



One Piece by Najmun Nahar Keya: The Spell Song

Words by Sarah Burney

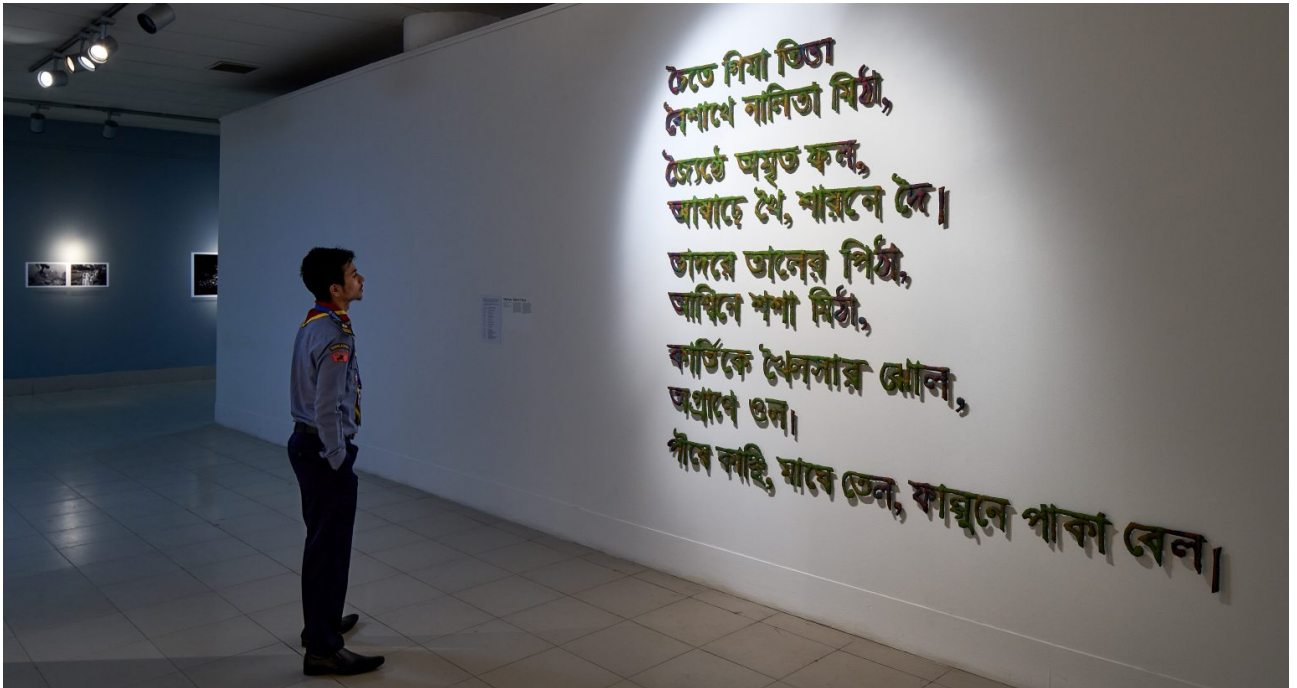


Tags: **One Piece By**



A wall of soft words. Bangla script as sculpture, with pillow-like volume and skin of shimmering sari fabric. The formal beauty of written Bangla catches the eye of the uninitiated. The title, *The Spell Song*, heightens the mystery of the text. For Bangla speakers the softness will transcend the physical to the linguistic. The phrases on the wall are Bangla folk proverbs – familiar and, for many, familial. The title, kindling reflections on the magic of language; the mysterious immortality of folklore.

Bangladeshi artist Najmun Nahar Keya debuted this installation at the 2020 Dhaka Arts Summit (DAS), a biennale exhibition based in Dhaka, Bangladesh that has very quickly become a critically significant event on the international art calendar. A text-based artwork that is indecipherable to foreigners is a bold choice for the exhibition that routinely draws the largest foreign crowd to Bangladesh. Keya's decision however, was well rewarded. *The Spell Song* was roundly lauded by DAS attendees and the art industry press. *Kajal* connected with the artist to learn about the origin, creation and reception of this work.



Najmun Nahar Keya, *The Spell Song*, 2020, Tangail Sari, cotton, thread, and pins, Dimensions variable.
Photograph by Randhir Singh.

Kajal: To begin, can you explain your title, *The Spell Song*. Are you using the word “spell” magically or linguistically?

Keya: It's a magic spell; magic that exists for a long time. I am happy to revive the magic of spells and play with them.

