

## **AIBS Narrative Report**

**Melia Belli Bose**

**January 2015-December 2015**

My fellowship in Dhaka and Chittagong enabled me to meet and interview many of the best known and influential Bangladeshi artists, gallery owners, collectors, and teachers, and to build my Bangla language skills.

When I arrived in late February, there was a nation-wide hartal in effect, which made travel outside of my residential area difficult and at times, dangerous. The strike only lifted in April. I therefore used this time at the beginning of my fellowship to focus on my background reading for my project and Bangla language skills, for which I worked on my own and with a tutor.

From April onwards, I conducted interviews with artists, discussing their work, careers, media, and photographing their art. I visited over two hundred artists' homes, studios, and, if they were teachers, classrooms. In addition to gaining invaluable information about individual artists, my interviews revealed specific themes, or larger issues, which enable me to bring different artists into wider conversation, not only with other Bangladeshi artists, but with other artists in South Asia and beyond. These include degrees of engagement in the international art world; male and female artists' examinations of gender; engagement with history, and intersections of art and activism, especially in relation to garment work and artists' endeavors to assist the victims of the Rana Plaza disaster in their search for justice. My time with artists, individually, at exhibition openings, or at workshops, was undoubtedly the most fruitful for my research. Speaking with artists of different generations enabled me to understand shifting trends in Bangladeshi art, for example, although Bangladeshi artists have long cultivated ties with international artistic networks, and frequently traveled and studied abroad, these artists operated more as individuals and were not focused on raising the international status of Bangladeshi art. This has changed over the past decade as Bangladeshi artists now participate in international biennales and art fairs, and have work in the collections of international museums. Additionally, individuals and foundations are establishing Dhaka as a hub of international contemporary art, with the Dhaka Art Summit, Chobi Mela, and other regular art fairs.

Several people associated with organizations, such as Britto (an artist-run collective), and foundations, such as the Bengal Foundation and the Samdhani Art Foundation, as well as individual collectors provided insight into commercial aspects of the country's contemporary art scene, trends in collecting and marketing Bangladeshi art, within the country and on the international stage. I worked closely with branches of the Bengal Foundation and its three galleries, for which I observed the organization of exhibitions and wrote several catalog and review essays during my fellowship.

Many of the artists with whom I worked are also teachers at the primary school or university level. Unsurprisingly, all had very strong opinions regarding pedagogy as well as trends in student (and often parent) interests they have witnessed over the course of their careers. As an art historian who teaches in a department dominated by studio practice, I was interested in art pedagogy at the university level. Long conversations with art professors on how and why artists

should be familiar with art history resulted in two lectures, one at University of Liberal Arts, Dhaka, the other at Institute of Fine Arts, Chittagong University on art history pedagogy at American universities and how that may enrich their art.

My fellowship resulted in two published essays, one on the prevalence of violence in the work of multi-media artist Mahbubur Rahman, the other on intersections of gender and globalization in the work of three women artists. I also published two essays for exhibition catalogs and two exhibition reviews. My project on contemporary art in Bangladesh was inspired, in part, by the dearth of literature on the topic. I regularly teach an undergraduate survey course on South Asian art, for which I include contemporary art from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. There is a wealth of literature on the art of the first two countries, which enabled me to write my lectures and assign critical readings to my students. Bangladeshi art is a latecomer to the table of global contemporary art, a situation which is beginning to be rectified. I hope that these and my future writings initiate discussion and wider interest in this exciting, emerging field of art and offers educators resources to include Bangladeshi art in their classes.