



A Bird of Stone – a performance by Reetu Sattar.

PHOTO: MUNEM WASIF

“You and I are here 5000 feet under; under constant threat. The barb wires of power and invasion are coming down on us, to cut our space as far as possible. What is left for humanity is the sheer strength of being human.”

This is how Reetu Sattar explains her latest performance '5000 Feet Under' showcased at the 16th Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh 2014. All of us, at some point, have experienced this helplessness of being a human, the 'most intelligent species in the world,' who is unable to do anything to save his freedom, his personal space.

Reetu forces you to care. She forces you to question how different are you, really, from a kid in a war-torn country, going about his daily work, a feeling of dread and constant fear gripping his heart.

The space for humanity is getting smaller and smaller, says Reetu, as we lower our heads to the greatest powers of cruelty. Through '5000 Feet Under', Reetu portrayed how life feels under constant surveillance and fear.

A shroud made of rusty barbed wires covered a prayer rug, also made of wires, as Reetu remained bowed in shame for four hours continuously, only moving to submit herself completely after every hour.

She had asked the audience to tie pieces of pretty strings on the shroud, a depiction of a religious-cultural practice while pigeons surrounded the prayer area. White pigeons, feathers and stones also surrounded the area, delivering the message of promised peace that remains unfulfilled.

A theatre and performance artist conveys her message through her thought-provoking performance at the 16th Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh 2014

UPASHANA SALAM



PHOTO: AYON REHAL

1134 lives not numbers

“I am not a believer. But I have had the feeling of being threatened and attacked like the people in Palestine. This is something that's not limited to religion, race or nationality. It's a very universal feeling,” says Reetu.

If you think about it, Palestinians, like a majority of the people in the world, don't really have a voice. That has been suppressed thanks to years of subjugation, exploitation and unsolicited attacks from a more powerful economy. “Even if you watch interviews of Palestinian leaders with the Western media, you'll have a feeling that they are being attacked,” says Reetu. They are supposed to be given a medium to express their grievances and complaints, but instead they are chided for wanting to speak out, she adds.

Shilpakala Academy until December 31.

Reetu's dedication and commitment to her performances goes beyond the abilities of mere mortals. To her, it's not just an act that can be forgotten after a few days. It's her way to express her helplessness, her desire to do something in protest against the atrocities she sees around her.

Inspired by Milan Kundera's belief that “everyone lets everything be forgotten”, Reetu wanted to ensure that people remember the conflict of Palestine and

their right to exist as an independent nation for at least a while. She thus walked about 15 kilometers for her six-hour long performance 'A Bird of Stone', starting from the US Embassy in Baridhara till Dhanmondi-27, with stones hanging from her feet and a singing bowl in her hand. She had requested 15 of her closest friends and family members to dedicate a personal item that touched their lives or something that's indispensable to them. She wanted people to remember the struggle of the Palestinians, as they struggle to survive and exist with nothing but a few stones in their midst.

“We live in a bubble of our own, where we are unaffected by the trials and tribulations of others. We commiserate for a short time and then quickly forget about it,” says Reetu. For this performance, celebrated photographer Taslima Akhter donated her first camera, gifted to her by

her brother. Another friend donated a copy of Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel' that she always carried with her since 1997. Reetu's sister-in-law dedicated the hard copy of the last letter that she had faxed to her terminally ill mother who lived abroad. She then burnt all of these in a fire to demonstrate how the loss of one's most prized belongings can never be erased from memory.

Performance art requires immense physical and mental strength as the artist often has to endure grueling experience for the sake of their performance. Reetu says that being a theatre artist helped her stay fit and strong. Moreover, Reetu adds, she is not afraid for her life. “As an artist, my primary feeling is that of helplessness. I feel terribly motivated by issues. And I only have my body and performances to do something about them,” she concludes.



PHOTO: AYON REHAL

1134 lives not numbers was a performance to remember the lives lost under the rubble of Rana Plaza.

This lack of a voice is further depicted in Reetu's performance as she bows down in obeisance in absolute silence. Like the Palestinians and other minority groups, Reetu accepts her helplessness, her inability to change anything. If she even attempts to stand up, she will immediately be pricked by the wires surrounding her. Thus, she remains bent until she bows down completely in prostration to an unseen power.

The performance was showcased live at the Art Biennale on December 1, but Reetu says that she won't be repeating it for a live audience. “You are not acting here. You are expressing a feeling. And that cannot be repeated,” she says. The video streaming of '5000 Feet Under' will, however, continue to be exhibited at the Asian Art Biennale held at the