So what are these “magic spells” you are casting? Can you tell me more about the phrases in your installation?

Bangla, my national language, has a glorious and rich literature tradition. This includes folk literature, which is the oral version of literature, created by the communities who are illiterate and passed down orally from generation to generation. Later it becomes a collective product, which assumes the traditions, emotions, thoughts and values of life. It includes different types of epics, dramas, ballads, proverbs, folk tales, poetry etc. Even today, though it is not written down, it exists in different forms in the local community.

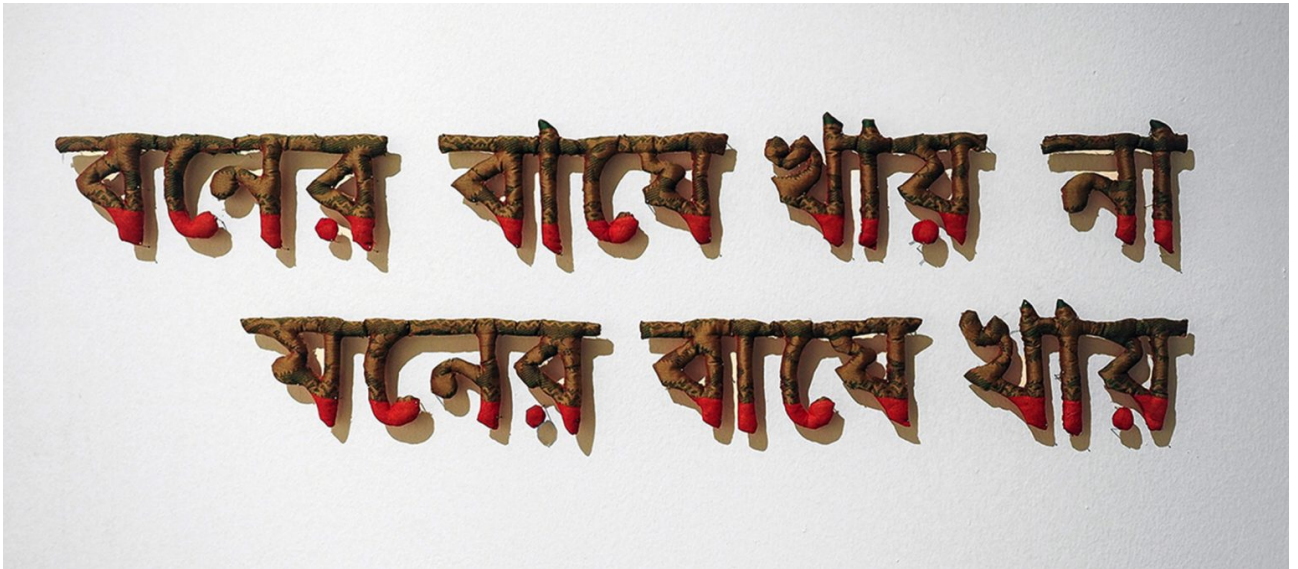
For this project I have chosen some very common and popular Bangla folk sayings, including the sayings of Khona. Khona was a woman living in the Indian subcontinent around 800 to 1200 AD. She was an astronomer and her knowledge about astronomy, the crops, and the harvests proved to be so valuable that she became a member of the Royal Court and was often called on by King Bikram Aditya for solutions. She always gave solutions in the way of a poem. They are about everyday life, harvests, and the seasons and they became very popular. The story is that her father-in-law, who was also a member of the court, became so jealous of her popularity that he ordered his son to cut out her tongue. He did and she died but her sayings stayed popular. There are so many sayings of Khona, “Khonar Bochon”.

That's quite an ending. Is it a warning to women or jealous men? Is it still a celebrated story?



were you thinking of them as a group or individual texts?

I have chosen the proverbs that my mom and grandmother used to use everyday. Not all of them are Khona's. A few are from her and others are common sayings whose writers are unknown. Most of the sayings are about seasons of Bangladesh, harvest, weather, friendship, and relationships. I didn't pick a particular topic, I have chosen to work with individual texts.



A detail from *The Spell Song*. Translation: Not the tiger of the jungle should ye fear, but the one roaming in your mind. Translations by Tariq Mohsen. All images by the artist or her husband, Promotesh Das Pulak, unless noted otherwise.

How did you come to choose proverbs as your subject?

I'm interested in texts and have made artwork with words in different forms since 2009.

