

## Dhaka Art Summit 2018: The most unusual 'must-see' on the global art circuit

By John McDonald

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Bangladesh is not the first place that springs to mind when asked about fashionable art destinations. Yet if you wanted to visit a single city in the world last week where you might meet the director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the director of Britain's Tate art museums, and a top-line supporting cast of international curators, gallery directors, collectors, dealers and art bureaucrats, that place was Dhaka.

The occasion was the fourth Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) – 10 days of exhibitions, seminars, lectures, performances and networking – sponsored by local philanthropists, the Samdani Art Foundation. Directors Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani took a hands-on approach, being present at all the major events. They obviously had no illusions about the magnitude of their achievement in drawing such a crowd. With Bangladesh we are talking about a land of crushing poverty, with a population of 165 million. It's not like turning up in Venice for the Biennale, where the most disturbing sight is the length of the queue in front of the American pavilion.



Detail from Desmond Lazo's Gold, Glory and God, World Making - Icosahedron after Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion (2017).

In Dhaka the air pollution is suffocating, the traffic is unbelievable, the streets are shabby and dirty. Every bus is scarred and pitted from daily gladiatorial contests in jam-packed thoroughfares.

One has to get past these dispiriting first impressions to discover that Bangladesh is a powerhouse of optimism. Its gross domestic product is growing; poverty rates are

falling. Experts are predicting that within 20 years its economy will outstrip countries such as Spain, the Netherlands and Australia.



Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran's Big idol (2016).

The DAS is playing its role by nurturing local culture and helping connect Bangladesh to the rest of the world. Since its beginnings in 2012 the summit has grown in stature, becoming the most unusual "must-see" on the global art circuit.

It owes some of its popularity to the fact that contemporary art is stratified between the huge prices paid for work by celebrity artists at up-scale galleries and auctions,

and a tendency among leading art museums to start looking beyond the power centres of Europe and the US. This has been accompanied by a new appreciation of indigenous art forms.

It's quite a feat to balance one's allegiance to the stars of an inflated art market with a belief in art as a grass-roots expression of human hopes and desires. Tate Modern in Britain has been at the forefront of this tricky manoeuvre, setting up committees in different parts of the world to acquire works by leading local artists, while hosting shows by contemporary high-flyers.

What some see as a long overdue correction in museum acquisition policies is viewed by others as a symptom of creeping political correctness, or simply a fad. Only time will tell. It could be interesting to know how much "developing world" art is donated to the Tate, and how much European and American work is purchased.

The other aspect that sets the DAS apart from the annual procession of Biennales and Triennials is the emphasis on talks and seminars, with a particular focus on the South Asian region. This year's program included 120 speakers participating in 16 seminars and two panel discussions. For a session on critical art writing called Sovereign Worlds, the Australia Council funded the participation of five Indigenous writers. I had to leave beforehand so I can't give any report, but it's a clear indication of Oz Co priorities.

There's a kind of academic romance about talks and seminars. One always imagines they will be illuminating and inspiring, but they often turn out to be the opposite. Nevertheless, a hefty talk-fest acts as an indisputable badge of seriousness.

The chief curator of the DAS is Diana Campbell Betancourt, originally from Los Angeles, but now an Asian art specialist. As well as the talks, Betancourt put together a complex exhibition program that ranged widely over the present and recent past of art in Asia. The line-up included 10 shows chosen by international guest curators; displays by local students and artists' groups, and work by 11 Bangladeshi artists shortlisted for the Samdani Art Award.

That award went to Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, for an installation consisting of a tower of plastic chairs topped with a TV monitor; a lawn mower, a fan and a wedge of shredded gold foil. On the opposite wall sat a magazine with the words "Cool It" prominently displayed. One presumes it was a comment on climate change, a big problem for a country rapidly losing land to the sea.

The 10 shows had a strong informational basis, leavened by a few eye-catching interventions. One section detailed the history of a performance art festival held in Iran, more specifically in Shiraz and the ruins of Persepolis, from 1967-77. It included works by everyone from Peter Brook to Merce Cunningham to Stockhausen and Tadeusz Kantor. Who would have thought it possible? The time span coincides almost exactly with China's Cultural Revolution, in which the only permissible art was political propaganda.

There's no way to summarise the bewildering quantity of work spread out over four floors of the Shilpakala Academy. There were, however, two installations that stood out in terms of sheer size and spectacle: an opulent room designed by Anglo-Indian

artist, Raqib Shaw; and a series of towering ceramic sculptures by Australia's Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, an artist who knows how to make an impression.

Shaw's claustrophobic chamber was a theatre of mixed East-West imagery: wallpaper featuring fairies, demons and grotesque plants, along with mock-Renaissance paintings that showed Jesus being visited in the manger by three wise men with the heads of savage beasts. The entire ensemble was a phantasmagoric blend of Christian and Hindu imagery, played for mischievous fun rather than profundity.

Nithiyendran (b.1988), who has had a meteoric rise through the ranks of Australian art, showed three large-scale figures that appeared to be oblique self-portraits. They might also be seen as deities, devils, scarecrows or voodoo idols, with a large helping of street art.

This morning I noticed Nithiyendran had scored a mention in a list of DAS highlights published online by the *Art Newspaper*, although he is referred to only as a "Sri Lankan-born artist". As he was born in 1988, and arrived in Australia in 1989, it seems a little unfair to see Nithiyendran as a product of Sri Lanka.

Such a comment reveals the strange position Australia occupies in the new world of contemporary art. Too Westernised to be considered Asian, too far from Europe and America to be part of an exclusive club, we get leap-frogged on the way to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Maybe if the Australia Council keeps sending artists and curators to every event from Venice to Dhaka, one day we'll eventually be noticed.

**The Dhaka Art Summit 2018 ran at the Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 2-10.**