

“Lost in Transition”, showcasing 52 paintings under six categories, boldly depicts the transitions of Mahi’s emotive personal journal where she is eternally trapped.

I knew little about Afrida Tanzim Mahi until her mother Rahima Afrooz Munni, a poet and writer, invited me to Mahi’s solo exhibition at Kala Kendra in Dhaka through Facebook. After visiting her exhibition and speaking to the curator of the show, I can just speculate how her inner world was dominated by commotion and complex thoughts.

Mahi’s artistic preoccupation bear testimony to the unique works she created. A shade of gloom and pathos is a common feature of her arts, especially ones that portray her self-portrait. Perhaps, she could envisage the chaotic facets of the world well along with the harsh reality of patriarchy. Several of her

EXISTENCE OF AN ARTIST LIES IN CREATION

ZAHANGIR ALOM

paintings uphold these characteristics. Being a socially conscious artist, she regarded the pains of the victims as her own and depicted crude, vile images where she was a lone, yelling voice.

In *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare mentioned a famous soliloquy, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale, Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.” In other words, life is meaningless. It lasts for a brief time and is full of “sound and fury”, but in the end, nothing lasts.”

This excerpt comes to mind when viewing one of her paintings where she created no space on canvas, filling it instead with chaotic composition. In this piece, Mahi depicted varied social disorders and war while questioning the socially constructed ideas of life, society, things, fame and the afterworld. She also inserted several words as calligraphies in the complex composition. Words or sentences are also noticeable in several of her other works where she allegorically depicted the nude reality of life and time. She chose these words—“First day of the menstrual cycle”—to describe one of her black and white compositions portraying the wastage of life. Mahi also depicted society’s perspectives towards individuals that are conventionally viewed as absurd. The depictions of helpless and gloomy feminine faces, the imagery of alcoholic celebration, smoking in the bathroom and the togetherness of the dead are some of her works displayed at the show.

But how she saw her art is best heard through her own voice. In a powerful artist statement hung at the gallery of Kala Kendra, this is what she writes:

“If asked why I chose to do a solo exhibition at this point, I can only say



that it is to make peace with the past. I have been in-hiding from myself and the world. I need to see it, show it and finally let it go. I am not comfortable in front of my work. They remind me of events I would like to forget. However, the irony is I am the one who makes them immortal. I may forget the event but I can’t erase the image of my paintings.”

“I started painting on bed sheets and walls, my subjects being irregular shapes and strokes of excitement. Colours kept me preoccupied for hours when everything else became bland. On the

plains of hopelessness, painting is my only medium of expression. Blue meaning melancholy and red being angry, I painted nothing with every colour on the spectrum. I paint because it is the only activity I don’t have to force myself into. Art overwhelms me and I find myself lost in a trance guided by fleeting emotions and thoughts over which I have no control. Anything and everything can drive me to the small corner of my room which I claim as my studio. All my colours stacked on a shoebox beside a row of empty canvases waiting to be destroyed, or preserved.

My art is the only proof of my existence; they portray me; every told and untold story,” reads the artist’s statement.

“My paintings tell the story of whatever happened on the day I painted the piece. A series depicts a phase I passed through. I may have painted the series overnight or over months and this determines the length of the episode. My perception of time is blurred but I’m glad I still remember the alphabets. Self-portraits continue when I have nothing else to draw or no one to talk to. It’s mostly the second reason. My inability to

Continued to page 5



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EXISTENCE OF AN ARTIST LIES IN CREATION

After page 4

explain myself results in the creation of self-portraits. Sometimes I shout at the wrong person, sometimes I become hysterical, but mostly I paint. I paint when there is something I have to say but there is no one to talk to. Even if there is, the person will not understand because I

