

## Sanchita Islam: Art as a Cure

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(Sanchita Islam, 1973-)

Born in Manchester in 1973 of Bangladeshi parents (with some mixed lineage), Sanchita Islam is an artist, a writer, a filmmaker and a composer. Her output deals with a variety of themes and she works across media. She has been running the organisation Pigment Explosion for almost twenty years now, focusing on international art projects that stem from a distinctive work ethic supported by a well-articulated outreach plan; working with marginalised individuals, she specialises in film, art, photography and 30-foot-long scroll projects where participants work collectively on a single piece of work. Islam has so far published

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ten books, seven plays, produced fifteen films, participated in over one hundred group and solo exhibitions of her art, while screening her films in capital cities such as London, Dhaka, New York and Kuala Lumpur, just to mention a few. She remains deeply connected to Bangladesh and has worked extensively in the Southeast Asian region as well as in Brick Lane, London, home to the Sylheti community; yet despite her Bangladeshi roots, she remains a nomad, drifting from city to city, not really having a place to call home. She is drawn to people on the periphery, individuals who could be perceived as on the outside looking in, something that resonates with her.

A brief analysis of her first works will be followed by an interview with the artist, delving into her latest output. Among other issues, it will be emphasised how Sanchita Islam has forcefully succeeded in exploring the palliative impact art has on the brain, and how art can be regarded as a powerful tool to deal with mental health issues and excavate personal and collective traumas.

*From Briarwood to Barisal to Brick Lane*, her 2002 collection of poems and prose narratives written in collaboration with several diasporic Bangladeshi authors, can provide outstanding examples of the writer's intention to unsettle deeply-ingrained stereotypes, thus promoting a dynamic, globe-straddling network of communication that undermines the very concepts of *centre* and *periphery*, the one and the Other. The volume and the film of the same title connected with it<sup>2</sup> stem from a pivotal question: where is home?; the answer is provided by several Bangladeshi writers, scattered in three different corners of the world: Briarwood (New York Banglatown), Barisal (a district in Bangladesh), and London Brick Lane. The customary sense of alienation and isolation experienced by immigrants and featured in much diasporic literature is largely absent from the anthology: conversely, by alternating voices and points of observation, readers are prompted to appreciate the unexpected correspondences, uncovered by the narrators, between distant lands, the glimpses of one country in the description of another. Sanchita Islam seems to foster a new meaning for the word *globalization* which, far from indicating the annihilation of one's native culture and identity, implies the construction of a fruitful network of global communication.

The writer employs a similar technique when she addresses the subject of religion. *Connecting Faith*, a 42-minute-movie released in 2004,<sup>3</sup> aims at redressing the biased and derogatory perceptions of Islam, which have multiplied following the attack at the World Trade Center in 2001. The three narrators, whose voices are once again intertwined, express their views on religion from different parts of the world: Aveen lives in Dhaka, Nurul in London and Melati in Kuala Lumpur. The stereotypical expectations of western viewers are immediately broken when Bangladeshi Aveen, introduced as a moderate Muslim, appears on screen wearing

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/92>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/88>.

Western clothes, and describes herself as a student in business administration coming from a liberal family that always supported her aspiration to pursue a career (nothing of the typified Islamic girl who can only dream of an education). In Nurul's speech the negative role of the media is strongly highlighted; indeed, the young man invites the viewers to formulate their own opinions based on first-hand information, without relying on clichés. The most remarkable statements, however, are uttered by Melati, whose inspiring words on preconceptions and religion are tightly linked with the necessity to *educate* the world about multiculturalism, in order to avoid conflicts and exercise mutual respect.

Another pivotal aspect of Islam's output is the idea that art can cure, thus acting as a treatment. Islam has devoted much time, energy and efforts to projects aiming at the improvement and revitalisation of society. In her 2004 volume entitled *Old Meets Young*,<sup>4</sup> for example, she turns her camera, her drawing pencils and the written page into a way of easing and recomposing the fragile and at times unbalanced minds of the elderly who gather at "St. Hilda's Bengali Day Centre" off Bethnal Green Road, London. By encouraging them to speak about their past experiences, by making them the protagonists of narratives and the focus of her pictures, she succeeds (albeit, at times, only temporarily) in drawing them away from the margins and in paving their troublesome way out of depression. Something similar can be found in *Hidden*,<sup>5</sup> her 2005 book dealing with domestic abuse and featuring Asian women in the East-end of London who managed to move forward, despite the painful experiences they had to grapple with. The volume has the effect of empowering both the narrators and the readers who, from the very beginning, understand Sanchita Islam's message: life can start afresh.

