KANTHA

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Thesis Proposal: Concept and Vision: Many artists are remembered through self-portraits. They can offer insights into an artist's life, surroundings, and mental state. Painting a self-portrait seems complicated. When I think about painting a self-portrait I think of my identity as a woman, an artist, the experiences, memories, values, background, culture, and other things that makes me the person that I am. In this study of self-discovery, internal and external perceptions, I will try to document my early childhood to the current time of being through abstraction and try to capture the aura of the person. I'm also doing research on the women's artwork in Bangladesh.

Here is an example of women creating art in Bangladesh------

https://korissa.co/pages/our-story

Media and Scale: 7 to 10 paintings, acrylic and oil paint on canvases

Canvas sizes: 8ftgx7ft, 7x6ft, and 4x3ft

Timeline: Main Gallery, April 20-April 26

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INTRODUCTION: KANTHA

I see myself as part of a lineage that honors the untold stories of rural Bangladeshi women, whose art—woven into thread, shaped with clay, or painted in pigment—often goes unrecognized. Their work, often dismissed as “craft,” holds deep emotional and cultural meaning that speaks to the core of their lives and experiences. In my paintings, I bring this visual language into the contemporary art world, blending textures and forms drawn from the lives of Bangladeshi women with abstraction. I ask questions through my work: What happens when patterns from Nakshi kantha meet oil paint? What if alpana designs appear in a gallery? What if sari textures or kolshi motifs find their place on canvas?

These traditional details carry with them a wealth of lived knowledge, transforming what is often labeled as folk or feminine into powerful statements in the global art conversation. Through my work, I connect these worlds, honoring my roots while pushing the boundaries of their evolution. This thesis blends early feminist ideas about visibility with modern perspectives that emphasize intersectionality, arguing that rural Bangladeshi women’s art deserves to be woven into the broader art history narrative.

For generations, women in rural Bangladesh created art through mediums like embroidery (nakshi kantha), pottery, and Alpana, yet their work was largely anonymous and often dismissed as mere craft. With the rise of mobile phones, social media, and NGOs, these women are now documenting their lives and creating self-representations. Artists like Tayeba Begum Lipi, along with organizations like BRAC and Aarong, have played a crucial role in turning rural craft into recognized art, giving voice to these women

and their stories.

This thesis explores the fusion of traditional forms, such as embroidery and Alpana, with self-portraiture and contemporary expressions. It looks at how rural women's art challenges invisibility, offering them a space to express their identities. Cultural institutions like Aarong, Samdani Art Foundation, and Bengal Foundation have been key in bringing rural women's work to public recognition, showing that these women are not just makers of tradition but are unique artists with individual voices.

Through symbolic forms of self-representation, like kanthas and alpana, rural women assert their identities. Nakshi kantha, in particular, serves as a visual diary, reflecting personal stories that are often unseen. Contemporary artists like Tayeba Begum Lipi continue to reinterpret these traditions, exploring themes of bodily autonomy, memory, and resistance. Through these acts of creation, rural women reclaim their voices, carving out spaces for their identities to be seen and heard.

My paintings are not just a personal expression—they are a celebration of those who came before me, a tribute to the labor, creativity, and resilience of Bangladeshi women. They remind me that art doesn't have to be labeled or defined by others. Art is not just about recognition or fame—it is about survival, strength, and the quiet rebellion of creating, even when the world doesn't see. Through color and gesture, I honor their work, their joy, and the love they pour into every piece of nakshi kantha or alpana. Their artistry is not just an act of creation, but a form of resistance, a refusal to be forgotten, and an inspiration for me to continue telling their stories through my own work. This is a celebration of unseen artistry—of the love and labor that women in Bangladesh pour into their daily lives. It is a way of saying: we were always here.

INFLUENCES AND CONTEXT

My aesthetic understanding has been shaped by a blend of personal experiences, formal visual education, and a deep connection to both historical and contemporary influences. Growing up in Bangladesh, I was surrounded by the silent yet powerful artistry of women—my mother, grandmother, and other women in my community who practiced embroidery, weaving, and other traditional crafts. These experiences, rooted in everyday life, taught me that art doesn't need validation from institutions to be significant; it holds meaning in its very creation. It was through their hands that I learned to see the beauty in the mundane and the sacred in the everyday.

My formal visual education, particularly in the West, broadened my understanding of what art can be. I was exposed to diverse forms of art—from traditional to contemporary, abstract to realism—which allowed me to explore new ways of expressing my own cultural identity. The balance between technique and emotion became key to my work, where I started to blend my roots in traditional Bangladeshi craft with modern, abstract forms. This fusion allowed me to explore the themes of identity, gender, and labor—subjects that are deeply personal to me and the women I depict.

Historical and contemporary influences have also played a vital role in shaping my aesthetic. Artists like Claude Monet, Gustav Klimt, and Frida Kahlo have inspired me with their use of color, pattern, and self-expression. Monet's vivid hues and abstract approach encouraged me to merge traditional craft techniques with abstraction, while Klimt's celebration of women's bodies and labor has influenced my own approach to depicting women's work as art. Frida Kahlo's emotional self-portraits have encouraged me to delve deeper into my own identity and resilience, using art as a form of personal

reflection.

Contemporary artists like Tayeba Begum Lipi, Shahzia Sikander, and Bipasha Hayat have shown me how to blend cultural heritage with modern artistic expressions. Lipi's use of traditional crafts in contemporary art, along with her focus on women's labor and identity, resonates deeply with my own practice. Similarly, Shahzia Sikander's ability to merge old traditions with new forms of expression inspires me to push the boundaries of what is considered art, making space for voices like mine. Bipasha Hayat's abstraction, emotion, and use of color have had a profound impact on how I express the hidden strength of Bangladeshi women in my own work.

Finally, the life and leadership of the first female Prime Minister of Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia have profoundly shaped my artistic journey. She embodies the power, resilience, and boldness I see in the women I depict through my paintings. She is the thread that runs through my work, reminding me that we, too, can break barriers and create space for ourselves.

She keeps coming back in my work. I even drew a portrait of her in my undergraduate thesis—she felt that important to me. I grew up watching her on TV, and honestly, I haven't seen any other woman in Bangladesh speak or lead the way she did. Her presence was powerful, fearless, and deeply inspiring. That image of her—strong, composed, leading with purpose—stayed with me. She is, without question, one of my greatest inspirations of all time. Her strength shaped the way I see women in power, and it continues to shape the way I make art. Her strength, fearlessness, and determination are reflected in the strength of my brushstrokes, my color choices, and the stories I tell through my art. Like her, I strive to give voice to the often unseen and unheard, elevating

the everyday into something extraordinary.

Through these influences—both personal and historical—I have come to see my work as part of a larger narrative that transcends time and geography. It's a celebration of identity, of history, of the women who came before me and the ones who will follow. And it's a reminder that art, in all its forms, has the power to reshape the world.

Art forms like Nakshi Kantha (embroidered quilts) are deeply symbolic and passed down through generations, yet they are often dismissed as "craft" rather than recognized as fine art. (Basu Basu). This reflects broader gender and colonial biases that have long devalued women's creative labor. While some organizations support these communities, women often receive only a fraction of the profits from their work, and the stories once embedded in each piece risk being lost to commercial use. Despite these challenges, rural women continue to create — using natural materials, personal histories, and joy. Their work deserves recognition not only as cultural heritage but as art, rich in meaning, skill, and imagination. The misclassification of traditional women's art as "craft" rather than fine art has serious social and economic consequences. Works like Nakshi Kantha, Alpana, and Dhamrai pottery, despite their intricate designs and deep cultural value, are often excluded from the fine art category. This lack of recognition denies women both economic opportunities and creative autonomy (Bhuiyan; Conard and Horton). The marginalization of rural Bangladeshi women artists stems from colonial classifications that labeled traditional art as "craft" (Selim). Despite their intricate and culturally rich work, these women face limited access to education, income, and recognition (Sultana and Saleh). I grew up witnessing their talent undervalued. This paper explores their contributions within historical and modern

contexts, arguing for their recognition as artists and cultural bearers. My paintings celebrate their creativity and resilience. Due to widespread poverty and lack of resources, female artists in rural Bangladesh struggle to gain recognition. Their work is often exploited by third-party brands that profit while giving the artists as little as 1% in return. Limited education and access make these women vulnerable, despite their talent and creativity. As a result, many are forced to compromise their artistic ambitions and accept their work being labeled as “craft” rather than art, just to survive (Islam).

