

ART

# RISING IN THE EAST

*Setting up an international art extravaganza, specifically the 2014 DHAKAART SUMMIT is no mean feat. Curator Diana Campbell Betancourt opens up her diary on the festival that is fast becoming a definitive platform for showcasing South Asian art.*

**T**he Dhaka Art Summit is the world's largest South Asia-focused art event, and I was privileged that Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani (under whose Samdani Art Foundation the festival is organised) invited me to share their vision to create such a wonderful platform for over 250 talented artists. The Summit, now in its second year, started to take shape when I met the Samdanis over two years ago—artist Jitish Kallat had invited me to join him for dinner with them, and little did he know that he was brokering a relationship that would blossom into an festival that is today being lauded globally for its quality and forward-thinking model. From February 7-9, the event exhibited technically challenging works—from Shahzia Sikander's 60-ft immersive video installation *Parallax*, to low-tech, craft-inspired works like Rana Begum's *No. 473* made of 1,060 hand-woven baskets—and provided platforms for all kinds for art. More than 70,000 people enjoyed the exhibition, which took months to put together and is the result of the hard work of countless people.

# REEL STORIES

*Costume designer Pia Benegal teams up with father Shyam Benegal to make the India of the '40s come alive for the small screen*

**M**atching director Shyam Benegal's repertoire of work can be a daunting task for anyone. But daughter and costume designer Pia Benegal has been holding her ground thus far. With her latest project, she is set to

add another feather to her cap. *Samvidhaan*, a new mini series, and the first project ever to be conceived and commissioned by Rajya Sabha Television, is a non-fictional production that documents the history of independent India—Pia has designed the costumes for the same. Directed by Shyam Benegal, *Samvidhaan*'s 10 episodes aim to educate us about our constitution in an entertaining and informative way. The series offered Pia a chance to research, in detail, what the costumes and outfits of that time looked like. "The most challenging factor for me was the replication of characters from different corners of the country," she says, and has painstakingly recreated double-breasted suits, dhoti-kurtas with Nehru jackets, south Indian bush shirts, several kinds of turbans, sherwanis, and saris in silk,

handloom, and cottons of the mid-to-late '40s of rural and urban India. The aim was to make the audience identify immediately with the characters in a way they would recognise where in India they came from at the very first glance.

Pia has previously worked on numerous films like *Dil Se* (2003), *English, August* (1995), *Antarnaad* (1991), period films like *Making of the Mahatma* (1996), *Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2005), *Zubeidaa* (2001), and *Last Days of the Raj* (2007). After studying psychology and sociology at Sophia College, Mumbai, she took to fashion designing, eventually earning a diploma from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi. Currently project manager at the Asian Heritage Foundation and a freelance costume designer for both film and TV, she also working on a project based on the freedom movement in Punjab.



A still from *Zubeidaa* (2001)



Pia Benegal



On the sets

IMAGE COURTESY: PIA BENEGAL, FOX TRAVELLER

## STREET SMART

Popular fashion-focused TV series *Style & the City 2* hits TV screens this month on FOX Traveller. With a focus on street style, viewers can look forward to host Kirat Bhattal taking designers Nikhil Thampi, Rocky S, and Shantanu & Nikhil on a trip to Surat, Pune, Kohlapur, Goa, Chennai, and Mumbai on a hunt for local fabrics and textiles, and incorporating them in the final outfit they make for Bollywood stars. Style icons Kalki Koechlin, Esha Deol, Yami Gautam, Sharmista Shetty, and Vani Kapoor will don the final creations. Watch Shantanu & Nikhil learn about the indigenous crafts of India that might disappear in the years to come, and how, for upcoming designer Nikhil Thampi, the best part of the journey is his discovery of new and unusual fabrics ■

By Anwesha Sanyal





Assistance at the Delhi airport, just before departure to Dhaka

JANUARY 27, 8:00 A.M.

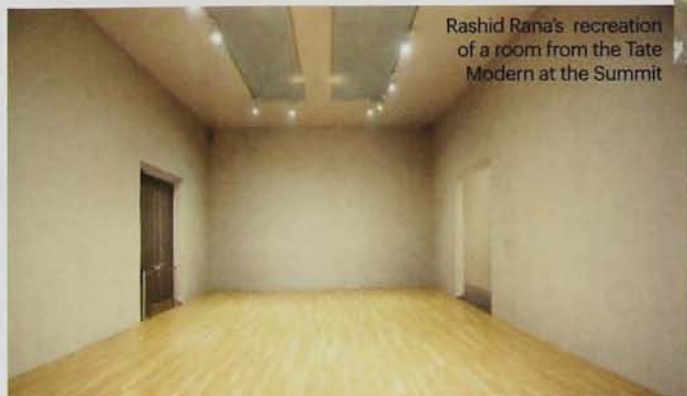
## TWO WEEKS AHEAD OF THE SUMMIT—90 KGS OF WEIGHT AND EMOTION

I had been travelling back and forth between Mumbai and Dhaka for nine months, but my last trip from Delhi to Dhaka was the most emotionally and physically charged. On my morning flight to Bangladesh, I was carrying 90 kg of Rashid Rana's wallpapers, Shilpa Gupta's prints, Asim Waqif's helium pump, and other portions of the artworks which would soon be installed in my exhibition. People think that being a curator is a glamorous job, but to pull off an exhibition at this scale with tough customs constraints in the region, you have to be extremely hands-on.