One cannot refrain from wishing Sanchita Islam a much longer and even more fruitful career. The contribution to humankind she has offered so far is invaluable. As the following interview will demonstrate, through her art she has addressed pivotal issues in modern-day society, such as marginalisation, global migration, homelessness, physical and mental decline, and the acknowledgement of individual and collective trauma. The interview will also focus on her engagement with the victims of acid attacks in India, as well as exploring the experience of motherhood from the point of view of somebody who suffers from psychosis, thus showing that survival strategies can be devised. Through her multi-faceted art (painting, writing, drawing, shooting films, taking pictures, and, more recently, even composing music), she has provided herself with powerful tools to carve her way out of trauma, and she has shared them with an ever-increasing audience. Acting as a personal and communal healer, she has dressed

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/77>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/83>.

wounds and restored dreams and aspirations, showing that there is still hope for a brighter future.

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*Why did you decide to start a book publication connected with Pigment Explosion? Can you briefly talk about The Cloud Catcher,<sup>6</sup> its first publication? In this beautifully crafted volume, you seem to explore the theme of loneliness, fear and longing to belong, while craving to be released from the shackles of the mind; can you expand on that?*

I thought that branching out into book publication would be a good development for Pigment Explosion; *The Cloud Catcher* is a niche book, non-commercial, and Pigment Explosion is a non-profit arts organisation. The main focus has always been the integrity of the art projects I conceive and decide to embark upon. Some of my books are limited edition prints with handmade paper made in Bangladesh creating a unique object, which is vital for me. It is only available at two bookstores, Brick Lane bookshop in London and Silverfish in Kuala Lumpur, or directly from the author.

The text came to me on the train to Devon and the character Sophie is a cloud catcher. She lives in the sky and catches clouds. Certainly she is a solitary character, roaming and searching and trying to escape the clutches of Fred, who represents the darkness that inhabits all of us.

The drawing and illustrations were completed at airports, on the bus, on trains, on the tube, and when I was bored at dinner parties. I was always carrying my book and pens with me and drawing assiduously; drawing became an escape from the real world; creating these fantasy landscapes was an attempt to temporarily inhabit another utopian universe that only consisted of trees, mountains, the sky, the sun, the moon, rocks, flowers and Sophie.

*In Eternal Pollution of a Dented Mind you continue to explore the tricks and labyrinths of the human mind. Can you tell us more about this collection of poems? Can you tell us of Sophia, Mia and Fred, its protagonists?*

*Eternal Pollution of a Dented Mind* (Chipmunka Publishing, 2007) was written when my mind was unravelling and I was heading for psychosis in 2009. I did not know this at the time, but my life was becoming increasingly chaotic and fraught; sometimes I would be up all night painting and writing or impetuously get on my bike in the middle of the night and go cycling in London to meet someone. Or I simply wanted to cycle and feel alone in the city. It was a dangerous time and the poems reflect my fractured mental state. And, yes, many of the poems are dark and deal with suicidal ideation, rejection, abuse, sexual objectification and

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/35>.

solitude. The mind is a maze and it is a mission of mine to decipher the mysteries within it through writing, art, music and film. The second volume of poems in this series was published last year in *Dented* (Chipmunka Publishing, 2017). Again it was written between 2007 and 2009, a very intense and turbulent period in my life. *Dented* deals with similar themes of love, loss, fame, death, abuse, family, estrangement and mental health. My publisher Jason Pegler contacted me out of the blue and agreed to publish the second volume immediately saying: “Your new poetry is fantastic. It’s so visual, matter of fact, erudite, gripping and existential.” Personally I believe the poems deal with subjects that matter. The strongest poems are directly about the mind or based on random encounters with strangers. In the foreword I write, “We owe it to our wellbeing to try to fathom the idiosyncrasies and strangeness of our own unique mental landscape.”

