

HYPERALLERGIC

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‘Making Art from Politics in Bangladesh’

By Faheem Haider



Khaled Hassan, "Born to Be Migrant (Positive or Negative)" (2013–14), film and digital process installation with digital prints, dims var (all images courtesy Aicon Gallery)

Aicon Gallery in downtown Manhattan currently has an excellent exhibition up, *Readymade: Contemporary Art from Bangladesh*. It's the obscure object of my art desire: a summer show offering a take on materials and craft that ranges from the familiar to the utopian-exotic. That the show seems to stand in for real politics with an indignant view of the use and abuse of labor, activism, and the status of women in Bangladesh — and that it does all this while hinting that it's just the tip of the sinking iceberg — make *Readymade* a must-see.

The show features the work of nine artists from Bangladesh swinging at the political economy of their country, and at the readymade apparel industry in particular — an industry that makes up the largest share of the country's export-led service economy. Crucially, the art succeeds in implicating its audience, you, into the narrative and blame. This is identity-politics work on stilts, 15 years after the moment when just being shown in New York meant that Bangladeshi artists and their careers were "made." The late arrival to the scene feels like a good thing.

The exhibition invites viewers to stand witness to Bangladesh. So, the history of oppositional accounts of the country's founding, its public narratives of war, independence, and genocide, are addressed in work by Imran Hussain Piplu and Promotesh Das Pulak. Piplu, in a digital print series called *The Utopian Museum* (2011), offers the hope that modern weapons and artillery might one day be seen as nothing more than the fossilized remains of a dinosaur culture. Das Pulak casts weapons in resin and fleshes them out with flowers, which are traditional to commerce and craft in Bangladesh, displaying the intricate and unsettled contest between art and craft, war and its manufacture, that we in the West take for granted.

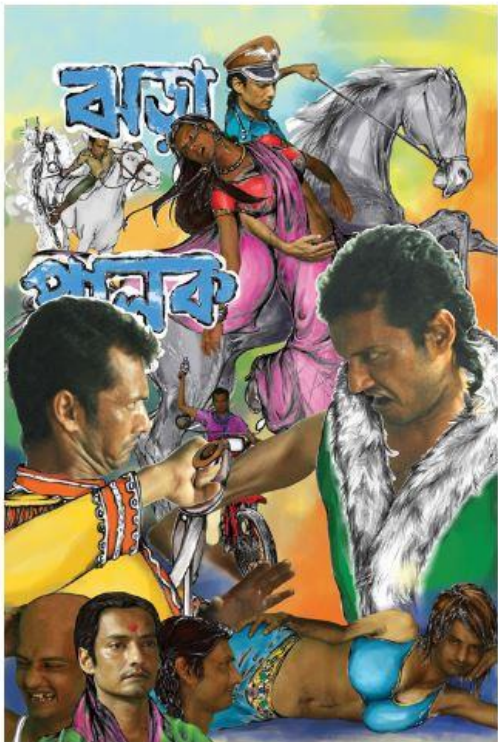


Imran Hussain Piplu, "The Utopian Museum" (2011), digital Print on archival paper, 55 x 36 in (click to enlarge)

Khaled Hassan's film and photo piece on Bangladeshi migrant workers documents labor exploitation in the oil-rich art magnate of the UAE (stories of which have featured prominently in Hyperallergic.) Masum Chisty takes the opposite tack and digitally figures himself into a short film that nearly all Bangladeshis (hell, all South Asians) would recognize: the hero cop with a mustache fights the villain — no doubt a smuggler, a robber capitalist — with a bigger, bushier mustache. The animated poster for this imagined movie works like every poster in Bangladeshi cinema has ever worked: with loud, flashy colors. Dhali Al Mamoon's captivating large fish and fauna drawings in pen, ink, and charcoal are wonderfully rendered, but they also point to the dead and detritus of the 1971 War of Independence against Pakistan. Exploitation, murder, and genocide are their undercurrents.

Other artists in the show propose new accounts of familiar tropes: Kazi Salahuddin Ahmed offers collages of the capital city, Dhaka, in acrylic and newspaper that look like fresh turns in analytic Cubism. Wakilur Rahman's text paintings could be read as riffs on Robert Ryman and Glenn Ligon — if those two made work about genocide.

Art historical play aside, contemporary art in Bangladesh pulses with the urgency of a late-to-the game documentary ethic: it's interested not only in form, but in form to tell a story that you already know, though you might have missed the moral view embedded in it. So, the work on display is installed to focus attention on the twin tragedies that stand behind the failures of contemporary capitalism in Bangladesh: the Tazreen factory fire from a couple winters ago, which killed 117 workers, and the Rana Plaza collapse last year, which killed nearly 1,200 innocent people and permanently injured thousands more.