Saleh and Sultana highlight how systemic inequality exploits and silences the artistic voices of rural Bangladeshi women. Due to traditional gender roles, their creative work is often seen as part of household chores rather than individual artistic expression (Khan). Art created for the family is labeled as “craft,” not “art.” Furthermore, the collaborative nature of their work, passed down through generations with inherited motifs, reinforces the belief that their creations contribute to cultural heritage rather than reflect personal artistic identities (Sharmin & Ahmad). Women in rural Bangladesh continue to create unique, resilient art that intertwines personal experiences and cultural pride. Each Nakshi Kantha is different — from colors to motifs, reflecting the creator’s geography, life, and beliefs. These quilts tell the story of their lives, rooted in the rural landscapes and spiritual experiences of the women. Yet, due to collective creation and lack of recognition, these masterpieces are often dismissed as “craft,” denying their artistic value and the women’s individuality and cultural identity. Traditional art by rural Bangladeshi women holds deep cultural and spiritual significance. Through Nakshi Kantha, women express personal stories, folklore, and spiritual beliefs, using fabric as a canvas for identity and community.

These artworks serve as a form of meditation and a testament to the rich history of Bangladeshi society. As Conard and Horton note, traditional art anchors excluded communities, allowing women to tell their stories through symbolism and storytelling. Nakshi Kantha is a form of embroidery where rural Bangladeshi women create colorful motifs from nature and daily life, such as animals, landscapes, and emotions. Each stitch reflects the culture, stories, and spiritual beliefs passed down through generations. Common motifs include lotus flowers, water lilies, pigeons, and peacocks, symbolizing purity, beauty, and spirituality, much like the themes in my paintings. The symbolism in rural Bangladeshi art reflects the hardships, joys, and spirituality of the women who create it. Dhamrai pottery, known for its intricate folklore and religious motifs, is a cherished cultural heritage. These functional pieces, often created with rituals and prayers, connect artists to their environment and traditions. This process of spiritual expression in art reminds me of ancient Greek pottery, where similar themes were explored, despite the cultural divide. Spirituality and symbolism are integral to South Asian folk art, with artists using specific materials and methods to convey meaning (Selim). The spiritual aspect of creating art gives rural Bangladeshi women a strong sense of identity and cultural belonging, passed down through generations. As Sharmin, Dilruba, and Rizwan Ahmad note, traditional skills and symbols in pottery reflect deep family and cultural ties, highlighting the need to preserve these artworks as heritage. They serve as a collective language, allowing women to express their identity and connection to their community. The techniques and motifs used in rural Bangladeshi women's art reflect the cultural symbolism of the country, making their work more than just crafts. Each piece tells a story, showcasing values, beliefs, and emotions unique to rural life. These intricate, colorful artworks, including lotus, moon, tree of life, and agricultural motifs, are steeped in

symbolism and passed down through generations. The women's detailed stitching, often inspired by nature, animals, and daily life, reveals their love for art and deep connection to their environment. These quilts are not only cultural expressions but also symbols of resilience in a society that often marginalizes them.

Alpona is a widely practiced folk art in Bangladesh, characterized by bold lines, geometric shapes, and repetitive patterns that depict local folklore and daily life. Often created on floors or walls, it can cover entire streets, especially during celebrations like the Language

Movement. While more common in Hindu communities, Alpona symbolizes harmony and relationships within the community and nature, reflecting the core values of rural life. Like Nakshi Kantha, it is a unique and culturally significant art form, preserved and passed down through generations, distinct from formal art traditions. Clay pottery from Dhamrai is a famous traditional art form in Bangladesh, often depicting Bengali mythological and religious symbols. Despite its rich cultural significance, it is often categorized as craft rather than fine art (Islam). This highlights how traditional art is excluded from the formal art world, even though it reflects deep connections to nature and community life. The pottery, along with street Alpona, represents the women's creative expression and identity within their community. These communal art forms embody creativity, resilience, and cultural heritage, deserving recognition and respect. The colorful motifs and stitching created by rural women in Bangladesh through art forms like Nakshi Kantha, Alpona, and pottery carry significant historical and cultural meaning. Originally intended as practical items, these pieces evolved into canvases for storytelling, reflecting women's lives, spirituality, and community. Despite

their rich cultural value, these artworks were often overlooked by colonial and postcolonial narratives, and labeled as "craft" rather than art (Selim). Traditionally seen as "feminine art," they were relegated to a lower status, with their creators often viewed as anonymous contributors, not individual artists (Basu & Basu, Conard & Horton). This colonial bias persists, continuing to categorize rural women's art as craft rather than fine art. After Bangladesh's independence, there were efforts to reevaluate national identity, especially within Indigenous communities. However, gendered perceptions persisted, and despite the cultural significance of rural women's art, such as quilting and pottery, their work was still viewed as craft rather than personal expression. Sculptor Jainal Abedeen helped bring folk arts into national consciousness, but women's contributions remained largely invisible. Additionally, the international dispute over Nakshi Kantha, with India claiming its origin, further complicated the situation by raising issues of cultural ownership and intellectual property. This ongoing marginalization reflects the deep-rooted cultural and gender dynamics that persist today. Gender and cultural biases in Bangladesh result in the undervaluation of rural women's art, categorizing their work as domestic craft rather than Fine Art. Rooted in traditional gender roles, this perception limits recognition and opportunities for women, reinforcing a social hierarchy that prioritizes urban male artists. These biases are partly inherited from colonial times, where Indigenous art was dismissed as primitive or folkloric, further limiting economic opportunities for rural women. As a result, their works are rarely included in the formal art world, even as urban markets exploit their art. (Basu Basu). The issue of labeling women as craft makers extends beyond Bangladesh, affecting other non-western societies as well. Despite women's innovative contributions to art, a lack of support from government and officials worsens the situation. In recent years, there has

been momentum to recognize traditional art forms by women, with NGOs and cultural programs advocating for the classification of Nakshi Kantha, pottery, and paper making as Fine Art rather than crafts. This challenges urban male artists and calls for continued efforts to redefine the perception of rural women's art in the broader art world. (Conrad and Horton) Certain projects, both international and local, aimed at empowering women, unfortunately, continue to label them as beneficiaries or brands, keeping the artists anonymous and obscured. This gender bias and exploitation limit the cultural importance of their artwork within Bangladesh. By recognizing these women as artists, rather than merely producers of crafts, their status in society would be elevated, fostering an inclusive understanding of Bangladeshi culture. Organizations like Carissa and the World Architecture Community have helped shine a light on the artistic contributions of rural Bangladeshi women. (KORISSA; WA Contents) However, redefining the term "artist" in Bangladesh and other non-western countries is crucial to gaining more exposure and recognition for these women. (Zimmerman et al.) This change requires consistent efforts from government, cultural institutions, and policymakers to dismantle the gendered and colonial biases that continue to undervalue women's art in Bangladesh. In recent years, there has been a growing effort to recognize the artistic contributions of rural women in Bangladesh. NGOs, organizations, and individuals are working to move their art from being seen as folk art and crafts to being recognized in the broader art world. This challenges long-standing gender inequality and the obstacles women have faced. One such organization, the Center for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed, helps women artisans by providing economic support and organizing exhibitions to showcase their work. These efforts help break the divide between artists and artisans, showing that rural women’s work deserves to be in the Fine Arts category. These initiatives have brought

traditional art forms to international attention, highlighting their cultural value and the need for preservation.