Sophie, Mia and Fred are recurrent in my work; Sophie is the dreamer, Mia the diva and Fred the devil. I would say I am split between Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo is the god of truth and Dionysus the god of debauchery. Sophie always pulls me back to the dream world, the ethereal, the imaginary, but insalubrious forces within can lead to a self-destructive drive (Mia and Fred). Yet, if you harness these *daimonic* tendencies it can inform your creativity. I cannot help but gravitate towards dangerous situations, but if I survive and come out the other side then my work is enriched and energised by insights only derived by pushing yourself to the periphery of existence. And it is only by teetering perilously on the edge that you can get to the ineluctable truth (although some would say there is no truth – it is this, which I am pursuing in my work). Much of my work would not be possible if I lived a safe, cosy, myopic existence, which I could if I chose to. Something within rejects such a notion virulently. Life is suffering. Making art and writing is arduous and unrelenting; it is not pleasurable, yet it is certainly a compulsion and all I know. And if you get truly immersed in the process there is nothing like it. The experience is incomparable.

Another feature of my work is painting and drawing marginalised people; currently I have been documenting the problem of global homelessness through photography, painting, drawing and writing. I was recently in New Delhi and met two acid attack victims; I was very touched and moved by their story, which was horrendous. I promised I would draw and paint them both if it helped to spread awareness and highlighted their *Stop Acid Attack* campaign. I will always be compelled to comment about such issues, and being a blogger for the Huffington Post is a great platform to express my views about politics, women’s issues and social injustice. I also illustrate all my articles with my own artwork. I will be sure to write about these two remarkable women in India.

*You are the proud mother of two outstanding children. What impact has motherhood had on your mind?*

I fell pregnant in February 2010, after my second psychotic episode in January 2010, and I suffered prenatal depression in the third month of both my pregnancies and post-partum psychosis after both my children were born. It was terrifying having visions to harm them and the early years when I was breastfeeding were also tough because I suffered D-mer and dysphoria each time my children latched onto the breast. As a result of these experiences I wrote the book *Schizophrenics Can Be Good Mothers Too*<sup>7</sup> (Muswell Hill Press, 2015) under the pseudonym Q.S. Lam. It is perhaps my most important and authentic work. Written in the first person the book comprises a series of essays that deal with mental health and issues related to psychosis and the shock/beauty/loneliness of motherhood. The book wrote itself and the writing flowed like an errant river. Poems, too, came very fast, often related to madness – I have written scores to date. 2014 was the year that writing was all I wanted to do because I felt so passionately and strongly about the subject of mental health. Usually all my art forms compete with one another for attention, but writing the book became all-consuming while also dealing with maternal mental illness, a new-born and a 3-year-old. When my children were sleeping, writing was the only activity my brain had space for. Although as I breastfed them I would draw both my children to ward off the horrifying visions that refused to abate. Since I elected to eschew medication, it was writing and art that helped me get through this most difficult of times.

*You have recently resumed a musical career. Can you tell us more about it?*

2016 is when I started to make music again after a 33-year break; I have now completed over thirty albums, nearly 400 pieces of music, all composed on my Apple MacBook Pro computer using Logic software and a AKAI MPK mini keyboard, Alesis keyboard and a MiniNova synthesiser. I have started playing the piano again and singing, too. I am also learning to play the electric guitar. So far, I have performed in Singapore, Berlin, Malaysia, London and Brussels. I was also invited to perform in Moscow and St. Petersburg but had to decline the invitation due to exhaustion. Collaborating with various musicians has been both exciting and energising. Music has a palliative impact on my brain; interestingly, after the psychosis I could not listen to electronic music, only classical. For music to re-enter my life again has been like a gift and it feels like the songs and compositions literally fall out of the sky. It all started after I recalled memories of being sexually abused. I cannot be sure of the veracity of the memories because the abuse occurred decades ago. It is only after I recalled the abuse that the music ensued

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jun/16/sanchita-islam-mothers-mental-illness-visions-silence-lack-help>.

and now it gushes out like the sea. I also wrote a 96,000-word novel in three weeks in March 2017, when the abuse came out and my alleged perpetrator was confronted. In the book the female protagonist is named Edward and Sublime is the mysterious male stranger who appears and takes Edward back in time. During my last trip to Bangladesh, funded by an Artist International Development Fund grant, I did some research about my heritage and learnt that my mother most definitely has Burmese ancestry in her lineage because of the proximity of her home district to Burma and the facial features of my relations on my maternal side. I also discovered that during colonial times it was commonplace for white colonialists to engage in sexual relations with pretty Burmese girls. My son was born with blue eyes, which would only be possible if I had Caucasian lineage in my family and this newly discovered information became the basis of my novel. How did white blood seep into my ancestry? It was probably through sexual violence of some sort, possibly a powerful white man raping his Burmese maid.