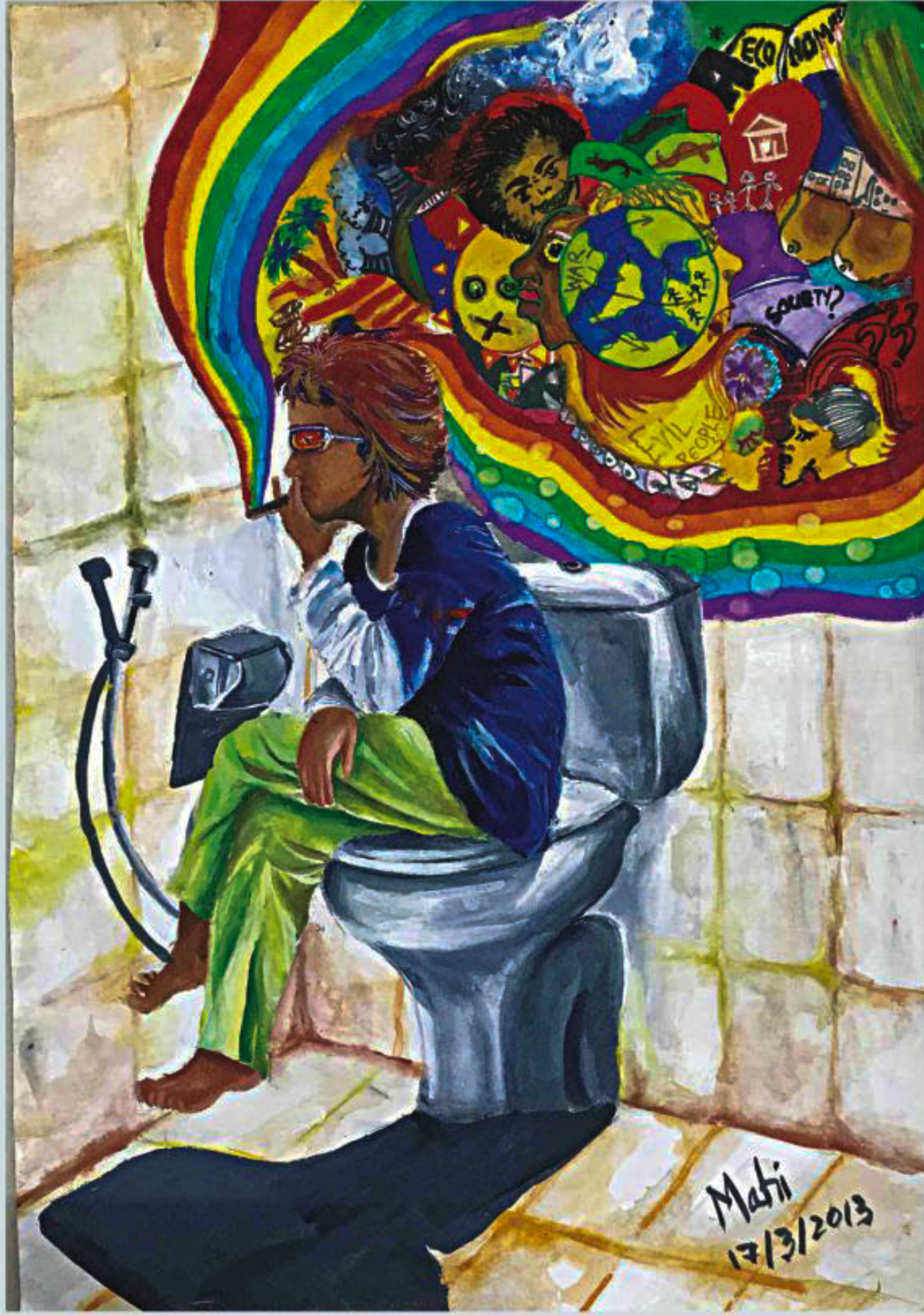
sight. As a non-academic artist, her artwork was different from your conventional artist. At a very young age, she had produced a large number of works. It is exposed that expressing emotion and thought through painting was her closest medium. A strong presence of her own self and originality are noticeable. I regard her work as the outcome of deep concentration, meditation and passion.



fail to find the words, but I can paint it for you. You will see that neither I nor my paintings are unworldly, but we are the simple momentary emotions spawned by nature and present in every breathing soul,” further reads the statement.

In a conversation with *The Daily Star*, artist Wakilur Rahman, the curator of the exhibition, reflected on Mahi’s art: “I was impressed with Mahi’s work at first

“If you closely look at her work, you will find that she was well informed on art history. This doubled my attention towards exhibiting her works. The subjects she dealt with relayed a strong message and those are a special kind of art. She was uncompromised on the front of social issues and traditional barriers. She was deeply influenced by social issues, injustice, and negative news in



A tribute by her mother ON THIS JANUARY

RAHIMA AFROOZ MUNNI

Mahi where are you? Should I come to lay flowers where you are? The way you appeared to everyone as a string of lights, you left your body just as publicly. Where did you get lost? I looked for you on the bed with whatever life force I had in me. Did you lose your way inside that big, heavy quilt? Mahi, the morning goes away, and the night follows behind it too. Where are you hiding? In that small dark room? In the land of sleep? Of course, you sleep a lot. What if I, too, silently go to that room? Would it be too cramped? Why did you go there then, before me?

You said, “*roton e roton chene*” (jewels recognise other jewels) and that is why I can still get your smell, and maybe you mine! You have

understood by now that at this moment I do not dare as much as you, and what will not happen is what is most yearned—but my apparent discomfort does not bother you, does not worry you.

I need to accept that your intuition is acute. Listen, let me exaggerate a bit—don’t you remember? We are used to somewhat supporting those who are powerful. So, you will not agree to the use of “we”? It is the rule of all rules. When have we ever accepted each other without debate? You say what you will and end it right there without forgiveness, so I will not take the risk of becoming your opponent in any way. I still plan to spend my last days with you—even if it is in some dark room.

Translated from Bengli by Zyma Islam

mass media, and was very powerful and expressive in tracing the matters in her art. Another important thing noticeable in her works is that she was disturbed by the anomies and agents of society. I didn’t expect such a young girl to deal with such social issues in such a mature way.”

Mahi viewed “art” and “life” as a two-way origination of the same entity.

Maybe be her personal disturbance, agony, reflection of powerful memories and thoughts on life and death coupled with her reactions towards the decaying illness and morbidity of the society instigated her to choose the path of eternity.

“*Lost in Transition*” closes February 4, 2018. The exhibition is open from 5pm to 8pm.