

# Home is Where the Art is

By **AYESHA SINGH**

The artistic bent of mind has never been so trendy in India. The bank accounts of successful artists, writers, filmmakers and photographers have never been so overflowing before either. New names and new styles are trophies in the Indian art business, which was valued at over ₹1,400 crore in 2017. Subsidiary stakeholders like art residencies are mushrooming across the country, inviting artists to practice their creative mantras in sylvan solitude or culturally rich environments. Indian artists are also receiving invitations from residencies abroad, both privately funded and corporate. Some of these charge a fee. There is Sangam House in Bengaluru. Khoj in Delhi. Art Ichol at Khajuraho and Kalanirvana International Art Centre in Bhubaneswar. Across the sea are Residency Unlimited in Brooklyn and the Glenfiddich Artists in Residence in the Scottish wilds that has hosted Biplab Sarkar and fashionista-photographer JJ Valaya. Each residency is unique. The Himalayan Writing Retreat in Satkhol, Uttarakhand, encourages aspiring and aspirational writers. Art residency KYTA based in Kalga, a Himalayan village, hosts 10 artists in 10 disciplines every year from the fields of visual art, sound, music, film, architecture, performance arts, sculpture, installation, theatre, science, interaction design, dance, new media, writing, electronics,



With creativity launching new lucrative careers, a growing number of art and writing residencies have risen to meet international standards and explore a varied spectrum of disciplines

## Kalanirvana International Artists Residency Bhubaneswar

The only private art organisation that has over 300 international artists from more than 40 countries

### Walid Elzonfoly From Egypt

The Egyptian police officer-turned-full-time artist and photographer worked at Kalanirvana. The experience gave him access and direction. It opened his eyes to temple architecture and the street culture of Bhubaneswar.



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photography, intellectual property rights, street art, fashion design, illustration, painting and mixology. Its own private art collection is dispersed throughout the village. KYTA takes the creations to be shown in New Delhi, India and abroad. It also acts as a bridge between international artists, projects and institutions. WAA Residency launched in 2013 is one of the few art residencies in Mumbai that functions as a convergent art space for artists whose discussions and dialogues are valued. The Pepper House Residency operated by the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has an international residency programme for all types of artists. Then there are broad-based cultural institutions with a long track record such as the Sanskriti Foundation, Delhi, and the Preet Nagar Residency in Punjab. Mirage in Himachal Pradesh is unique for not having any rules for artists to follow. At FARM Studio in rural Rajasthan, successful applicants interact with rural artists, artisans and international contemporary artists at its International Artist Residency.

### MONEY MATTERS

Residencies are largely fully funded by the providers; some like the India Writer's Residency by Kalanirvana even pay an extra stipend to their creative occupants. So do Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Nebraska and Eyebeam, Brooklyn, US. The funds can be disbursed also for travel, research or material grants. New Yorker Paula Jeanine, who is part of the Kalanirvana residency, believes that funding helps artists raise their own bar without worrying about money. The starving artist in garret or barsati in the Indian scenario may not be strictly a true image since many of them turn to the new and well-paid illustration

market for sustenance; residencies give a fillip to the idyllic notion of the brush and chisel. KYTA pays for travel from Delhi-Kalga-Delhi and local travel, a private room, a common studio space, and walking tours. Says artist Iolanda Palmer from Washington State University, who is engaged with the Sanskriti Pratishthan's residency in Delhi, “Grants paid in full, partially or intermittently bring comfort and reassurance to artists.” She believes financially structured frameworks promote the creative impulses of the artistic community at large. Palmer, however, admits that grants have shrunk since the 2008 economic recession, at least in America. But there are corporates, which remain committed to the idea; in its 14th year, Glenfiddich offers its 17-year-old artists-in-residence programme an annual stipend of £10,000 and an opportunity to create original work at the

windswept cottage in the Scottish wilds. These are meant not only for newcomers but also established artists who are keen on exploring new facets. Sarkar got the Glenfiddich 'Emerging Artist of the Year 2018' award from among 1,700 participants that included P Yogeesh Naik, Anju Kaushik, Loknath Pradhan and Deepak Kumar from India. Sarkar got ₹10 lakh and an international allowance and work allowance of ₹1.2 lakh and ₹5 lakh respectively. He would also mount a solo show at Bestcollegeart.com Gallery in Delhi as part of the programme.