JANUARY 28, 2:00 A.M.

## THE SPIDER-MEN

While Rashid Rana may have had one of the more subtle projects, recreating a room from the Tate Modern as he was, it was actually the most technically challenging as we had to build a room to scale with no cranes or central support pillars. This meant that we had Bangladeshi workers working all night, climbing up wires and ropes to attach the structure to the ceiling of a three-story atrium—it looked like something out of a *Spider-Man* movie. However, when I began thinking about how new museums in the Gulf are being built similarly by Bangladeshi workers, it added an interesting layer to the work.



Rashid Rana's recreation of a room from the Tate Modern at the Summit

The Dhaka Art Summit billboards



FEBRUARY 1, 10:00 A.M.

## THE TICKING CLOCK

The first layer of the Summit was installed on February 1—160 road signs and billboards that featured clocks offering a new sense of time in Bengali, by New Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective. Bangladeshi artist Shumon Ahmed and I took a joy ride around the city to make sure each of the 160 surfaces were properly pasted.



## FEBRUARY 7, 9:00 A.M. THE BIG DAY

I arrived early at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, where a major part of the Summit was on display, and was thrilled to find everything was working. I had butterflies in my stomach as I was scheduled to give my first tour to the Asia Society group. When they arrived at Mithu Sen's immersive installation with light and shadows, my nervousness melted away—I could see they didn't need my words to engage with the profound artwork.



Batil Kobitaboli (*Poems Declined*),  
2014, Images of Self  
Corrections—Mithu Sen.



Diana Campbell  
Betancourt with artist  
Asim Waqif.

## FEBRUARY 7, 1:30 P.M. THE FLYING ARTWORK

I got urgent phone calls from artist Asim Waqif around 1:00 P.M., telling me that we had to launch his project *Control* at precisely 1:30 P.M., given a surprise heat wave (the past three weeks had been very cold). Waqif's project was a floating sculpture that read 'No Fly Zone' in cane with helium balloons, and since the helium in the balloons was put in during colder weather, the heat risked popping them. The tension added excitement to the project, and when we did unveil it, people clapped and cheered as the sculpture flew high above the obstacles.

## FEBRUARY 7 & 8, 7:00 P.M.-3:00 A.M. PARTY TIME

I had been busy running around the 1,20,000 sq ft venue all day, and I was happy to finally personally welcome the guests during the gala dinner to celebrate the opening of the Dhaka Art Summit. Art collector Lekha Poddar joined Nadia Samdani and me on the stage to announce the Samdani Art Award—I was elated when Ayesha Sultana won a residency at the Delfina Foundation in London. We celebrated into the night, with many artists and curators ending up in my hotel room, appropriately numbered 911, for celebrations.

Artist Rashid Rana with  
Rajeeb Samdani







Artist Nikhil Chopra getting set for his eight-hour performance

## FEBRUARY 8, 10:00 A.M. NAKED MAN ALERT

"Why is this man naked?" asked a security guard as I made my way to the organisers' office the morning of the second day of the Summit. I looked to my right, and Nikhil Chopra was priming himself for an eight-hour performance where he would blacken his body and the walls and make a much-needed commentary on race. Soon, it became nearly impossible to see Chopra with the crowd pushing to catch a glimpse of him, while still keeping a respectful distance for the performance.

## FEBRUARY 8 & 9, 8:00 P.M.-3:00 A.M. COLLECTION VIEWING TO POOL PARTY

The celebrations continued at Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani's six-story residence, Golpo. Guests were greeted by one of our recent acquisitions by the Berlin-based artist Ceal Floyer, a sound work where the voice of American country musician Tammy Wynette crooned *I'll just keep on... 'til I get it right*, the unofficial theme song for the Dhaka Art Summit. There were local and some top international artists, gallerists, and curators. Later on, Dinesh Vazirani of Saffronart dove into the swimming pool with his clothes on, taking me, gallerist Bhavna Kakar, and Aaron Cezar of the Delfina Foundation in with him. Next thing I know, everyone from Rajeeb Samdani to Rashid Rana are in the pool for an art-world version of synchronised swimming.



Artist Mithu Sen, Nadia Samdani, and curator Helen Pheby



Tayeba Begum Lipi's solo project

## FEBRUARY 9, 9:00-10:00 A.M. CHILD'S PLAY

I went early morning to the venue with my husband Thierry Betancourt, to greet 1,060 local children who were to tour the festival. My husband gave a tour in French to the French students, and was blown away at how five- and six-year-olds were able to connect to the sonograms in Tayeba Begum Lipi's solo project. Reena Saini Kallat realised a children's workshop with local and underprivileged schools, looking at what it meant to be happy. The venue was full, and we had to extend our opening hours. Three days was a short time for such a massive undertaking, but with 70,000 people attending, the days were well spent. ■