KORISSA is an example of how rural Bangladeshi artists are gaining international recognition. They view the work of these women as unique and sophisticated. The House of Wandering Silk also focuses on the storytelling in Nakshi Kantha, raising awareness about preserving these artworks and recognizing the women as artists, not just craftswomen. Despite the challenges they face, some women, like Suraiya Rahman, have gained international recognition for their Nakshi Kantha art, showing that rural women can achieve global recognition with the right support. However, most still face barriers like limited resources, gender bias, and lack of access to education and art networks. Colonial and postcolonial structures continue to reinforce the idea that their work is “traditional” rather than “fine art.” To overcome these obstacles, more support from the government and organizations is needed to provide exposure and opportunities for these women.

The label of “artisan” rather than “artist” devalues the work of rural women, even though their creations are full of creativity, cultural meaning, and personal expression. The stitchwork in Nakshi Kantha, for example, tells stories of rural life, often featuring self- portraits and daily experiences, such as the sun rising near their homes. This personal touch sets it apart from mass-produced items, which lack the same depth. With more government support and resources, these women could be recognized as artists. Adding rural women’s art to national curriculums and using digital platforms could help increase their visibility and acknowledge their historical contributions. Partnerships with social enterprises and galleries could also provide fair economic benefits, helping

elevate their art to the fine art category. These changes would preserve cultural heritage and empower rural women in the art world.

THE BODY OF WORK

In my paintings, I focus on these women whose hard work often goes unrecognized. As a woman born in Bangladesh, I have a deep connection to their experiences, and it makes me reflect on how my own life could have unfolded differently. Through my work, I continue the tradition of Nakshi Kantha, using painting as a medium to honor their stories and their creativity.

In my self-portraits, capturing who I am feels complex and layered. I wanted to portray the different emotions I experience and how I react to them. The repetitive pixelation in my paintings adds texture and evokes Nakshi Kantha, though this connection may be more apparent to those familiar with it. Through these self-portraits, I explored my identity and how I felt while painting the women. The faces in the portraits are intentionally unclear, leaving space for the viewers to interpret and discover what they reveal about me. These works come from deep emotional and psychological places within me.

For me, the large paintings serve as a kind of Nakshi Kantha—a space where I can express emotions and reflect on my reality as a female artist caught between two worlds. Each large painting is like a window into my past, filled with details that remind me of where I come from and the women I am connected to. The self-portraits were the next step in this process, capturing the emotions that linger after creating the larger works. Just as a knot ties together the final threads of Nakshi Kantha, my self-portraits bring the story full circle. Each one carries a different emotion, completing the narrative and allowing me to tie together the threads of my personal experience and my cultural heritage.

As I worked on the self-portraits, I reflected on my journey growing up in Bangladesh. Through research, I deepened my understanding of the women who came before me and the tradition of Nakshi Kantha. I began to see my place within that legacy as a female artist with roots in Bangladesh. Each portrait in this series marks a shift in style, mood, and meaning, offering glimpses into how I've changed both as a person and an artist. The self-portraits allowed me to explore my inner world and how it evolves over time. I aimed to capture a thought, a feeling, or a moment by using repetitive marks to process my emotions—almost like stitching my feelings directly into the canvas.

This body of work became a journey of personal history intertwined with artistic expression. By connecting the stitching technique of Nakshi Kantha with the elements in my paintings, I was able to weave together emotional depth and a stronger connection to my cultural roots. Each brushstroke, like a stitch, adds layers of texture, meaning, and story—not only my own, but also the stories of other women artists in Bangladesh. This emotional exploration has sparked new ideas and directions for future work.

I began with smaller portraits, and now, my largest painting is about 7 by 8 feet. Looking back, I can see how much I've grown through this process. I view this work as a transformation—a visual and emotional journey through uncertainty, growth, and, ultimately, a sense of resolution. Over the past two years, my paintings have reflected the changes in both my artistic practice and my personal understanding of identity, belonging, and expression.

The difference in composition between my smaller and larger paintings is intentional and deeply tied to how I perceive the world around me, especially the lives of the women I paint. In my smaller works, the centered, somewhat symmetrical

compositions reflect a more intimate, personal experience. These pieces are like mirrors, where I search for clarity and balance, both emotionally and visually. The symmetry in these works speaks to my journey of understanding myself—it's about creating a sense of equilibrium, something I personally strive for in my own life. For me, these paintings represent a quieter, more controlled sense of order, which contrasts with the chaotic, often fragmented reality of the women I depict.

However, as I transitioned to working on larger paintings, the composition changed dramatically to reflect the energy and complexity of the women's lives. The larger canvases are more open, more chaotic, and more asymmetrical—qualities that reflect the lives of the women I grew up witnessing. These women were never isolated or perfectly arranged. They worked together in groups, moving in different directions, sometimes sitting in circles or scattered across a room. Their bodies, their gestures, and their focus on their work were dynamic, not confined to neat lines or balanced spaces. The chaos and fluidity of their actions felt essential to capture, and the large scale of the work provided the space to do so.

The asymmetry of these larger paintings mirrors the reality of their labor: shared, communal, and full of unpredictable motion. Just as they worked without rigid structure—fingers stitching, hands reaching, bodies shifting to accommodate the work—the painting reflects this unpredictability. The irregularity of the composition in the larger works serves as a metaphor for how the women's labor was not neatly defined or organized, yet it was full of life and purpose. There's a beauty in that chaos, a richness in the messiness of their work, and I wanted to preserve that in the way I painted them.

The transition from symmetrical to asymmetrical, from smaller to larger, is a

reflection of my understanding of how my own life intersects with the lives of these women. My self- portraits are about my internal world, my search for self, and my understanding of my identity. In contrast, the larger paintings are about the external world—about how I see the collective strength of women working together, despite the struggles they face. Through asymmetry and scale, I aim to capture the raw, unsanitized reality of their lives, while also showing the grace and power that emerge from the chaos. It's a celebration of their resilience, their creativity, and their spirit—untamed, unconfined, and beautifully imperfect.

The asymmetry and chaos in my work are key to how I reflect the realities of these women's lives. When I paint, I don't want to smooth things over or make them look perfect, because their lives aren't perfect. Their labor is often unseen, unappreciated, and undervalued. They don't have the luxury of neatness or balance. The fact that they work tirelessly—without recognition, without the ideal conditions—is something I want to honor. Their world is messy, in every sense, but it's also incredibly beautiful because they continue to create, to nurture, and to live through that chaos.

By using an asymmetrical composition, I'm mirroring how they work and live. It's a representation of their physical movement as they sit together in groups, stitching, talking, or sharing stories. Their hands and feet aren't aligned or symmetrical—they're moving in different directions, adjusting to the demands of their work. When I look at these women, there's an energy that comes from the disarray, the unpredictability, the way they are constantly adapting to survive.

The overlapping marks and layers in my paintings represent that chaotic energy. Each mark, though seemingly random or uneven, is purposeful and has meaning. I want

to show how this chaos, this lack of order, actually holds meaning in itself. The layers are a metaphor for the complexities of their lives. It's like peeling back layers of history, memory, and struggle to reveal the strength and beauty that exists beneath the surface. Even though everything feels a bit jumbled or chaotic, there's a sort of harmony that arises from this dissonance, just like their lives.