The premise that sexual abuse is generational is a strong theme in the narrative. And so in the book we see how the men abuse their female partners and so it continues into present day. I select music that I have composed that readers can listen to either while reading or separately. The artwork, also, reinforces themes and ideas in the text.

The most powerful scene is the reenactment of the war between East and West Pakistan in 1971. Three million died in that war and many women were raped. Edward and Sublime travel back to 1971 and participate in the conflict. Edward, who is a woman, indulges in extreme violence, enacting revenge punishing soldiers who have raped women and children in the most gruesome fashion. It is both liberating and ghastly because when does the cycle of violence end? This is the final scene of the book, Edward staggers off, covered in blood, but is still not satiated and will not stop killing until every rapist is eliminated. Of course this is impossible to achieve. In the end, Edward goes mad and no justice is achieved, the only truth being that violence is ineffectual and erodes the soul and society.

I have never written a book so fast, but it goes back and forth in time, back to my ancestors, tracing rape and abuse in my lineage, which seeps into Burma and Bangladesh and present day. Conceptually, the book must be read in digital format only; music and art are intrinsic to the text.

May I add that I have been profoundly impacted by the current Rohingya crisis, reading about their stories of systematic rape, persecution and displacement forced me to respond by creating artwork using newspaper images as points of reference. I feel such images of suffering that proliferate the media have become a form of pornography and I want to imbue the subjects in these photos with a dignity by reinterpreting them. Interestingly, my book features a maid who is of Rohingya descent, rejected by society when she falls pregnant after being raped by her white colonial master; she is forced to flee Burma and returns to

Bangladesh where she is also not welcomed and gives birth to a blue eyed son. The parallels in my book and what is going on right now in the world are significant. At the end of May I am going to Bangladesh, supported by Action Aid, to visit the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar to photograph, document and sketch the women and girls that I will be working with. It will be the most important work of my career to date. It's a calling to go.

Being able to make music is the strangest most life-changing event to happen to me. Many of my songs and compositions deal with mental pain; abuse and the sounds I make with my voice can sometimes sound like a haunted mantra.

I believe that I am able to make music, write and paint because all these art forms involve patterns and layering. Music is layers of sound, writing is layers of words arranged in patterns, a painting is achieved with hundreds of brush strokes, a drawing consists of hundreds of marks, and all these marks and strokes are arranged in patterns that suck the viewer into another world. My mind is hard wired to look for patterns and during my psychosis when I was trapped in a parallel psychotic world I was trying to decipher a code, to find all the answers to a myriad of questions that tied my mind into a web of tight knots. I thought I was on a mission, the chosen one, of course it was all part of the psychotic narrative, but still I see patterns everywhere, especially numeric ones. Again patterns and numbers have become a feature of my work, both in my writing and art. I often make series of works, for example my *1000 Postcards* series<sup>8</sup> is a close collaboration with my children; so far I have completed 400 with them. They make the squiggles then I transform their marks into weird landscapes with Lego figures. I have also made scrolls with my sons; part of my *War on a Scroll* series features their work. In these scrolls I ask the fundamental question: how do little boys go from playing with Lego and acting out war games to actually wielding machetes and waging real warfare? This is why their marks are so precious to me; they symbolise a time of male innocence that is usurped when the boy becomes a man.

Dr. Eric Thys, a psychiatrist and colleague in Brussels, told me that psychosis is often the result of some deep childhood trauma; it is interesting that I started to draw in earnest at age three. My drawing then was fanatical, almost ritualistic. It was as if my brain turned to art to heal itself from childhood trauma, which started after the sudden death of my father when I was eight months old.

Balancing all these art forms – the art, the writing, the filmmaking, and now music, as well as being a mother – is a feat. Often the children take up enormous swathes of time and energy. But then my philosophy is to do a little each day, and before you know it I have taken my pen for a stroll around the universe. It is my *scrolls* that I think are my most important works visually, they are each 30-foot

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/113>.



long, some have taken months to complete, others years.<sup>9</sup> I have created at least ten or twelve so far. They also include text that is written in handwriting so small it is barely decipherable to the human eye. Text features in my art and spoken word, heavily in my music. As a poet, song writing comes very naturally. I seldom write down the lyrics, the songs come fully formed in my head, just as my poems do.