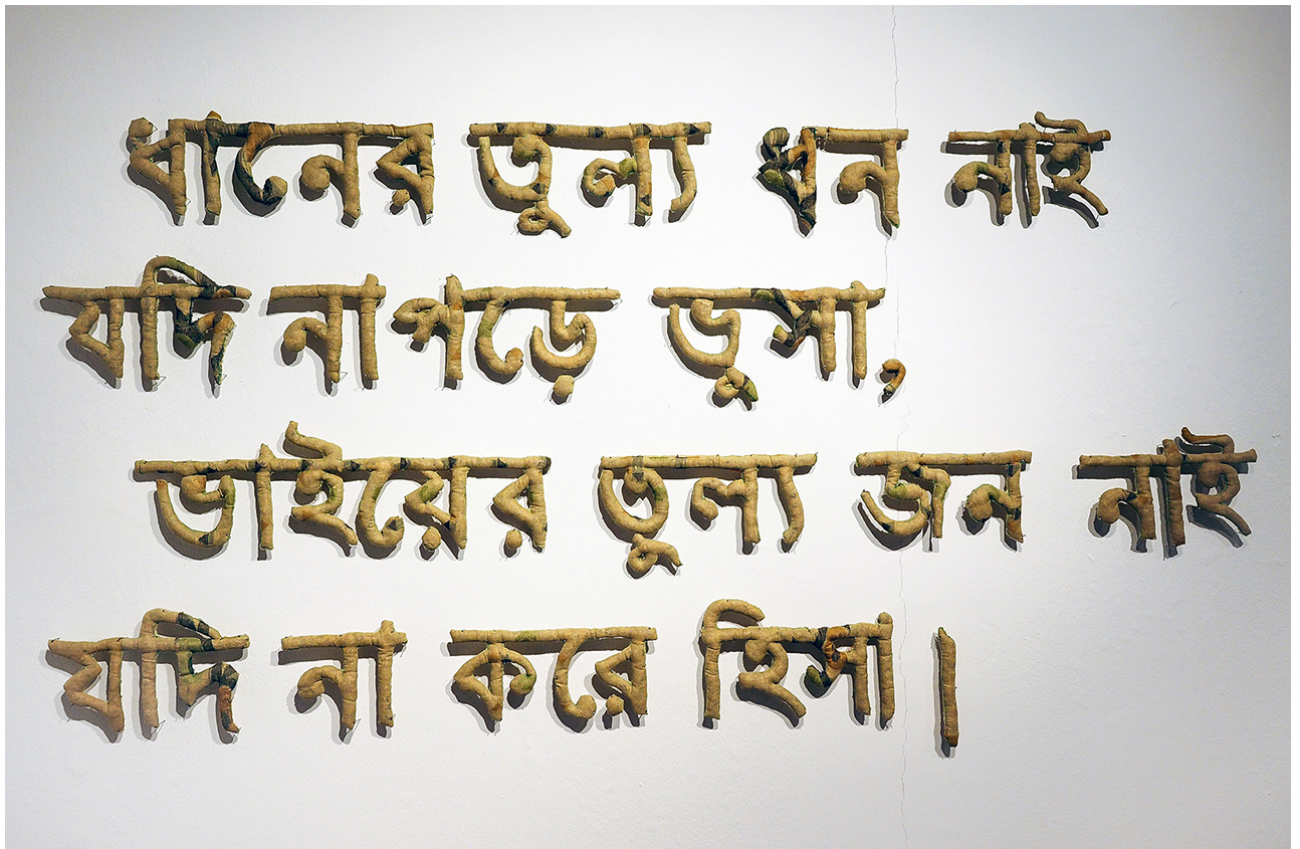
My mother had just passed away when I was shortlisted for the Samdani Art Award at the DAS. I was going through her things and found her collection of wall hangings – small pieces of cloth with sayings stitched on them. Women typically make them in their free time in a form of quilt called Nakshi Kantha; they stitch images of the different subjects and sometimes stitch sayings on the cloth. It is a very common practice in villages. My mom had very small pieces and I used to see them hanging on the wall whenever I visited.

I began thinking about a project with the women from our village and the sayings they use. My primary idea was to give them some cloth and thread and let them do what they want. But as I continued to think about the idea, I realized that there were certain sayings that my mother used to say all the time. Then I began researching common sayings of Bangladesh and I found that we have thousands of sayings all over the country. Different areas have their own sayings in their own dialect, not only in Bangladesh but across the Indian subcontinent. I decided to pick the most common sayings and the ones that are used all over Bangladesh.