The act of layering and overlapping isn't just about creating visual interest; it's about telling a story that's complex, multifaceted, and often uncomfortable. These women live in a world where their lives are constantly overlapping with struggle, joy, work, and survival. That chaotic layering becomes a visual representation of how these forces come together, how they survive despite everything stacked against them.

I think there's also a deeper sense of beauty in chaos. The way things come together in a dynamic, unpredictable way mirrors life itself. It's raw, it's real, and it doesn't shy away from the messiness of being alive. By working with this asymmetry and chaos, I want the viewer to feel that energy and that struggle, but also the resilience and creativity that come from it.

If I had more time, I would push this chaos even further because there's something profound about embracing the messiness of life. It's the heart of these women's story. The way their labor, their creativity, and their lives are chaotic yet beautiful is something I want to communicate through the painting. It's like a poem in visual form—unpredictable, complex, and raw, but deeply beautiful in the way it all fits together.

In the end, I want my work to show that beauty isn't always neat or symmetrical.

Sometimes, it's found in the mess—the overlapping, the unbalanced, the chaotic. That's where the true power and beauty of these women's lives lie, and it's where I find my own connection to them and their story.

Color is more than just an aesthetic choice in my work—it's a part of who I am, a reflection of my roots. Growing up in Bangladesh, I was surrounded by vibrant colors in everything: the clothing we wore, the food we ate, the pottery, and the art that filled our spaces. Color was—and still is—at the heart of my culture. It's woven into every moment of life, and for me, it's inseparable from my identity. As a child, I always wore colorful clothes, and that love for bright hues stayed with me. Even now, when I look at clothing or the world around me, I'm drawn to the colors that speak to me. The bright, bold colors in my paintings carry that same energy. They're not just visual choices—they're about memory, culture, and the essence of Bangladesh. I think my colorful compositions have become a signature in my work, just like the patterns I grew up with in Nakshi Kantha and other folk traditions. These colors are part of my story—they travel with me wherever I go.

I love colors. The use of colors in my paintings is instinctive. I grew up in Bangladesh, surrounded by women creating Nakshi Kantha and colorful embroidered fabrics—that was my first exposure to art. I've always worn vibrant clothing, with embroidery and embellishments that felt like second skin. In Bangladesh, wearing color is a part of everyday life, a part of joy, which is so different from what I see in Western fashion. My mother would dress me in multicolored sweaters and patterned dresses. Even now, when I walk through a store in the U.S., my eyes go straight to the brightest piece in the room. It's not something I think about—it's something that's been woven

into me.

Even my smallest paintings aren't really small—they're 3 by 4 feet, about the width of a body. I think that says something about how I want the viewer to be immersed. With my larger pieces, like the ones that are 7 by 8 feet, it's not just a painting—it's a presence. You can't ignore it. It surrounds you. I love working large because I feel like I need more space to express what I want to say. The scale echoes the physicality of what I'm painting—women making, women moving, women working. Their labor demands space, and so does the painting. I grew up watching women work quietly, often invisibly, but always with so much beauty and energy. Creating something this big feels like honoring that—it's unapologetic, expansive, and takes up the space it deserves.

My self-portraits are 3 by 4 feet, which already isn't small, but when I started painting women making art together—women in groups, working alongside each other—I needed more space. That shift in scale happened naturally. These women don't work in isolation; they create in shared spaces, sitting close, passing materials, telling stories as they stitch or paint. So, I couldn't fit that energy, that togetherness, into a smaller canvas. The larger scale allowed me to honor that collective rhythm. It became less about a single body and more about the presence of many—just like the art they make.

The melting backgrounds in my paintings represent memories—soft, blurry, like the way I remember things from childhood. They hold the feeling of growing up around women making art, stitching, dyeing fabric, working with their hands. Those backgrounds are hazy on purpose, like looking through time. In contrast, the foregrounds are sharper and more defined. That's where my own marks come in—more

recent explorations, more present. The stitch-like gestures I make are my way of connecting with their language, but from my perspective now. So, the foreground holds my voice, while the background holds my memory of theirs. Together, they tell the story—past and present woven into one frame.

I tried to number the paintings in the order they began, but the process wasn't always linear. The first painting I started was the large one of the women working together in a group. (PAINTING#1) Around the same time, I also began the large red piece (PAINTING#2) that became a celebration of women working together—those two pieces were the starting point for the whole body of work. They carried the energy of collective labor and shared experience, and I found myself immersed in them for quite some time.

Then, somewhere around the midpoint of working on those two larger paintings, I began the blue self-portrait (PAINTING#3). That one came from a very different emotional space. I was processing so much internally while painting these women, and I needed to find a way to express what I was feeling. The blue self-portrait captures a quiet tension, mirroring the emotional state I was in at the time. It made me reflect on how the women I paint often work in silence, in a focused, inward way. Their stillness feels different from my own experience, where emotions often stir more openly.

I'd say my personality is one that can be both introspective and energetic, shifting between moments of calm and periods of intense drive. Sometimes I feel completely at ease, while other times I'm caught in a whirlwind of emotion and thought. That fluidity is reflected in my work, particularly in the blue painting. It starts quietly, with more subtle

marks at the bottom, then gradually builds toward something wilder and more expressive at the top, capturing the ups and downs I felt in that moment.

The blue represents calmness on the surface, but underneath there's so much more going on. It's not just about serenity—it's about how emotions move, change, and crash into one another. It's a portrait of how I felt while painting the larger works. The contrast between my own restless, expressive nature and the quiet endurance of the women I was painting made me reflect on the differences between us, but also on what connects us.

That painting became a turning point in the series. It gave me space to explore myself in relation to the women whose stories I was trying to honor. It's deeply personal, layered, and raw—just like my emotions at the time.

After that, I painted the green self-portrait (PAINTING#4). In that piece, the surface became very fabric-like—almost like a cloth. I was intentionally trying to replicate the look and feel of traditional raw fabrics made in Bangladesh. I focused on building up texture, trying to get it as close as possible to the woven, earthy, handmade quality of those textiles. It became less about the figure at first, and more about the surface, the base—this symbolic ground made of something deeply rooted in where I come from.

Then, on top of that fabric-like surface, I painted a shadowy figure of myself—one without clear lines or boundaries. It's not sharply defined; it just exists. It's hovering. It takes up space, but it's not locked into the surface—it floats. That figure is made up of pixels, colors, energy—it's me, at this point in my life. Not fully present in one place or the other. Not fully fixed. It's like I'm hovering between two worlds: the country I come

from, and the one I live in now.

The figure isn't painted directly *on* the fabric, but it's *with* it. That symbolizes something important—how I feel about my identity. I'm making work about Bangladesh and the people there, but I'm also living and creating here, in the U.S. I'm in between. I'm not entirely here, and I'm not entirely there. I exist in this middle space, and this painting captures that feeling. The pixels in the painting come forward—bright, vibrant, colorful— like fragments of energy. They're not static. They float. They pulse. That's how I feel about my own energy right now—untethered, but still full of life and intention.

The green color in this painting holds a very specific meaning for me. It symbolizes calmness and peace—the peace I've found in being where I am, spiritually and emotionally. Even though I'm in between two places, two homes, I feel grounded in my own energy. There's a layer of stillness, of acceptance, like I've carved out my own space in this in-between zone. But I'm not fully grounded, and I'm not fully drifting either. It's like my soul moves freely—finding moments of peace wherever it can.

This painting, to me, is about that feeling: the peace of being in flux. Of not needing to be one thing or another. It's about having an energy that belongs to no one place, yet carries traces of both. I see the figure as a kind of ghost or presence, not haunting but existing, floating, radiant in its ambiguity. It's me, being who I am—unfixed, but whole.