Masum Chisty, "The Acting," single-channel animation, 0:40 min (click to enlarge)

That last horror captured the imagination of the worldwide Left and reverberated throughout the clothing manufacturing and retail industry in America and the UK. Yet you'd think a tragedy that implicates major international corporations and highlights their exploitive labor practices would finally shape up rights and protections for workers. Instead, on the backs of the many thousands of casualties, Walmart, Gap, and other major firms turned away from the twin tragedies. They did so because they knew we Americans love our \$7.99 T-shirts, and no amount of moral outrage can countenance our demand for a pair of cheap jeans that fit well. In Bangladesh the Left fumed and protested, and the International Labor Organization charged the government in tandem with other agencies for construction of shoddy, failing buildings. But little changed on the ground: as soon as it could, the Left-leaning government sided with the apparel manufacturing industry and let many buildings deemed unfit to house working factories stand. The government sided against her people, and few seemed to mind.

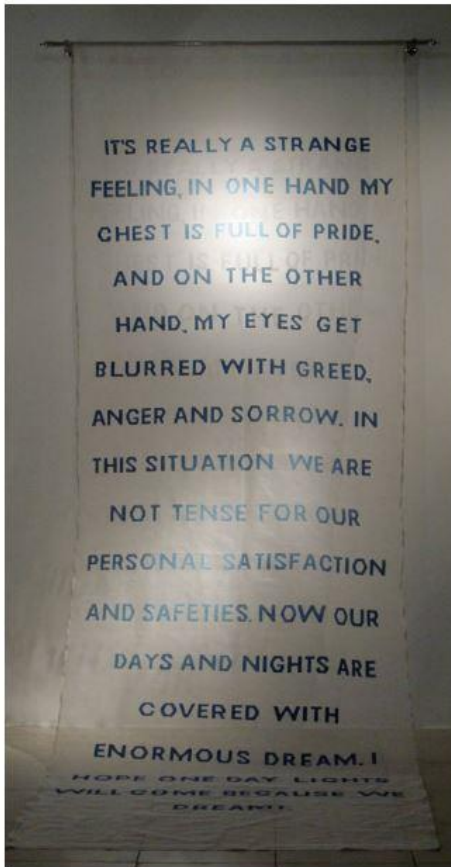
Readymade speaks to those unaddressed injustices. Mohammad Wahiduzzaman's titular installation features resin casts of shirts that look like those neatly installed in your closet and mine, and they point directly to the Rana Plaza collapse. Both that piece and "Readymade II" (2014) include strands of women's hair, traditionally braided, hanging like lacerated tails. Twisted lines of artificial iron protrude from the walls and become the hangers from which shirts and casting dangle, straight, silent, and without agency.



Mohammed Wahiduzzaman, "Readymade" (installation & detail view) (2014), resin castings with artificial hair, iron, and shirts, dims var

Yasmin Jahan Nupur's installation, three works titled "In the Weave of Dream" (2013 and '14), is at first unassuming but gets a bit closer to the lives touched and lost in Bangladesh's service and export economy. And fittingly, craft stands behind her installation and reveals her righteous anger. Nupur's long pieces of hanging fabric suggest Muslim burial cloths, but walk up to them and you realize they're see-through saris, with the texts of dreams woven into them. The dignity of women in Bangladesh is clothed in their saris; Nupur's work suggests that so are their dreams. This installation is the star of the show.

Aicon has long showed South Asian art, mainly Indian and Pakistani. Readymade is the gallery's turn at the recent run on Bangladeshi work. Just last year artist Tayeba Begum Lipi showed her 2012 piece "Love Bed" at the Guggenheim's Global Arts Initiative show sponsored by UBS, and this past spring a group of Bangladeshi and American photographers and writers put together the Eyes on Bangladesh photography show. (Full



Yasmin Jahan Nupur, "In the Weave of Dream" (2013), handwoven Jamdani, 156 x 50 in (click to enlarge)

disclosure: I wrote and had a piece performed for that show.) Bangladeshi work is also getting international fair attention, mostly from the Dhaka Art Summit based in the country's capital city.

All that success is hard-won, but it feels scatter-shot and under-appraised. This exhibition feels like a corrective project. It's the first group show of Bangladeshi artists in a notable downtown gallery. It's the first show that seems to set its sights on a new generation of collectors, both mainstream American and members of the Bangladeshi diaspora. This is just the start, in that art world way, but I hope the concerned quality of the work doesn't fall by the wayside. When so much of this summer has been about what we've done, or failed to do, "over there" (Iraq and Syria most prominently) as well as what we've failed to do at home (the murders of several young American men at the hands of police), this is a show that crucially reminds us: what we've done over there easily blows back home to us.

Readymade: Contemporary Art from Bangladesh continues at Aicon Gallery (35 Great Jones St, Nolita, Manhattan) through September 6, with a closing reception on September 4, 6–8pm.