This is actually my second soft sculpture installation. This work is the continuation of my earlier project *Minute Words* from 2018. I have chosen very common words that have powerful universal connotations but retain a special value in the current socio-political context of my country. I used to make small dolls in my childhood using spare pieces of cloth and cotton that I had collected from the tailor. I found the relation between the dolls and the words as my childhood playthings to raise questions about the power of the words. My idea was to pick some popular words and make doll-like sculptures. I was planning to make many but I ended up only making “autocracy” and “democracy” for the show.

I was shortlisted for DAS soon after I made these soft sculptures. I think this is one of the reasons that the previous project influenced me to create *The Spell Song* in three-dimension.



A detail from *The Spell Song*. Translation: There is nothing more valuable than rice unless marred by soot,
There is nothing more valuable than a brother unless marred by jealousy.

Does remaking these words in this doll making process rob them of their power? Does it make them play things?

For *Minute Words* my intention was to make the words more playful and compare its actual value in the current political context. Precisely, I like the sentence you have used in your question “rob them of their



Not all by myself. I had a big team. I decided to work with the community. My five sisters and the women from my village all worked with me. I paid them of course. I prepared the words for them, cutting them out of cloth, then one of my sisters sewed it roughly with a machine, and then we gave it to the other women – they stuffed it with cotton and then we stitched all the edges by hand. It took us almost 3 and a half months to complete the project *The Spell Song*.

Is there a significance to the different materials and colors?

Yes. The idea to make them in this material came at the same time as I was researching the sayings. My home town, Tangail, is famous for saris, very, very, beautiful, thin cotton, handwoven saris and I knew that I had to use that local material with the local saying. I went to the weaver's house and picked the materials and colors that went with each saying; green for the one about seasons, yellow for the harvest, blue for the monsoon.

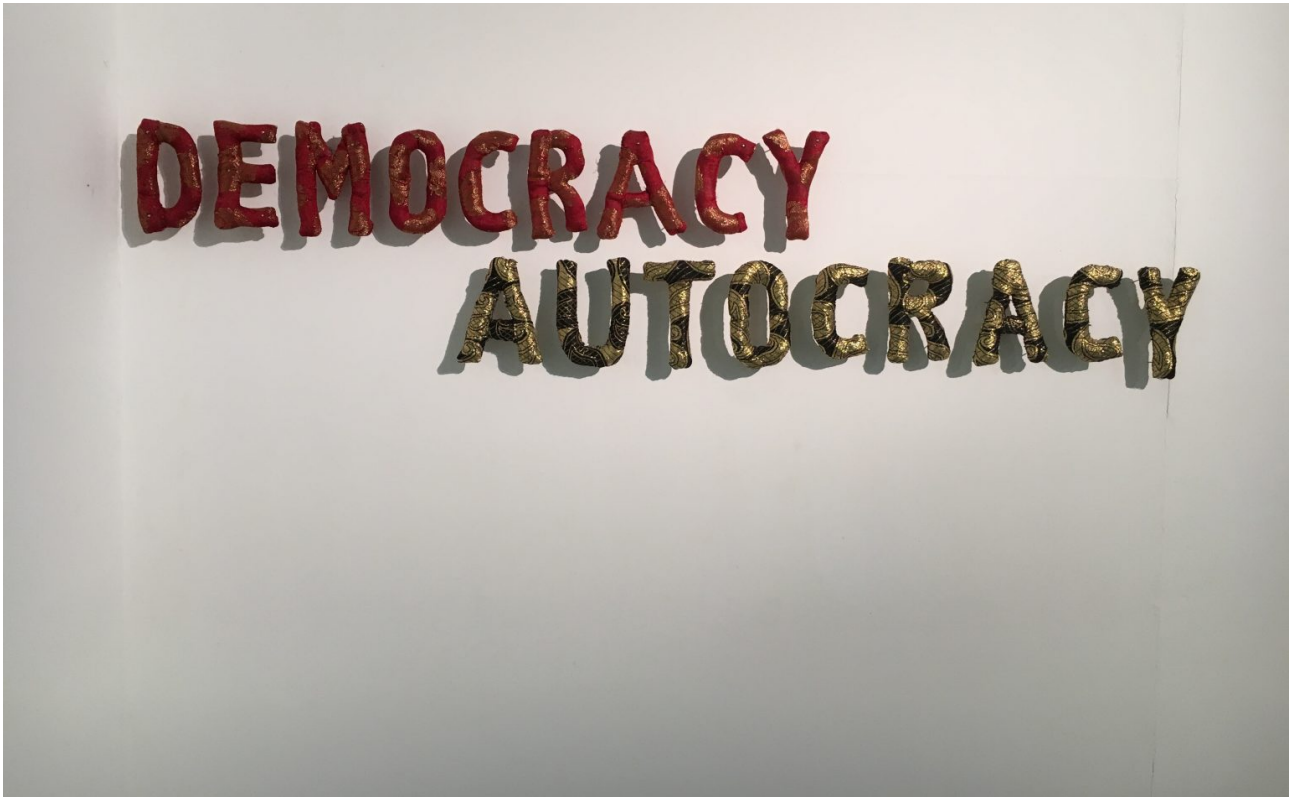
In making this work, you are joining a tradition of contemporary artists creating text sculptures. Tracey Emin, Glenn Ligon, Nari Ward, and Robert Indiana come to mind immediately. Yet each of these artists uses an industrial fabrication process to create their work. You used a very simple, traditional craft. Art history is notorious for not respecting craft processes – did that worry you? Especially when producing a piece for a major international event like DAS. Are you intentionally rejecting high art processes?

