

EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN

"The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman"

BROAD ART MUSEUM AT MSU

One of the first exhibitions of contemporary art from Bangladesh at an American museum, the two-person show "The Artist as Activist" confirmed the South Asian country's place in the art world as it surveyed the politically engaged practices of artist couple Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman. While Lipi's work takes gender as its central focus, Rahman's tackles everything from the legacy of border disputes and their geopolitical ramifications to the plight of the disenfranchised and poor.

Devoting a section to each artist, the exhibition showcased Lipi's and Rahman's individual practices while subtly acknowledging overlaps, intersections, and influences. A number of Lipi's signature sculptures—furniture and apparel whose surfaces consist of chain mail-like sheets of stainless-steel razor blades—were theatrically presented in darkened galleries. Taking cues from Mona Hatoum's weaponized furniture and oversize kitchen appliances, these cold, shiny objects—pulled from a domestic, traditionally feminine sphere usually associated with nurture, care, comfort, and warmth—were recast as items fraught with pain and anxiety. The many blades, fashioned into the shapes of heirlooms such as an antique dressing table and a vintage sewing machine, insert suggestions of violence and trauma into familial narratives. Covering the ornate surface in *My Daughter's Cot*, 2012, they reference both the artist's childhood recollections of delivering fresh blades to local midwives and her (publicly vocalized) grief over her own infertility, compounded by the shame of remaining childless in a society in which a woman's ability to procreate determines her worth. These same razors transform saris into armor—protection, perhaps, from the sexual harassment that is rampant in Bangladesh. Yet the repetition of the material throughout the display diluted its impact, making the razor plating feel gimmicky. The inclusion of short, bipartite video works provided some relief from the sculptures' uniformity. In *I Wed Myself*, 2010, Lipi plays both a bride and a groom primping for their nuptials, to the accompaniment of the subtly disconcerting rasp of a knife being honed. Reclaiming agency for and through the self, the video wryly subverts the common practice of arranged marriages (since the artist is, after all, implicitly marrying the one she loves most), yet it also equates marriage with ritualistic sacrifice.

Disparate in form, media, and subject matter, Rahman's work felt rawer and less neatly resolved. The artist's likeness appeared in sets of charcoal drawings of different sizes. *Enjoy the Security 1* and 2, both

2005, featured frontal full-body self-portraits, one showing the artist half naked, as if subjected to a strip search. The drawings addressed the increased surveillance of brown bodies in a Western world that perceives people with brown skin as potential terrorists. One of the two drawings in the nearby diptych *Landing*, 2010, showed two seminude male bodies dangling upside down from ropes bound around their ankles, surrounded by tiny jet fighters and helicopters. Executed on an enlarged digital facsimile of actual stamped paperwork belonging to the artist's ancestors and bearing multiple national seals, the work symbolizes the precarious sense of belonging produced by the subcontinent's shifting national borders. The artist's body also serves as a vehicle for performances presented through documentation and artifacts. *Feature 2*, 2013, clearly indebted to Lipi, is a spherical helmet made of surgical scissors, their pointed ends projecting menacingly outward. Rahman dons a shamanistic bull's costume, woven out of rope and straw and topped with a pair of curved horns, for *Transformation*, an ongoing performance begun in 2004. The piece was inspired by an episode from the 1982 play *Nurul-din Sara Jibon* (The Entire Life of Nurul Din), by Syed Shamsul Haq, which concerns the predicament of a destitute indigo farmer who, collapsing under the strain of pulling his own plow, is transformed into a bull in the eyes of his young son. Photographs (dated 2004 and 2010) document a performance by Rahman, in a field and on a beach, reenacting this profound metamorphosis in which oppression and injustice reduce man to the condition of a beast struggling to survive. Nearby, a powerful stainless-steel sculpture, *Transformation*, 2015, more Minotaur than meek animal, achieved a partial resurrection.

A final gallery highlighted the couple's work focusing on the status and treatment of Bangladesh's trans female citizens, known as *bijras*. While Lipi's two-channel video *Home*, 2014, presented a forceful and passionate individual testimony on behalf of these legally recognized but often ostracized Bangladeshis, Rahman's single-channel *Time in a Limbo*, 2014–15, adopted a less didactic, more fly-on-the-wall approach, intimately documenting communal spaces, tracing diverse narratives, and capturing the warmth, camaraderie, and mutual support that sustain *bijra* communities. Similarly, this exhibition's greatest strength was the insight it provided into the many subtle ways in which a longstanding personal and professional partnership can enrich, rather than deplete, both partners.

—Murtaza Vali



Tayeba Begum Lipi, *My Daughter's Cot*, 2012, stainless-steel razor blades, stainless steel, 40 x 48 x 30". From "The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman."