contexts. I would say, as an emerging art scene, our opportunity lies in problem-solving; from working for the art infrastructure to creating more social and community-engaged practices."

I was very excited to learn about Srihatta, an art centre and sculptural park which is due to open later this year. How do you see their role in all of this?

K.S: This young collector couple Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani founded the Samdani Art Foundation (SAF), and DAS is their brainchild. Creating a platform like DAS from scratch must be a tough call, but it was the best timely decision they could ever take for the wellbeing of the local art scene. Networking with the art world has been a challenge for Bangladeshi artists for decades, undoubtedly the DAS platform made it easier and accelerated.

Like DAS, Srihatta is another admirable endeavor taken on by them. We do not have any museum dedicated exclusively to contemporary art. As far I know, Srihatta, an art center, will be the first kind, spanning a hundred-acre area with a sculpture park, a permanent display space for their art collection including an international artist residency facility. Surely, it's going to be another great commitment for the global art scene and for our country. We are all waiting to experience it too.

Being a part of this art scene, I see their role as supportive, foresighted, and strategic. Without passion for art, excellent resources, and strategy, their success would be slow-paced and wouldn't draw global attention. They understand the global art world and they know how to achieve their goal.

C-P: Having visited Dhaka quite a bit over the years, I could assume certain challenges, especially from an infrastructural point of view which applies to the city at large, but what opportunities would you identify for Dhaka as an emerging art scene?

K.S: Indeed, infrastructure has been troublesome and demotivating. However, artists are always seekers and find a way out more innovatively. If we look at history, great artworks came out of challenging contexts. I would say, as an emerging art scene, our opportunity lies in problem-solving; from working for the art infrastructure to creating more social and community-engaged practices. Caution to be made, as social art practices - I want to emphasize the responsible practices only, which are not seeking advantage of the problem rather developing from empathy and a sense of coexistence. You will find many thriving young art initiatives here that have great potential.

C-P: When we met, I had the impression that you knew "everyone" and were really "in the know" of what was going in the city. Could one speak of a tight-knit artist community in this megacity?

K.S: It's not like I know everyone. Here, a large group of artists practices modern art, and my passion for contemporary art forms and practices leads me to know the contemporary art communities and work with them. Bangladesh is a small country, and Dhaka is the capital and largest in population, most likely



every big event or initiatives are operated from here. It's like if you work in the Dhaka art scene, you would know the others.

Decentralization is strongly needed for creating a healthy art ecosystem, but it is what it is until now. Anyway, to speak about the tight-knit communities, yes, there is a good bonding. Otherwise, the contemporary art scene could not rise. However, our art market is lopsided and international opportunities are inadequate, which ultimately creates a sense of contention. I would say artists are individualistic by nature, so are their initiatives. Like international art communities, here also artists need to maintain the network and work hard if they want to be a part of the scene.

C-P: On my last visit, on your recommendation, we visited Bengal Foundation and were so impressed by the space and the group exhibition that was on at the time. It really felt like a hidden gem in the city with such international breadth. What might be some of the other institutions and galleries that are crucial for the art scene that you would like to highlight?

K.S: Yes, Bengal Foundation has been one of the oldest and dedicated art organizations for the art scene. They have always supported our artist communities, presented the finest programs, and have a great modern art collection of Bangladeshi master artists. The space you visited last year is

newly built in the old location, to accommodate their new exciting ventures.

There are a few other institutes and galleries which are crucial for the art scene. One of such is Britto Arts Trust - an artists' run non-profit network with a global reach, founded in 2002. Their remarkable affiliations and support from many other global and local institutes, give them an ultimate leadership voice as one of the well-sustained networks in Bangladesh to foster the new generation of artists. Britto has a permanent multipurpose space for hosting a range of art activities as their yearly recurring program, including - curated exhibitions, workshops, film screenings, and residency. They also plan extensive art projects in different locations across the country or border. They are the only collective from Bangladesh who is consistently visible in most international exhibitions and have brought pride to the art scene, especially representing the Bangladesh Pavillon in the 54th Venice Biennale and this year being selected for the upcoming Documenta 15.

The next one would be Chobi Mela - the international festival of photography, a Biennial arranged by Drik Picture Library Ltd. and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute since 2000. Drik is known for its largest photo archive with a permanent gallery space hosting exhibitions, and Pathshala is known as one of the best photography learning institutes in South Asia. This triangular venture has been creating a powerful community of artistic photographers with international outreach.

C-P: Lastly, might you have any “dream projects” that you in the role of a curator would like to carry out? Also, curious to know where you see Dhaka from an arts point of view in say ten years?

K.S: Working as a curator is something that I really enjoy, but working a few years with most of the organizations here, I have realized, curing the gaps within the art infrastructure is my desired goal. I don't know yet if I will do it being in the role of a curator or being in any other role. Also, I have a few research projects in hand which are halfway through, those I need to complete first. The recent one is complex and exciting. It is an inquiry to find curatorial methods and their genealogies in our contemporary local contexts, which prioritize new pedagogical inputs, collectivism to inform colonial apparatus. I have divided the whole research into several components. During the pandemic lockdown, I completed one of its components with a curatorial exhibition titled *DE / REAL* collaborating with 26 Bangladeshi collaborators from different geolocations. For the later parts, I need some specialization which I'm working on. I surely love challenging my limits.

Here the contemporary art scene was an untapped treasure and needed to unfold. If you truly get time to experience the work of our young artists, you will be amazed. If everything goes well, especially the art education, art market, and patronization - in ten years I see that Dhaka will be one of the best places in South Asia to look for the finest international artists.