I didn't think very much during the development of the project; it was a spontaneous process. It just came naturally, step by step. While developing the concept or process or choosing the materials, I never compared my work with other artists' work or its value.

Continuing in this line of thought: DAS brings all the international curators, art writers, museum directors, and collectors to Dhaka. I could imagine that many artists use the opportunity to exhibit work that engages more directly with the international art world yet you made something so hyper local – something that the local audience would appreciate the most – that's a refreshing and bold choice.

I am not worried about how everyone considers my work, as art forms or not, or something else. I just went through the research and wanted to connect something that related to me, related to my roots and of course my memories.

I didn't think much about the viewer's identity, I just wanted to make a work that I was enjoying developing. I was changing and reforming the idea continuously. Of course, I did put translations for the international viewers.



Najmun Nahar Keya, *Minute Words*, 2018, Sari, cotton, thread, and pins, Dimensions variable.

What was the reaction to this installation? Anything that surprised you?

I think most of the viewers loved it. Those who didn't understand the words liked the shape and form, also the color and patterns of the fabrics. Everyone came and asked me about it. Many foreign visitors told me "Oh! we have a similar kind of saying in our country.". Some people actually thought it was made of metal or something else, but it's very fragile, very soft and fluffy – that surprised many visitors.

Actually when I initially saw the images online I thought they were metal too. The softness is very surprising and...enticing. Just like a doll. Did people try to touch the work?

Yes! Everyday people came and they wanted to touch the sculpture. They wanted to see and feel what it's made of. It's installed with pins you know, just pins pushed into the edge of the letter and into the wall. I had to carry a hammer and pins all the time in my bag and whenever I went to DAS I had to fix some parts of the sculpture. Every morning we would go there and fix it – every day there were maybe two or three pins that had fallen. And then the selfie crazy people! Some of them smashed the pins into the wall! We don't have the practice of visiting galleries or museums here, so many people don't know that you must be careful with the work, and a lot of people came to DAS and you just couldn't control them.

Well, you know even in New York, where there's a very big culture of visiting galleries and museums people still damage artwork when taking selfies! Have you made any more soft words since *The Spell Song*, or are you planning to make more?



or 70 texts and created 15 sentences but exhibited only nine at the DAS. I have already made plans to visit the countryside, collect local sayings and phrases of local dialect and create the work by using local fabrics; such as jamdani from Narayanganj, silk and muslin from Rajshahi, benaroshi and katan from Mirpur, Dhaka, monipuri cotton from Sylhet etc.



A detail from *The Spell Song*

You're making a soft sculpture anthology! This body of work really celebrates women's labor, both in its production, by you, your sisters, and the women in your community, and in the work we do to pass traditions and knowledge, both oral and textile in this instance, down to the next generation. Do you see it as a feminist work?

I don't want to put it in a boundary, is it feminine or not. Actually my husband, brother and nephews are involved in this work in different ways as well and most of the weavers are male. I have never tried to signify it in any particular context.



I think both. The verses are, and the way folk literature lives on is magic. Those sayings are still meaningful, true and sometimes vital for us. The spells are connected to our lives and history. I am researching more and more magic spells, verses that belong to my homeland but sometimes have universal meaning.

The community behind the production of The Spell Song:







