

Winter is the month of celebration in this country of scorching summers. And the Dhaka urbanites do get spoilt for choice when presented with fetes of literature, music and art taking place successively hot on the heels of each other. Dhaka switches into the role, across a span of three months or so, of a beacon for resplendent names in all of these distinct fields; consequently, it earns a lot of kudos for reeling in a cache of international art cognoscenti who, apparently, exchange views, experience and knowledge with their far-flung peers through dialogues that appear, even to uncritical minds, to be lopsided. The local gets subsumed under the flattened, gleaming surface of the global.

The Dhaka Art Summit, chiefly a private initiative that collaborated with important government (cultural) agencies to stage their fourth edition at Shilpakala Academy, has progressively and increasingly been expanding its scope and scale to be an inclusive platform that chose as its locus of enquiry South and Southeast Asia, a fecund ground for chaos, conflict, resilience and hope. Looped around



PHOTOS: SHARMILLIE RAHMAN

Visitors at Dhaka Art Summit 2018

A WIND OF CHANGE STIRRING THE CHRONICLES FORETOLD

DHAKA ART SUMMIT 2018

SHARMILLIE RAHMAN

seen sweeping across the walls and the floors in their sumptuous presence. As art and architecture shared a common space, so did old and new, and it was a common thread of shared cultural genealogy that seemed to tie the works together instead of geopolitical hierarchies or boundaries that define art as belonging to given territorially significant markers. Volunteering art mediators regularly patrolled the grounds intercepting spectators to offer a glimpse into the background of the artwork on view. One must say this helped create a warm atmosphere of interaction, forging a space of intimacy between art and viewer, releasing art

from the air of intimidation that seem to create a distance from less-trained eyes.

However, this seemingly growing appetite for art can also be attributed to the steady stream of regular exhibitions around the city, and of course larger events like biennales being staged at close intervals. This has without a shadow of a doubt invigorated the local artists' appetite for new possibilities that could be explored with newer, heretofore untested tools and techniques, and has woken the viewers to changing realities in the world of art which has the ultimate power to change the world, more so than technology, with its sheer prophetic insight into man and his relation to the world that sustains him.

The entrance to the Summit could not have been more appropriate than what stood as somewhat of an ambient

gateway made of bamboo (painted in red) after the vernacular South Asian technique by Rasheed Araeen. Nearby was another structure more in the shape of a canopy bearing familiar patterns of baskets by Yona Friedman ushering the audience into the hallway to be accosted with yet another curious piece of scaffoldings and bulwarks named the Utopian Stage, a project by Archaeology of the Final Decade. As the name suggests, it was raised to showcase the failures and promises of the last decade symbolically through a slew of film screenings, dance, music and performance, the latter featuring two of Dhaka's celebrated artists in Reetu Sattar and Yasmin Jahan Nupur with choreographed performances that respectively included musicians and dancers in a melee of tradition and performativity coming together to seek accord amidst discord, something essential that silently glues together the fractured realities of a world gone berserk.

But the problem was the profundity of the projects thinned away in the face of thorough faring visitors who looked clueless and only struck for a moment in contemplation before they decided to move on. The case was similar with Runa Islam's multifaceted performance complete with an ensemble that, mindboggling though it was, had to be wrapped up every time there was a talk session at the auditorium.

A lot of the video installations, quite edgy in addressing contemporary issues of grave concern through alternately stark and poetic rendition, were

Continued to page 13

ART

DHAKA ART SUMMIT 2018

After page 12

presented in curtained enclaves and seemed to bring the audience to tears not only through the soulful unfolding of human tragedy but also by stinging their eyes with freshly applied paints. Apart from these glitches, and despite its sprawl, this edition was arranged in a jigsaw fashion, following a sinuous trail carrying the crowd along the schema of five segments. Each has its own thematic anchor which is rendered interchangeable so far as the theme of artificial, forced divide and dislocation and finding one's

pulls the curtain to enter Rakib Shaw's parallel universe of breath-taking splendour and flamboyance, it does not evade the gaze once one is drawn to examine the self-portraits up close that beneath the glitter and the embellishment lies one's yearning to reembrace the past that was riddled with myths, fables and was a syncretic confluence of different interweaving streams of religions wherein the question of identity became a redundant fallacy.

Rendered in a similar vein Nilima Sheikh's enthralling scroll depicting the 14th century Kashmiri mystic draped in an idyllic landscape by a curatorial

free of the bane of vicious struggle for power and domination. When taming and exploiting, associated with an insatiable hunger to possess becomes the driving impetus of civilisation, it is not surprising that artists who are the conscience of a community would try and sensitise people to the grievous outcomes of such vested human mobilities or migrations. The dire plight of these migrants crossing borders (imaginary) of depleting communities were captured with much contextual sensitivity in many a work.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's eye-catching video installation, suspended

audience with a unique experience.

This year the Samdani Art Award went to Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, who mainly forages the vibrant field of new media, and in this DAS edition of 2018 presented the audience with a tongue-in-cheek multimedia installation that lambasted the follies of human endeavours. Consisting of a raised pedestal made of plastic chairs nestling a monitor showing how gravity pulls down a levitating man in an endless loop, the same motion is again mirrored in the vain effort of trying to keep afloat a handful of floppy tinsels. These self-defeating acts are reflected implicitly



Lost Motherland, Ampannee Satoh



Relie, Novera Ahmed



My Home, My Land, My Country, Hitman Gurung



Heaven is Else Where, Kamruzzaman Shadhin



Installation by Gidree Bawlee

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSEEN AGAZ APURBO



Harano Sur, Reetu Sattar

place in the cartography of a world driven by neo-liberal policies and post-human technologies that daily challenges the ecology of the human mind and body and its environments is concerned. Artists from variegated locales seem to consensually bring the grief and distress of the individual's disjuncture from his community to bear, each through a unique treatment of the form and content of their works.

Out of such a vast plethora of conceptually dazzling and technically intricate works, it is really painstaking, and unfair, to single out a handful that stood out but it is worth a try! As one

oversight lay by the wayside in a cluster of lesser works. Erosion of the plurality of indigeneity under the bulldozers of homogenising globalisation was poignantly manifest in both Munem Wasif and Joydeb Royaja's works. Both address colonisation's (both of the past and the present) atrocity that slowly and insidiously wipes away traditions and locales to fuel the engines of capital-driven economy.

Human civilisation flourished as more and more trails and passages were etched crisscrossing the globe that centuries of travel by land, water and air made possible. That was however not

diagonally across a room with a fascinating chiaroscuro effect projected on the floor presents Bangladeshi Dilbar working in the UAE, whose half-bemused expression mocks the sub-standard working environment he has been trapped into. Pratchaya Phinthong had an art guide wear a pair of jeans which, far removed from its place of origin and owner, traces the treacherous chasm between producers and the mode of production. Curator Cosmin Costin as examined works based on textiles from different regions as metaphors for stories of resistance that were woven into them and by doing so, acquainted the

through the channels of makeshift art extravaganzas that proffer themselves as decolonising platforms that in reality happens only to contest a fluid landscape of virtuality in a quest for that which is vanishing and that which is potentially lurking on the horizon. And DAS is no exception!

Dhaka Art Summit ran its course from February 2 to 10 at Shilpakala Academy, produced by the Samdani Art Foundation and led by its artistic director Diana Campbell Betancourt.

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