The next painting I made came after the green self-portrait (PAINTING#5), and to me, it feels like the next step in that journey—a brighter, more grounded version of the one before. The background in this piece shifts: there's a rich mix of yellow and orange

at the top, and green-teal tones at the bottom, but the yellows push through everywhere. They peek out from underneath like sunlight breaking through the surface. It feels like the painting is glowing from within. It's warmer, more open, and it carries a different kind of energy—a lighter one.

If the green piece was about being suspended in a shadowy in-between space, this one is about stepping into the light. In the green painting, I was a shadow—pixelated and hovering, not fully here or there. But in this painting, that shadow is gone. There's no black figure. Instead, it's like the figure has absorbed light, grown from the darkness, and now exists in a more colorful, freer form. It represents a shift in my own state of mind. I was moving out of a heavier space, emotionally, and finding brightness again—clarity, hope, sunlight.

There's a visual and symbolic transformation in the pixels too. In the green painting, the pixels were small, condensed, mostly staying centered—as if they were holding themselves tightly in one place, trying to hover, trying to stay contained. It was like an internal vibration, full of energy but not sure where to go. In this yellow-orange painting, the pixels begin to expand. They grow larger, they float around more freely, and they're no longer tied to the center.

It's as if, in this painting, the pixels found their release. They discovered their own space. They're not lost—they're moving with intention, like they've finally found a destination. That's how I felt at the time, too. There was more openness in me. More room to breathe. More color coming through. The energy I had was no longer just hovering—it was moving, expanding, becoming visible and self-assured.

To me, this painting is a response to the green one. It's what happens when you let go of the darkness and begin to embrace the light. The yellow symbolizes that—sunlight, warmth, awareness. It's the moment when the energy that was condensed and searching in the green painting finally begins to take shape and scatter, freely, confidently, like it knows what it's doing now.

This piece marks an important turning point in the series. It's a reflection of me starting to feel more grounded and more myself. The freedom in the composition, the brightness in the color, and the movement of the pixels all work together to express that shift—not just in my painting, but in my inner world, too.

The next painting in the series has a teal background, with reddish-pinkish shades melting into it (PAINTING#6). These two colors combine to create an emotional atmosphere that feels more mature than the yellow piece before it. This painting feels like a moment where I think I know who I am and what I'm doing—but deep down, I don't think I actually do. Still, there's a certain confidence on the surface, a momentary belief in stability. The version of me in this piece *looks* like she knows exactly what she's doing. It's like a brief illusion of certainty.

The pixels in this piece are multicolored and more deliberately placed. They're centered, organized—structured in a way that reflects that feeling of confidence, of knowing. But that confidence is fleeting. The background is soft, fluid, almost like it's melting or dissolving—like water slowly flowing away. That vanishing, dissolving effect is essential to this painting. It contrasts with the static lines and ordered placement of the pixels, which seem so sure of themselves, while the background is already starting to fade, to shift, to wash everything away.

That contradiction is what makes this piece meaningful to me. It's about enjoying the moment when I think I'm stable, even though I know that stability is temporary. It's a strange but beautiful tension—between the illusion of control and the reality of change. The painted figure smiles in a way that almost feels playful, as if she's in on the joke. She knows the feeling won't last, but she's enjoying it while it's there.

There's something kind of fun about that. That moment when you feel like you've figured it all out—even if, in the background, things are already starting to shift again. That's the energy of this painting. It holds a kind of quiet joy, even in its impermanence. It's not about pretending everything is perfect, but about holding onto the feeling, the lightness, for just a little while longer before it melts away.

This painting is one of my favorites from the series—it's a portrait of my childhood home, the house where I was born (PAINTING#7). I think about this place all the time. It's hard to describe just how strong my connection is to it. There's something about it that lives so deeply in me. It was more than just a house—it was a whole world. A playground. A sanctuary. A place full of warmth and light and possibility.

The house had a front yard that felt endless, with a front door and a back door that were always open. Because the house was surrounded by walls and a big gate on the outside, the inner space always felt safe, always open. I used to run around—through the front door, out the back, into the yard, back again. The open doors made the whole place feel alive. I played hide-and-seek, climbed trees, sat on the swing, and made that space entirely my own.

There were guava trees I used to climb, and mango trees that stood just next to the

house. In the painting, the leaves coming from the corners represent those mango trees. During storms or in the rainy season, mangoes would fall onto the metal roof, and you could hear the loud thud as they landed. That sound—the storm, the rain, the mangoes falling—was one of the most beautiful sounds of my childhood. The metal roof made everything louder, more present. It was like a song I didn't know I would one day miss so much.

The house was surrounded by nature. There were fruits and flowers everywhere: oranges, mangoes, lemons, grapefruits, coconuts, and other vibrant, exotic plants. Everything bloomed. Everything grew. It was like a secret garden that belonged only to me. Now, the house looks completely different. There are no more trees, no more fruits or flowers—just buildings and structures. But in my memory, it's still full of life. That's the version I painted: the memory, not the current reality.

At night, the sky above the house was full of stars. I remember lying down, just looking up, feeling like the whole universe was close. I tried to capture that feeling too—the way the stars felt within reach, the way the world was both big and intimate all at once.

This painting is a memory, painted the way I remember it, not how it is now. It's full of that childhood energy, that freedom, that sense of wonder. It's the version of home that still lives in me, that shaped me, that continues to ground me, no matter where I am now.

This painting is deeply personal—one of the most special in the entire series (PAINTING#8). It holds a memory I've always cherished quietly, one that's lived in my heart

for as long as I can remember. Finally, being able to see it on a canvas, outside of my mind, feels almost surreal. It's exciting, emotional, and grounding all at once.

The blue tones melting into yellow represent the passing of time—time slipping away, yet glowing, filled with the light and warmth of my childhood. The combination of blue and yellow here reflects the sky and the emotional landscape of my life at that moment.

This memory is from when I was very little, living in my childhood home. Every day, around 1:00 p.m., I would find myself lying in the middle room of our house—a room that felt like the heart of the home. There was a clock mounted on the wall, not centered, but placed slightly to the right. That detail stuck with me, and I painted it exactly that way. I remember lying on the bed in that room, windows open, doors open, sunlight pouring in. But no one else was around.

My mom was probably in the kitchen, busy cooking. My dad would be at work, and my brother was off playing somewhere. I was completely alone in that room, at peace. Every day, I would look at that clock—exactly at 1:00 p.m.—and just lie there quietly, doing nothing but being still, feeling the silence. It became this small, repetitive ritual, almost meditative.

I painted myself standing in the piece, pointing at the clock—reaching out to the viewer, showing them what I was looking at. That clock holds so much quiet power in my memory. I don’t know why I was so drawn to it, but I was.

At the bottom of the painting are white flowers—jui phool—my favorite from that time. They grew by the main gate of our house. Every morning around 6:00 a.m., I would

go to collect them in a little flower basket. If I was early enough, I'd find them freshly fallen, untouched, perfect. But if I came a bit later—around 7:00 or 8:00 a.m.—people might have stepped on them, and they'd be dirty, and that would upset me. So I tried to wake up early just to get there in time. The joy of picking those fresh flowers and their sweet, delicate scent is something I'll never forget.

On the right side of the painting are two pieces of fish steak—hilsha, the national fish of Bangladesh and my favorite. Almost every household eats it—it's part of our lives. I included it because I associate it with that time in my childhood when my mom or grandma would feed it to me by hand. It's not just the taste, but the love, the care, the sense of being nurtured that comes with that memory. I've eaten it on my own so many times since, but back then, it felt different—full of warmth and tenderness.

The small, oval shapes nearby are eggs—another simple but significant detail from that everyday life.

