

SPECIAL FEATURE

Masks of Bangladesh

Trade and small-scale village fairs are gems that revive nostalgic memories of kites reaching for the skies, and Lalon hymns carrying harmonies through the air. While circus troupes amazed, simple paper masks, inspired by fierce animals and folklores, indulged both children's hearts and curiosity.

"Masked, I advance."

Bengal's Sundarbans echoed (and still echo) whispers of the royal tiger meeting its match with two-faced humans. Fishermen and woodcutters have long taken to the mighty mangroves, stopping for prayers at shrines to protect them against the big cat. This is when the experimentation of wearing a paper mask at the back of the head fooled the ferocious animals and protected the locals from deadly ambush.

Combine such folklores, and you'll have an epiphany about the art scene that we know of and appreciate today.

Artists experimenting with masks as a versatile medium of art showered us with exhibitions over the years. Zainul Gallery of Dhaka University's Institute of Fine Arts, and the EMK Centre saw spectacular modern and traditional masks as part of a series exhibit titled Behind the Mask. Raved were the works of Tushar Dey and Md Zakir Hossain, among others.

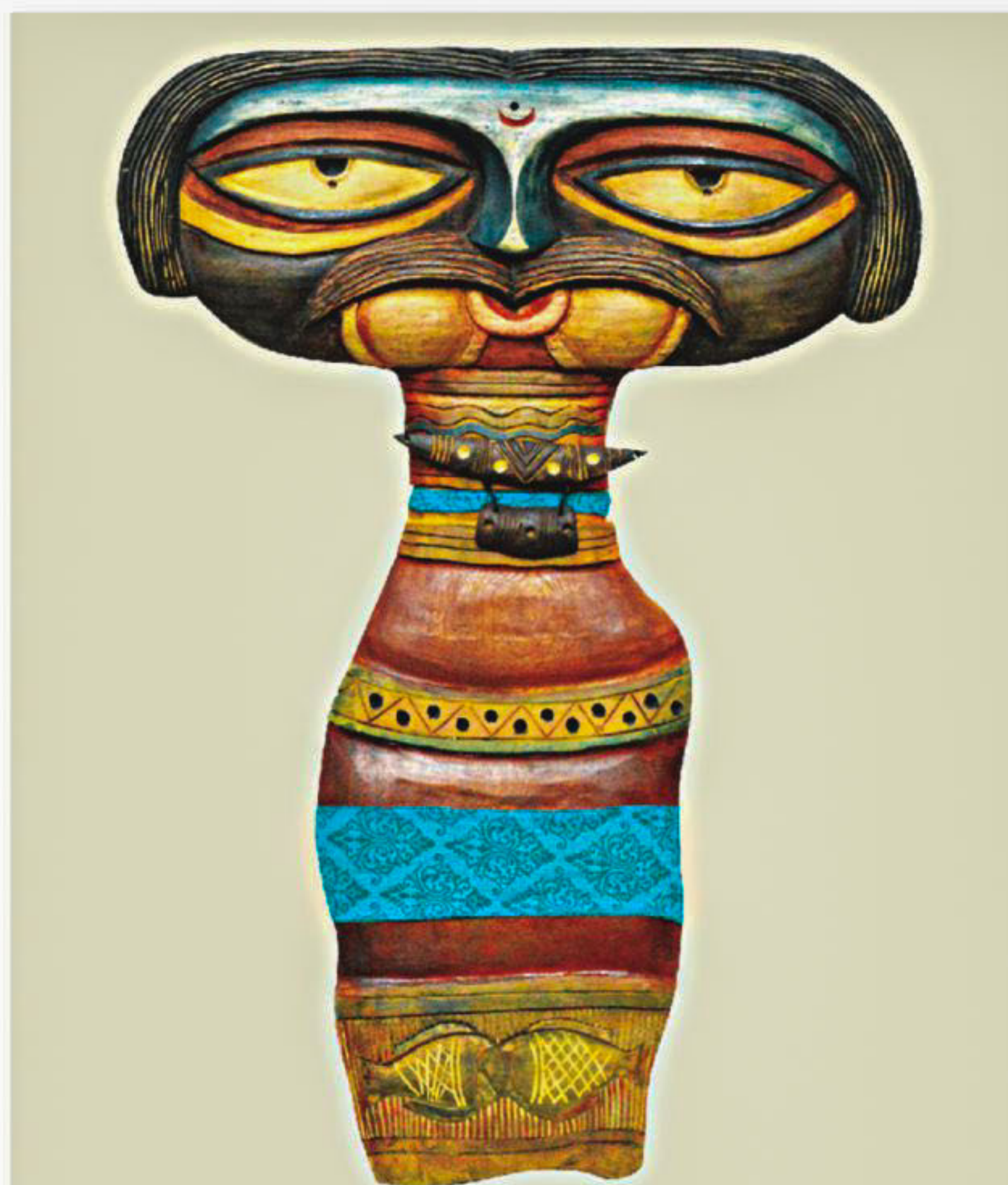
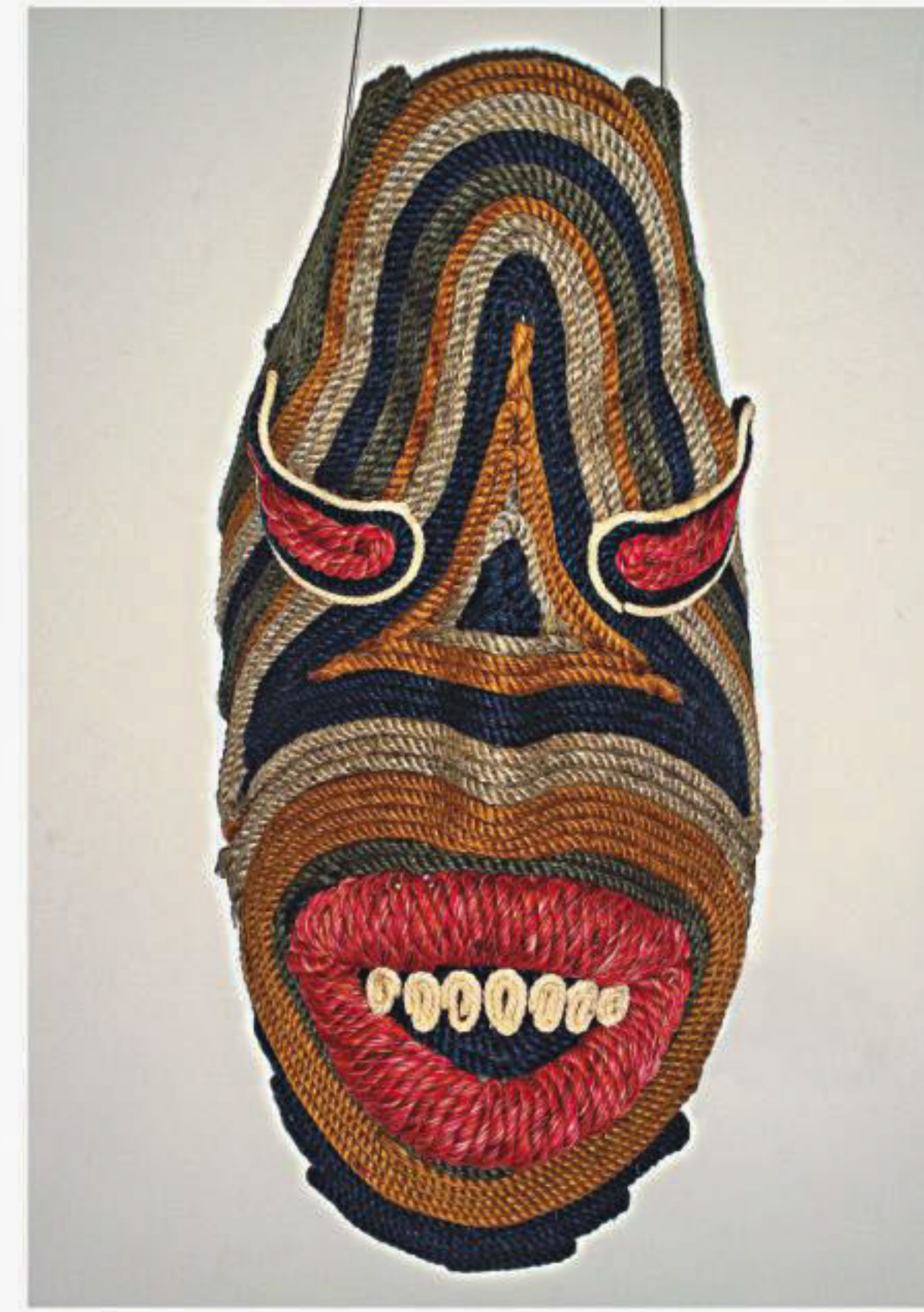
Galleri Kaya, too, houses contemporary group exhibits on its very own series, Mukh O Mukhosh. Seasoned artists like Shishir Bhattacharjee, Bishwajit Paul and Masuda Kazi sculpted masks for the series, spanning decades, alongside whom, Namirah Farzana and other young talents unveiled their salt's worth.

