



Abir Shome's installation

EXHIBITION |

WHIMSICAL POLITICAL SUBVERSIVE

A review of *Tasher Desh*



Onlookers in front of Eshita Mitra Tonny's artwork



Dilara Begum Jolly's installation combining a video projection with physical elements



The exhibition was being held in a factory building



ZYMA ISLAM

There are no bright lights, no potted greens artistically arranged around the entrance, no indication that an exhibition is going on somewhere here in Arambagh. In fact, in an effort to find the *Pirer Goli* hosting the exhibition, I somehow slipped into a maze of alleyways populated by book binders, printing presses, car-repair garages and more printing presses. Store-top homes housing many student dormitories and bachelor pads towered above the narrow lanes. This was new territory for those not explicitly involved with production and printing; never having been myself, it was a chance to explore the place housing the art.

For those who do not work, live or have acquaintances around Arambagh, the only reason to visit the area would be to make a pit-stop at the hundreds of inter-district bus terminals. The curator Atish Saha, a former student of Notre Dame College which is around the corner, has known this place for 17 years. He feels its pulse and that is what came out in his carefully selected collection.

Razib Datta's stream-of-consciousness artwork, scrawled with a light brush on the exhibition space, featured Arambagh prominently; but he portrayed the place in a way that showed its commonalities with the rest of the city, thus humanising it. His piece carried messages of basic human behaviour—broken hearts, the hierarchy of the dog-eat-dog world and silence.

That is also the message of the entire exhibition, says curator Saha, that we are simplistic people living in a tottering tower we call a country. "We eat, sleep, murder, hate," he states. The name of the exhibition, *Tasher Desh* alludes to Rabindranath Tagore's play about a fragile nation inhabited by simple, pre-coded, irrational citizens.

"This is political and apolitical at the same time," he states, and perhaps this statement rings most true when Datta subtly transitions the 'bagh' of Arambagh to 'baGH', inserting the endangered tiger into positions of vulnerability in his images.

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Mizanur Rahman Sakib's installation on elements of communism and socialism

WHIMSICAL, POLITICAL, SUBVERSIVE

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Datta's work cannot be visualised without a description of the exhibition space first. He painted, pasted, etched and sketched on the walls of what is essentially a factory building. A printing press, a couple of garment bag making factories and a dimly-lit office of a local crime bulletin, make up this building. Workers sleep away in wooden lofts in a room on the ground floor. Here is how Saha, the curator found it, "The building and the property around it belongs to the family of a junior artist I know. His father, in all likelihood, is not an art enthusiast, but he still allowed his artist son to use the space," says Saha. The space is a reflection of how artists originate from, and work in all types of spaces—not just those having well-lit white walls for hanging up art.

"It took us a month to simply clear out the place and make space for the art," says Saha. They did not however give a makeover to the factory building; in fact it was difficult to distinguish where the staged art ended and reality began. At the entrance of the narrow flight leading up to Chand Miah Bhaban is a large green poster of what looks like a politician releasing a dove. Overt political signage is so common in these parts of the city that hardly anyone passing by would give the poster a second glance. I crossed by it on my way up and only saw it when getting out of the building. Upon closer look, however, you realise it is the artist Wallid Saddam himself... holding a white poultry chicken. The clever parody would be too simplistic in a white space environment, but hung up at those dingy stairs, it could not have found a more perfect home.

Right beside it were a couple of notarised documents with poems about the majoritarian oppression of indigenous groups. This piece by Mithun Raksam alluded to the fact that an absence of land-registry documents has been used against these communities over and over again to grab their lives and livelihoods. The piece was dripping with sarcasm—an indigenous person's word can only be believed when it is notarised, right?

Jannatul Mawa's work "Close Distance" where she seated house-helpers on the same couch as the owners of the homes they work in has been widely circulated and is well known. This very famous collection however can easily be missed in this exhibition; this is

precisely where the beauty of the space lies. Her photos were hung up in a room set up with a couch, a rug, a bookshelf and a wood-paneled wall. The space was adjacent to a factory floor with rows of hard benches on which workers sat and sewed bags.

On the day I visited, Khadija Akhter and her sister worked on shopping bags for the Dhanmondi pizza place "Le Pizzeria" while her tiny niece Jannat sat on the cold floor and ate a modest lunch of rice and an egg. "Jannat is just a child, so we bring her to work with us. She spends the whole day at the factory," says Khadija. She works from 8 am till 8 pm sitting on a wooden bench, with Jannat on the floor, while a plush sofa is situated behind them. At first glance it is easy to dismiss Jannatul Mawa's exhibition as an office space for the executives of the factory—a closer look reveals that it is staged. In doing so, her work goes beyond just the photographs to point out the inequality of classes and sitting spaces.

Similarly, veteran artist Dhali Al Mamun's large-scale video of a row of heads nodded in harmonic motion with a rhythm not very different from that of the assembly line in which the bag makers worked. In the same space, the other half of the genius duo, Dilara Begum Jolly juxtaposed an animated version of "The Scream" by Salvador Dali, amidst a jumble of sewing machines draped in what looked like blood-stained shrouds.

I asked Saha what the factory workers thought about having their space used for the exhibition. "They have been a part of this. A lot of people thought they were hired for performance," he says.

"For example the office caretaker Rajib quickly learnt how to use a projector and how to turn it on and off during power outages," describes Saha. "He looked at Eshita Mitra Tonny's sketches and told us that they look like the faces of Dhaka city." Admittedly, I derived no such meaning from Tonny's chaotic paintings because I had never viewed the city through the lenses of an industrial district.

"The others helped paint Abir Shome's banner. When they were done painting, Shome scribbled over it, and the workers got very confused. They asked us whether they did anything wrong, whether we were upset! It was such an innocent reaction," adds Saha.

Artist Juneer Kibria also played off his surroundings. To be honest, I missed his work—I saw two phones lying on a crate, and put them back again. I could not be



Hasnat Soyeb's artwork using the language of books



Razib Datta's piece in a stream-of-consciousness style



sure whether someone had accidentally left them there. "The mobile phones were loaded with art and left there for people to interact with them. People took videos, selfies adding to the body of the work," says Saha. There is no security; the gates are not locked, yet the mobile phones are still there, weeks into the exhibition.

"The factory workers would never take the phones. If the phones ever went missing, they would take responsibility and replace them," adds Saha. Another viewer wondered however how prudent it was to put the moral compass of the factory workers on exhibit—humanising the people inhabiting the surroundings is not only about proving how honest they are.

"The mobile phones are simply the vessel used to the display the art; that is all there is to it," responds Saha.

The uneasy relationship between the lower socioeconomic strata and luxury goods was the main premise of Salma Abedin Prithi's work as well. The artist photographed spectators interacting with airplanes at the military museum. She documented their fascination with the aircrafts: how they took family pictures inside, how they opened their shoes before stepping into them. Their body language reminded one strongly of Bangladeshi migrant labourers in airports and airplanes.

Tasher Desh took some of the most widely recognised names in the art industry out of the white spaces of established galleries and sat them side-by-side with their subjects. It also pointed out that some of our greatest artists—rickshaw-painters, *jamdani* weavers, metallurgy artisans—don't live in gallery spaces, so why should others?

The exhibition features work by 25 artists and will continue till September 25, 2017.