And then, the green leaves represent the henna plant. We had one at our house, and nearly every home had one, too. Women would pluck the leaves, grind them into paste, and create intricate red designs on their hands, especially for weddings. It's such a beautiful tradition. I remember being fascinated by it as a little girl, dreaming about using henna when I got married someday. I think that's something many girls in Bangladesh grow up thinking about—from a very young age, marriage is part of the conversation. Our mothers, aunts, grandmothers—they talk about it often, and we listen, absorb, and imagine.

So as I painted, the memory of the henna came to me naturally. It wanted to be

part of the story unfolding in this piece. It merged seamlessly with the dialogue happening here— the quiet 1:00 p.m. moment, the flowers, the fish, the dreaming girl watching time melt around her. This painting holds all of that—my thoughts, my feelings, my memories, and a vision of myself as a little girl who was simply being, observing, absorbing everything around her.

This piece is my love letter to my childhood self. It holds the kind of love that words often fail to express—a love made of golden afternoons, open doors, the scent of jui phool, and the quiet hush of time gently passing. It's my way of holding that little girl's hand again, of sitting with her at 1:00 p.m. in the middle room, where everything was open and filled with light, yet peacefully still. No one around, just her heartbeat and the ticking clock—a private moment of existence, of simply being.

I painted what she saw, what she felt, what she dreamed of—how her eyes lingered on the clock, how she collected fallen flowers like treasures, how she was fed lovingly by her mother and grandmother, and how she imagined the future, weddings, henna-stained palms, and a life full of meaning.

Every symbol here is for her. The melting blues and yellows are her time, flowing, gentle, unforgettable. The fish, the eggs, the trees, the scent of wet leaves—all fragments of a memory I will never let go. I painted her not as she was, but as she felt—held, free, thoughtful, surrounded by love and light. This is not just a memory. It's a homecoming. A letter I've painted back to myself—to say:

"I see you. I remember you. I love you."

This painting is a dream in red—deep, layered, and pulsing with emotion (PAINTING#9). I explored every possible value of red, from dark wine to soft pinks, warm oranges, and yellow-tinted reds. I used both acrylic and oil, layering and mixing house paint into the blend. The most fun was using oil paint with water instead of traditional mediums, creating an unpredictable texture that felt right for this piece.

Red holds deep cultural meaning for me, especially in the context of Bangladeshi weddings, where it symbolizes transformation and togetherness. But marriage, like life, is filled with both joy and uncertainty, reflected in the balance of vibrant reds and dark, shadowy pixels.

This self-portrait speaks to the energy of new beginnings. Painted during spring, the green dots represent fresh life, pushing through the surface, embodying the sense of growth and change.

On my head, flowers symbolize the dreams and evolving nature of being. The subtle presence of forms leaning in toward one another hints at connection and care, a gesture of quiet understanding. This piece is personal, blending love, hope, and cultural memory. It’s one of my favorites because it’s not just about who I am, but who I dream of becoming. Whether it exists in reality or not, this vision is now alive on the canvas.

This next piece is one of my favorites, even though it came from such a difficult place (PAINTING#10). It’s a dark, monochromatic painting, and it was my way of capturing what I was feeling emotionally at the time. I wasn’t well—mentally or emotionally—and I was going through a lot of ups and downs. The cloudy, storm-like lines at the top of the painting reflect that confusion, the weight of it all, the way my thoughts

felt scrambled and directionless.

Those swirling, cloudy forms are exactly how my mind felt—foggy, overwhelming, stormy. The dark patches throughout the painting represent tears, but not the kind you see. I wasn't crying on the outside, but it felt like my brain, my heart, was crying constantly. These big, melting shapes are like invisible tears falling from a huge, dark, tangled mind. It felt gigantic, like the emotional weight was too big to carry—so I had to paint it on a larger scale than the rest of the self-portraits. I needed a canvas big enough to hold the dimension of that heaviness, to match the enormity of what I was experiencing inside. That's why this painting exceeds the regular size of my self-portrait works. The emotion simply needed more space.

And then there's the chair. This chair is so central to the piece. It's there for the viewer— to witness, to sit with the work. At the time, people around me kept asking why I wasn't painting, what was wrong. But I didn't know how to answer. I couldn't express what I was going through with words, so I painted this instead. The chair is for those people—for anyone who was trying to understand from the outside. It gives them an entrance, an invitation into the inner world they couldn't see.

Whether it's the feeling of internal tears, or the sensation of pain melting inside me, this painting holds it all. It may not look like my external reality, but it captures exactly how I experienced that time. It's deeply personal—a self-portrait not of how I looked, but of how I felt. A portrait of inner storms, of mental fog, and of unspoken grief. The chair is there to say: come closer. Witness what was hidden. This was the truth, even if no one could see it.

This piece is part of the self-portrait series because it captures an inner version of

me— one that's not seen, not visible on the outside, but still very real. It's a portrait of my inner storm. It's a self-portrait of my emotional world.

This painting has a very heavy, melting quality to it—visually and emotionally (PAINTING#11). It's a reflection of the aftermath, of the moment after coming out of a dark phase. It's not completely light, not entirely dark either—just somewhere in between. Like a fleeting moment suspended in time, still dissolving, still soft around the edges.

It's not a clear or defined portrait of me. And that's intentional. In this piece, my presence feels vague—like a suggestion of a person, an outline caught between fading and forming. I wasn't fully back to myself yet when I painted this. It captures that strange emotional state of being halfway present—still carrying the weight of what I'd been through but also starting to let it melt away.

The melting forms in the painting mirror the emotional residue I was still processing. The heaviness hadn't disappeared, but it was shifting, softening. There's a kind of fragility in the image, a delicateness that reflects how uncertain and tender that time was. I wasn't grounded yet—I was still hovering somewhere between the storm I had survived and the clarity I hadn't yet reached. This piece holds that tension—that liminal space of almost becoming. It's the portrait of a self in flux, a self that exists not in certainty, but in transition.

This piece symbolizes Bangladesh (PAINTING#12). It references the national flag—a green field with a red circle—which represents the land, the people, and a shared identity. It's simple but powerful. While the other paintings explore inner emotions and personal narratives, this one grounds the series in place and origin. It belongs in the

body of work as a symbol of where it all comes from.

This piece was inspired by Monet's water lilies and his use of blue and teal tones (PAINTING#13). While the colors nod to his work, the painting reflects Bangladeshi women—their bodies, hands, arms, and lives, all scattered yet interconnected through the lines and shapes. Like my first painting, there's chaos here, but also harmony—harmony in color, form, and rhythm. This balance mirrors the way these women thrive through the difficulties of their lives. They are the heart and soul of this piece. Within the layered abstraction, there are hidden symbols drawn from their lived experiences—a celebration of their beauty, resilience, and the messy poetry of life.

This final piece of the series is rich with symbolism, representing a blend of personal reflection and the broader cultural context (PAINTING#14). The red dot on the forehead evokes the tradition of Bangladeshi women, while the golden field at the bottom symbolizes the ripened rice fields—a quintessential image of the country's landscape. The flowers and fence in the painting further connect it to rural life, with the green stripes representing growth, stability, and the ties that hold communities together.

The face on the right is intentionally vague, almost like a fading self-portrait—suggesting a sense of transition or introspection. The other figure on the opposite side of the fence represents a conversation I had during the creation of this painting, symbolizing the connection between myself and others in this journey. The subtle colors of the piece, with its bright golden tones, bring a sense of lightness and rest, capturing the feeling of coming to a close, feeling a bit tired but content, and at peace with where I am in the process. This piece ties everything together, marking the end of the series with a gentle, reflective tone—feeling both lighthearted and tired, but at the same time, ready

to pause and breathe.

CONCLUSION

I feel like this series really captures a journey of growth, introspection, and transformation. Ending it with a sense of pause and reflection feels like the perfect way to honor all the emotions, ideas, and experiences I've woven into these pieces. It's been a deep and personal process, but now I'm ready to breathe, reflect on everything I've done, and move on to whatever comes next. There's a sense of peace, but also excitement for the new chapters that await. Whatever comes next, I'm ready for it.