*I noticed that Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur, in particular, are often featured in your work. What is your bond, your special connection, with them?*

My link with Malaysia goes way back to when I was at film school and finding it very hard to fit in; I was facing bullying from other students because many could not understand why I had been given a full Channel 4 scholarship when I had no prior experience making films. However, one student did have faith in me; his name was Abdul Razak Mohaideen. He was the Assistant Director for my final M.A. film, *Weak Bladder*.<sup>10</sup> I was facing mutiny on the set, but Razak stood by me and this loyalty cemented our friendship. He is based in Malaysia and has made over forty feature films to date. He inspired me to continue to make films, even though the odds were stacked against me. It was Carl Reuter, former British Council director in Bangladesh, who put me in contact with the British Council in Malaysia. Then my film *Connecting Faith* was approved and so I came to Malaysia to make the film. It was a very positive experience and I decided I wanted to do more projects in Malaysia, which led to *Connecting Kids*,<sup>11</sup> a project that deals with poverty following the lives of slum kids in Bangladesh and street kids in Jakarta and poor kids in London and Malaysia living on the estates. I also made a one hour film following the lives and stories of these kids and wrote a book about them, which includes photographic portraits and drawings of the participants. In 2015, I quickly forged a strong professional relationship with The Malaysian Mental Health Association. Dr. Ang embraced me straight away and organised a presentation of my work; she invited me to Singapore to speak about mental health at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia Pacific Conference and Meeting on mental health in 2016 and also commissioned a scroll, which I made with patients with mental health problems. Finally, she included my work in the book, *Living with Mental Disorders*, published by the Malaysian Mental Health Association which was a huge honour. I have also been exploring the issue of homelessness through street photography in Kuala Lumpur, visiting the areas where there are pockets of poverty. I continue to have a good relationship with the British Council in Malaysia giving several mental health talks in 2015 and 2017, performing my music to British Council

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/107>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/99>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/portfolio/project/90>.

colleagues. Now I am working with Oyez Publishing in Kuala Lumpur and that has been very positive, since Linda Lingard is a formidable Chinese Malay woman with years of experience in publishing. She has been very supportive and patient regarding my next book, *The Tree People*. I also love Silverfish bookstore, which stocks some of my titles; they also invited me to give several talks about my work and mental health. Malaysia press interest in my work has also been encouraging, with write ups in *Urban Health*, *Female* magazine<sup>12</sup> and *The Star*.<sup>13</sup> I have had more written about my work in Malaysia than in the UK. I am also now working with BadHatter Studios in Kuala Lumpur, learning more about electronic music production after embarking on an intensive music course in Logic. There is still much to explore here, but its proximity to Bangladesh and other Asian countries that I have a strong connection with makes Malaysia ideal as a second base to continue my work and *Mental Health 4 All* campaigning. The stigma also remains endemic in the Asian region.

*What role has your Bangladeshi background played in your art and what role do you feel it plays now?*

Bangladesh remains intrinsically important to my practice as an artist. Even though I was born in the UK, I have always had a deep connection with the land of my mother's birth (although now I realise I am of mixed ancestry with Burmese and Caucasian lineage, too). Part of the reason I started writing *Gungi Blues* (Chipmunka Publishing, 2007) when I was 23 years old, was to understand my past. Also I was frustrated, growing up, seeing the lack of representation of British Asians, in the media, the arts, and the type of story that was told was often steeped in cultural stereotypes. But writing *Gungi Blues* was not easy; I was not confident as a writer, actually, it was my sister who was the natural writer in the family. 4<sup>th</sup> Estate picked up the book, initially, and I worked on it with an editor Leo Hollis; I found myself modifying the story to please him, but he eventually dropped the project. Then I was signed with an agent, Watson Little, and Simon Prosser from Penguin was interested. Again I was asked to make changes, the book was again dropped and I lost my agent, too, because she wanted to spend more time with her family. The book I ended up with was not the book I intended to write at all; it was not written in my voice; it was a story that had been so modified it is almost painful to think about it. In the end, Chipmunka Publishing took it on and it was published in 2007 but I have never re-read the book since.