Gaze deep into its hollow sockets, and you will realise that a mask, not the eye, is the true window to the soul. And that is exactly how Goutam Chakraborty, Director of Galleri Kaya and a freelance artist, sees masks. "A mask is the subconscious reflection of the self. Millions of thoughts go into the making of just one mask," he muses.

Outwardly, such musings may claim mediums of chiselled stone, carved wood or smooth whisky bottles. The musings may even exaggerate themselves through feathers, colours, beads and sand. And, extensions like thorns growing out of open jaws, crows, wicked and perched, and even pendulums hanging down a morphed face may speak to you like a visage defying comparison. With mediums and artefacts being uncertain, one thing is constant; you can never know what your vessel will breathe life into beforehand. As your emo-

A lie in its truth and a paradox to its own reality; masks are maddening in all their eerie glory. You may have found yourself surrendering to morphed jaws, tribal geometry and exaggerated symmetry of creations being a touching nod to African cultures and hanging in local ateliers of Dhaka. Or, perhaps, an operatic performance, using boldly-painted masks in classical dances like Kathakali, or maybe even enlarged headgears and face-paint to act out animals of the jungle in theatrical renditions of Disney musicals that had you marvelling at the art of deceit.

Whether in galleries, stages, or your own living room next to a recliner, masks are essentially coins. They show you the story of the maker, and once flipped, go on to fit any truth you may conjure up with the most vivid of imaginations.



tions stir, your vessel will change itself in your own hands to speak of the turmoil within.

The theory is portrayed by freelance artist, and a master of his craft, Saidul Haque Juise, who says, "Art rarely comes from a place of happiness. The masks and paintings I create are grotesque enough to make you lose sleep!"

Known to usually use art as a weapon rather than just a wall décor, Haque has taken inspirations from movements, political and environmental, to speak through his masks. 2011's Arab Spring and national threats such as extinction of Bengal's mangroves are both issues strong enough to move Haque, and result in incredible gothic and vintage creations, featured and hailed in local art studios. Whether its world issues or even the dark side of the soul, why an artist finds diction in his creations is beautifully summed up by Chakrabarty.

"A painter is not a writer; a writer is not a painter."

While the inspirations sparking a great creation in a mask can come from anywhere, what is not up for negotiations is that masks are an extended form of art. It amazes, attracts and conceals. In masks, you'll find truth but no logic. And that is exactly why the masks of Bangladesh deserve their very own star in the art scene of Bengal.

By Ramisa Haque
Photo Courtesy: Galleri Kaya