Painting—especially abstract painting from the late 1900s—was seen by critics like Clement Greenberg as the highest form of art. It was something made by and for white, male artists from Europe and the U.S. That kind of art was treated like a sacred thing, the center of the art world. Now, I'm using that same kind of painting—but I'm turning it upside down.

Yes, I paint. But I'm not copying what came before. I bring in the traditions of Bangladeshi working-class women—their embroidery, their needlework, the crafts they've done for generations. The Western art world often sees these things as "just craft," not "real" art. But I use abstract painting—the same kind that once excluded them—to show the deep beauty, meaning, and skill in their work.

It's a way to say this: if you can't recognize the value of these women's work on its own terms, maybe you'll pay attention when it's framed within your own art world. I'll speak in your visual language, using the forms you hold in high regard, to reveal what's been overlooked. Then, maybe you'll see the hands of Bangladeshi women—mothers, daughters, grandmothers—quietly stitching their lives, their memories, their truths into every thread.

There are influences from artists like Klimt in my brushstrokes. Yes, you can see the Western art tradition. But what I'm painting is labor—women working, creating, passing down knowledge. It's feminine. It's beautiful. It's powerful. And it's always been art, even if it wasn't treated that way. This isn't me borrowing from their work—it's me honoring it. It's me taking my place in the art world and bringing them with me. It's me saying: *This is art. It always was.*

My paintings exist between visibility and invisibility, between what the art world has praised and what it has ignored. They ask people to look again—more closely—at the hands that have always been making. This work is about respect, about care, and about connection. It's for the women who made beauty out of daily life, for the artists like Bipasha Hayat who opened doors, and for the girl who watched and learned to see art everywhere. Their work is art. My work is because of theirs.