I could write a much stronger novel today because of the knowledge I have acquired and I feel I am a better writer now because I have found my voice and

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.urbanhealth.com.my/medical/art-for-the-mind/>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/12/30/the-healing-power-of-art-on-the-mind-artist-uses-talents-to-cope-with-mental-issues-and-helpsothers/>.

there is a natural flow in my writing. Yet, in terms of my evolution as a writer, it was one of my first attempts to write seriously. And this was a daunting endeavour because I had no one to look up to when I was starting out.

*Gungi Blues* follows the story of a Bangladeshi family that is dysfunctional in many ways; it was my attempt to shatter narrow depictions of Asians. And it has a strong female central protagonist loosely based on my mother. Repeatedly, I return to the same themes in my writing, and these concepts of family and, now, ancestry remain important subjects. I will never fit in with Bangladeshi society, or any society for that matter, including Britain, perhaps because I am so unconventional, but when I am in Bangladesh and hear the language, the sounds, experience the visceral onslaught to my senses, I am delirious.

Every scene on every street is like a movie. As a filmmaker I feel I have a responsibility to document what I see through photography, film and video and now I have a sizeable archive of footage. Most important of all is to keep writing our stories, and try and document a perspective that is rarely seen or heard; in fact, on the whole, it is ignored. At school I never learned about Bangladesh or my heritage; I have had to claw what I can from others. Such is my connection that I can now read and write Bangla and I incorporate Bangla text in my work too. It remains an on-going love affair with a country that I adore, but ultimately will never be home. I will always be a *bideshi*, which means foreigner in Bengali.

It does seem, however, that finally I am a complete artist and yet the main challenges I face are not the will and desire to create and keep on creating until the day I die, but rather it is the constant battle of dealing with the endemic sexism, racism and prejudice in the arts. Many female artists and writers are still overlooked, some do not achieve recognition in any viable way until their 70's. I cite the example of the artists Louise Bourgeois and Carmen Herrera.

Because I work across different art forms perhaps this is why my work has not been properly critiqued in the UK, the place of my birth, but now a country that no longer feels like home, if it ever did in the first place. It has abandoned me and I too, have abandoned Britain, it seems. A nomad with no discernible place to call home, a theme I deal with, ironically, in my first publication *From Briarwood to Barisal to Brick Lane* (Arts Council, 2001). This theme of drifting, wandering and searching will remain lifelong.

Yet, I believe fervently in the importance of my work. I have produced a prolific output in terms of art, photography, film and writing in the form of novels, plays, poems, essays, blogs, articles, some of which have been published, others not. No one is documenting my history, which is why I am compelled to write, make art, films and now compose music. Only history will be the judge of whether my work is worthy or stands up to the test of time; my job is simply to keep on making it. I just turned 45, so I am mid-career; I feel my best work and writing is yet to come. I am currently writing a new novel on my phone. Whether I write by hand, on my computer or on the phone, writing is intrinsic to my

practice as an artist and I cannot imagine a piece of work without words featuring in some way.

*What are your plans for the future?*

In terms of the future, I have an exhibition in Singapore organised by Michelle Lim (Mad Agency). Wilford X Gallery in Brussels purchased my first neon text piece; the words read, “What makes a good soul?” which is on permanent display at the gallery. I would like to see my neon signs with subtle mental health messages, all around the world – it is my dream. My eleventh book, *The Tree People*, is due for publication by Oyez Publishing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I am also in the process of editing a trilogy of feature length films entitled *A Portrait of Madness Part 1-3*. At the end of May I am going to Bangladesh, supported by Action Aid, to document, photograph and draw the Rohingya refugees, working with women and girls. I am incredibly honoured to be invited and I will do my best to depict their stories and suffering with dignity and integrity. There is still the huge task of archiving my work, which is a gargantuan, and time-consuming job, but I have the rest of my life to do this. And, finally, I am working on a giant scroll; it is my most ambitious work to date, a synthesis of all my ideas in one mammoth 30-foot-long piece of canvas; it will probably take ten years to finish, but I am in this profession for the long haul. Art, words, film and music, well it is the only thing that I understand and it is my job to use whatever facility I have to make sense of this world.



(Sanchita Islam with her art work)