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Visual Arts

Dhaka Art Summit brings the world to Bangladesh and Bangladesh to the world

Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani have created a biennial event with exhibitions, performances, talks and screenings

Debika Ray JANUARY 28 2023

“Nowadays when I’m abroad, I meet people who hear we’re from Bangladesh and ask if we know about the Dhaka Art Summit,” says Rajeeb Samdani with a laugh. This is the event he founded in 2012 with his wife, Nadia Samdani, which is gearing up for its sixth edition next month. “We wanted to put our country on the global art map and we’ve now reached that level.”

It might sound hyperbolic to credit a single private initiative with such a shift, but this biennial event has become synonymous with the Bangladeshi contemporary art scene. Its last edition in 2020 attracted an audience of nearly 500,000, and the nine-day gala of exhibitions, performances, talks and screenings is now a significant fixture on the global cultural calendar — bringing the art world to Bangladesh and propelling its artists far and wide.

It is not a commercial event but, over the years, works exhibited there have been acquired by Centre Pompidou, Tate, the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and exhibitions curated for it have toured the world.



A view of the 2020 Dhaka Art Summit, which attracted 500,000 visitors © Mithail Afrige Chowdhury/Pacific Press/Shutterstock

The couple insist this success is more by accident than design. “I’d love to say that we were smart and did a lot of research and strategising, but we don’t have a background in art and didn’t know what we were doing — we were lucky that we made some good decisions and that people opened doors for us,” says Rajeeb. Nadia adds: “When we started giving people access to the Bangladesh art scene, we realised everybody was curious.”

The couple’s network no doubt helped prise open some of those doors. Their six-storey home in the capital’s affluent Gulshan neighbourhood contains a mind-boggling collection, including works by contemporary artists such as Tracey Emin, Anish Kapoor, Ai Weiwei and Chris Ofili and 20th-century masters such as Paul Klee, alongside big-name artists from Bangladesh, broader south Asia and its diaspora — from multidisciplinary artist Ayesha Sultana and photographer Munem Wasif to London-based Rana Begum. An entire wall is devoted to works by Kolkata’s Tagore family, leading lights of the Bengali Renaissance, including Nobel prize-winning poet Rabindranath and his nephews Gaganendranath and Abanindranath.



'Untitled' (2021) by Ayesha Sultana © Courtesy the artist and Samdani Art Foundation

Tucked under the grand piano is a decomposing corpse made of buffalo hide, “Lost and Found” (2012) by Pakistani artist Huma Mulji; by the lift are sculptures from *Venetians*, Polish sculptor Paweł Althamer’s 2013 Venice Biennale installation; the Samdanis acquired the two Bangladeshi figures from the series of 90. Other pieces are in their office or storage, many waiting to be displayed at Srihatta, the cultural centre they are building in Sylhet, the north-eastern city where their families originate. It will have an exhibition and residency space and 100-acre sculpture park designed by Aga Khan architecture award nominee Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury and will be completed this year.

“When people say we’re passionate about art — I tell them passion you can live without; we are addicted,” Rajeeb says. The pair, both in their forties, finance that addiction through Golden Harvest, the business Rajeeb founded in his twenties, which employs more than 5,000 people across sectors such as food, property, logistics, infrastructure and insurance, and also funds their charitable initiative, the Samdani Art Foundation. The Samdanis are founding members of Tate’s South Asia acquisitions committee and members of its international council.

UK-born Nadia, who last year received an MBE, grew up in a family of entrepreneurs and collectors so was interested in art from a young age; Rajeeb came to it through his wife. When they started collecting together about 15 years ago they homed in on south Asian modernists such as Zainul Abedin, Mohammad Kibria, FN Souza and MF Husain, but through visits to biennales and art fairs, their interests turned towards the contemporary.



An installation at the 2020 Dhaka Art Summit © Mithail Afrige Chowdhury/Pacific Press/Shutterstock

Noticing the absence of Bangladeshi artists on the global stage, they dug into their local networks and discovered a rich seam of talented people with few prospects of a career. “We’d visit artists who were doing great things, but the rest of the world had no clue,” Rajeeb says. Bangladesh, they point out, never lacked artists — only the infrastructure to promote them.

They therefore founded the Dhaka Art Summit in 2012. The first edition attracted about 20,000 visitors and featured only Bangladeshi artists. The following year, the Samdanis appointed American curator Diana Campbell Betancourt as artistic director. Since then, the platform has grown to attract a stellar range of international contributors. It also strives to address issues of social justice from the perspective of the global south and to foster opportunities: half the works exhibited are new commissions. Each time, curators from global institutions are invited to spend two years in the local context researching an exhibition for the event.

“The idea is to allow our local audience to see a world-class exhibition, but also for the person doing the research to take that knowledge back with them,” Rajeeb says.



'The Shapeshifters Escape' (2021) by Rithika Merchant © Courtesy the artist and Samdani Art Foundation

At the same time, the event remains firmly rooted in the local, a free public event for “everybody, from the taxi driver to the garment worker, from schoolchildren to grandparents”, says Nadia. In this spirit of inclusivity, this year they scrapped special previews and the VIP lounge. “It’s a festival, so everyone has to come, leave and hang out together,” she says.

For this year's edition, the theme is *Bonna*, or "flood" in Bengali. In an era of climate crisis, its aim is to re-examine a phenomenon associated with Bangladesh: its links with (metaphorical and literal) destruction as well as abundance. Sixty per cent of participating artists will be Bangladeshi, among them rising local stars such as photographer Sumi Anjuman and research-based practitioner Dinar Sultana Putul. Local artists and people will collaborate with international contributors, including Britain's Antony Gormley, who will work with artisans on a bamboo installation; South African Sumayya Vally, who will work with potters on a performance piece; and Sean Anderson from the US, who has asked 1,200 children in flood-affected areas to paint their ideal future home.



From the series 'Somewhere Else Than Here' by Sumi Anjuman © Sumi Anjuman

A lot has changed since 2012. “We used to say we didn’t think we’d see contemporary Bangladeshi artists in major international art institutions in our lifetime,” Rajeeb says. Today, Tate owns works by Naeem Mohaiemen, Ayesha Sultana, Munem Wasif and Yasmin Jahan Nupur. The infrastructure to support contemporary art in Bangladesh has also strengthened, while the Samdanis are striving to make a more permanent mark with Srihatta. It will feature commissions by artists including Danish collective Superflex, Nepal’s Subas Tamang and India’s Raqs Media Collective alongside Begum and Sultana.

Yet as their impact becomes more concrete, the Samdanis are becoming less interested in permanence than process. “More than collecting art, we’re enjoying collecting memories,” Rajeeb says, citing a project under way in Sylhet with Indian artist Asim Waqif: *Bamsera Bamsi* is a bamboo forest that will act as a giant flute when the wind blows through it, and will take years to grow. When Waqif started the work in 2017, Rajeeb recalls, the artist warned him it might fail. “I said, fine — then we will have the memory. That is what makes it interesting.”

February 3-11, dhakaartsummit.org

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