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAINTING#1

PAINTING#2

PAINTING#3

PAINTING#4

PAINTING#5

PAINTING#6

PAINTING#7

PAINTING#8

PAINTING#9

PAINTING#10

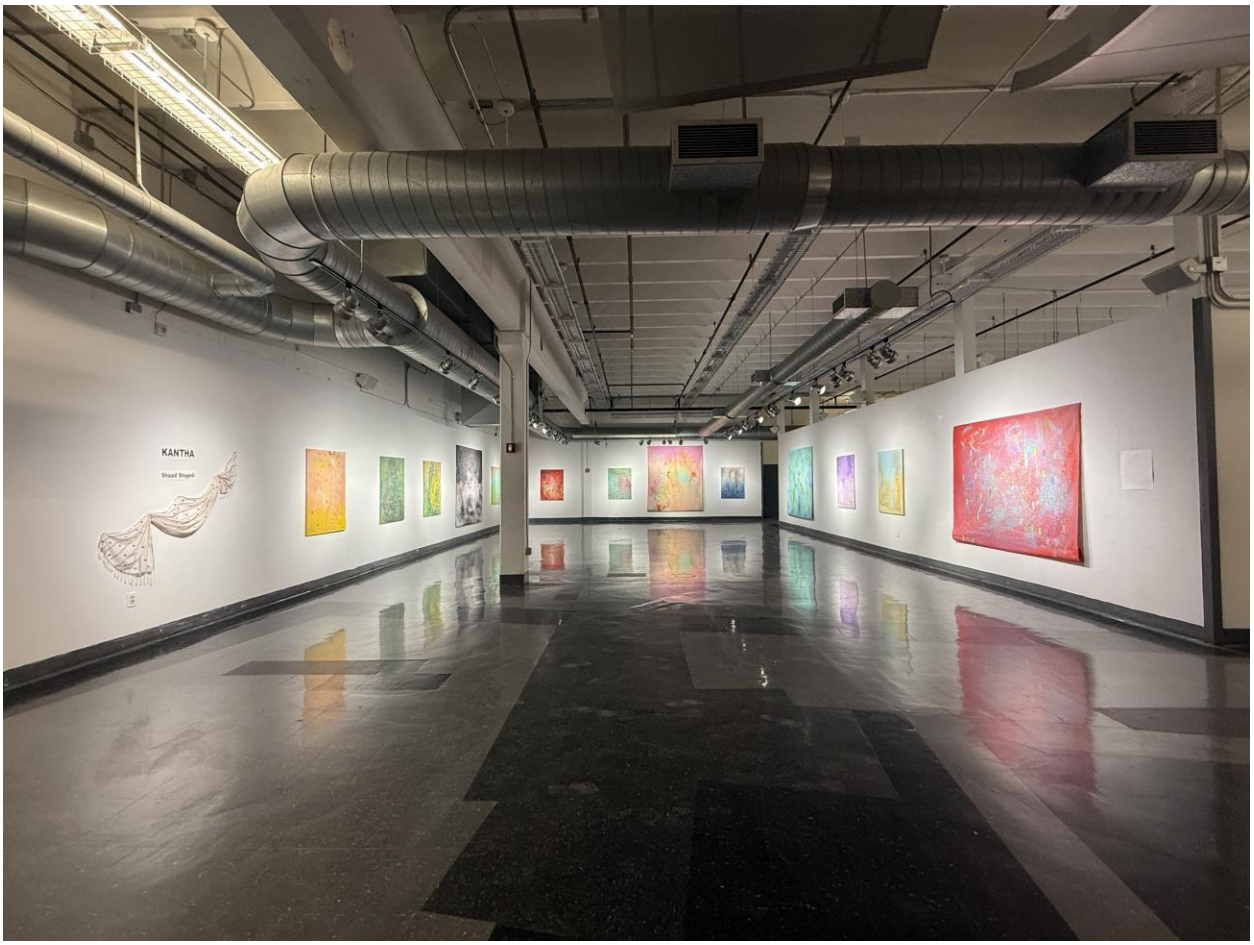
PAINTING#11

PAINTING#12

PAINTING#13

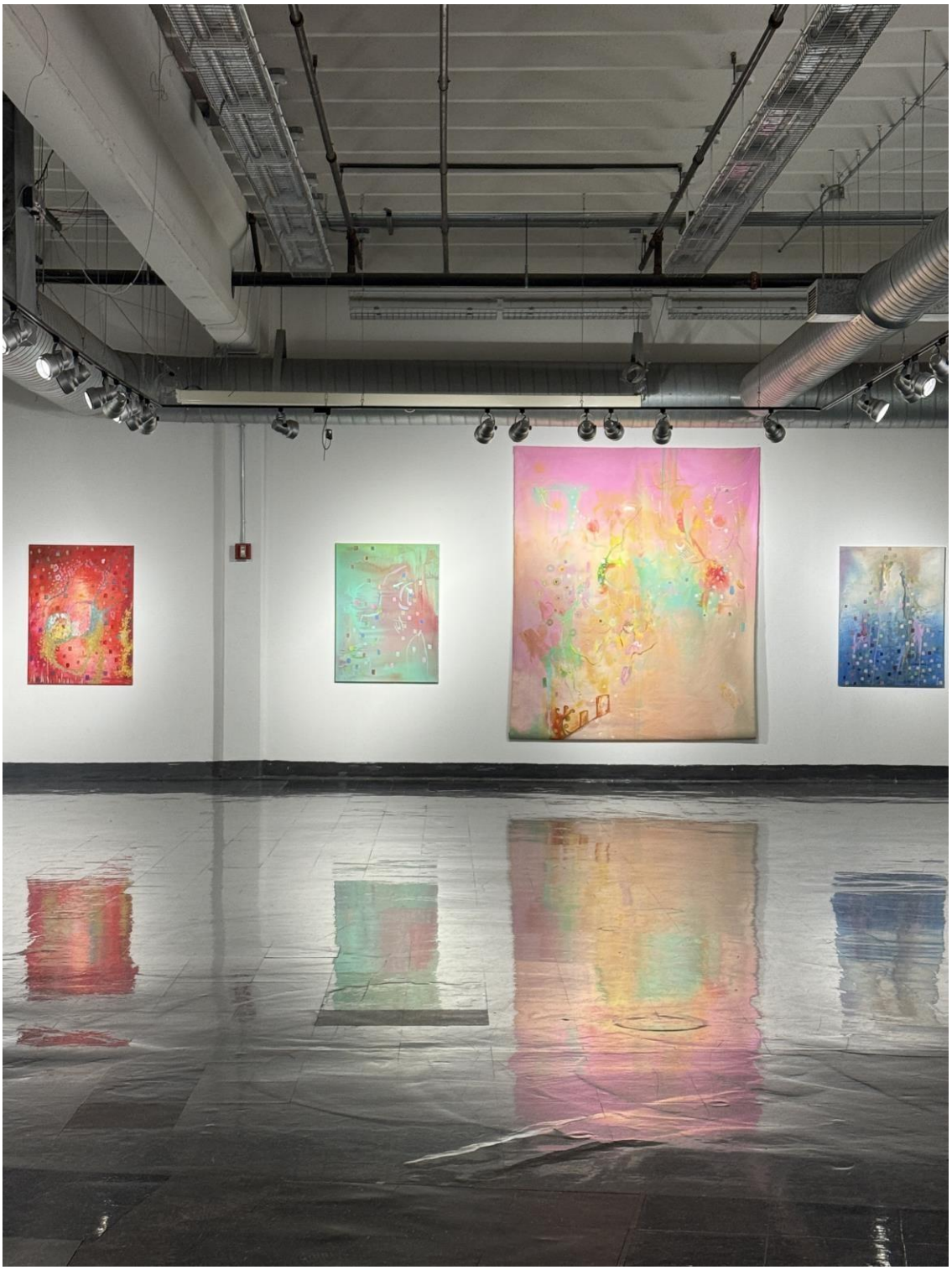
PAINTING#14

Gallery View 1



Gallery View 2

Gallery View 3



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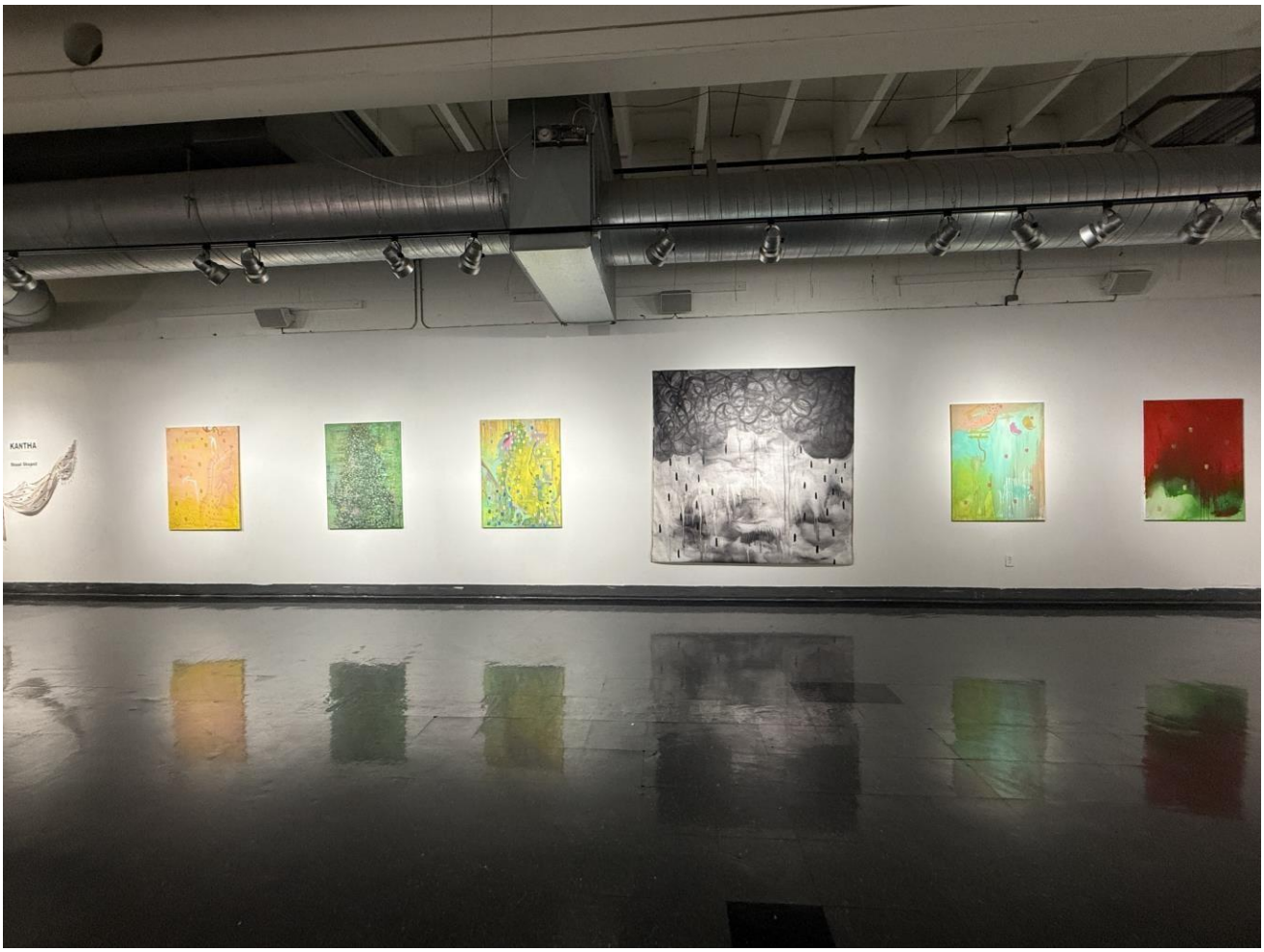

Gallery View 5

ENDNOTES

- Banks discusses how Bangladeshi women artists used traditional crafts and creativity as a means of resilience and activism during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Basu and Basu analyze Gurusaday Dutt's work on Bengal folk art and its role in shaping nationalist sentiments in early 20th-century India.
- Bhuiyan highlights the unique design motifs in Bangladeshi folk art, particularly focusing on Naksha (design) traditions.
- Conard and Horton examine the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and art through a community-based project that empowered marginalized groups.
- This page from House of Wandering Silk outlines the Nakshi Kantha embroidery process and profiles the women artisans behind it.
- Islam presents socioeconomic insights into the Nakshi Kantha tradition in Khulna, noting how it is evolving as a livelihood for rural women.
- Khan explores how the Hindu-origin Alpana art form is preserved and celebrated in a Muslim-majority village, reflecting interfaith cultural continuity.
- KORISSA introduces artisans behind their handmade crafts, emphasizing sustainable production and community impact.
- Saleh and Sultana evaluate how craft-based work contributes to the economic empowerment of rural Bangladeshi women.
- Selim reflects on how traditional Bangladeshi art has adapted in the face of globalization while searching for a renewed cultural identity.
- Sharmin and Ahmad offer a case study of traditional pottery-making villages, examining both craft processes and socioeconomic conditions.
- Siddiqui discusses the opportunities and challenges facing tribal craftspeople in Bangladesh, especially in preserving their artistic heritage.
- Willem documents the life and work of Surayia Rahman, a celebrated artist known for revitalizing traditional embroidery in Bangladesh.

- Zimmerman et al. address global labor exploitation, with implications for craft industries and the rights of artisans in developing nations.

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