### THE JOURNEY

India is the inspirational palette for many foreign artists who accept residencies here. Palmer is one such seeker. On her travels, she found herself intrigued by the *dhobi ghats* (open laundry stations). A

year-long investigation on how Indian fabrics travel through various layers of society helped her structure her work around the concept in a video installation she is putting together. If Palmer is an itinerant, time stands still for India-born New York-based artist Kuldeep Singh who meditates in a spartan room echoing with silence. He was mocked by friends and colleagues for preferring the hibernation of an art residency over the frenetic gallery-to-gallery politics that is so part of the high-selling art world of egos and private viewings. Participation in the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture residency in Maine (2014), Yaddo in New York (2015), Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Nebraska (2016) and most recently the Residency Unlimited in Brooklyn (2018) has given Singh the clarity to boost his work prospects. “In the three-

## Residency Unlimited Brooklyn, US

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CHRISTOPHER PRINZ



month-long Residency Unlimited programme, I discussed my current body of interdisciplinary work with visionary critics and curators who understood the diluting borders between national and international art practices. The kind of work I do uses the language of Odissi dance in deconstruction, wherein its acting and sonic components get woven with visual art comprising large

paintings and theatrical props into system of design; a focused residency environment was able to bring about a very atypical body of compound art practice, which is the need of this decade/time,” says Singh.

Residencies have come to serve different purposes at different times. Their evolving formats accommodate various

Turn to page 2



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Ashis Kumar Pahi, Curator and Director, Kalanirvana International Artists Residency



### Paula Jeanine From New York

Her work is inspired by folk theatre to engage the women's issues of the 21st century, in collaboration with the local women of Nayapalli in Bhubaneswar.

“It helps that I am eating, sleeping and ideating in the same place that I am creating my work. I developed a sense of ownership that helped my creative process.”



## Art Ichol Khajuraho, MP

**Megha Joshi**  
*From Gurgaon*

Her work on Migration wouldn't have taken off if she was not part of the ecosystem of exchange. She is off to Iceland for another one called Fresh Winds in December 2019.



*"I try to participate in one residency a year, since it takes me away from peer pressure and gives a supportive environment. Residencies are great spaces for fresh perspectives and experiments."*



*"There is enough room in the world for practicality and functionality, but what about dreams? Art Ichol provides an inspirational environment for writers, photographers and artists to push the envelope."*  
**Ambica Beri,**  
Founding Director



## Khoj Delhi

*Meant for artists, run by artists. Besides mentoring, exposure and hands-on experience, residents are not compelled to show a finished product at the end.*



*"Our artists add value to the overall creative dimension. Every small shift in perception helps. Our mutual conversation is enriching, and we benefit as much as the artists."*

**Radha Mahendru,** curator and programmes manager



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**Smriti Rajgarhia,** Founder



*Continued from page 1*

expectations as well as influences. Serendipity Arts Foundation's annual Dharti Arts Residency offers resources and the space to hone and develop art, and equally important, the ease for interactions in the larger context of community, across a wide spectrum of people and networks, says its founder Smriti Rajgarhia. "We aim to facilitate open and unconstrained artistic work, which is inspired by or responds to Delhi's urban community. Residencies provide opportunities for individuals to interact and network with other artists, cultural practitioners, and engage with the professional possibilities of the art world," she says.

Two of Dharti's previous resident artists have gone on to do exceptionally well. Khushbu Patel from Surat was selected for a residency in Iran, and Ravi Kumar Chaurasiya from Ghazipur has been accepted into a residency in Ireland. The residency opened new doors for small-town boy Chaurasiya. He says, "Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, Ireland, invited me for their prestigious Avolon Global Studio residency for three months. I would be able to use their studio space to facilitate the production and socialisation of artworks associated with my current working practice." Chaurasiya is aware that without Dharti, it would not have been possible to find a place, however small on the world art map. "Residencies provide exclusivity. They help you gain a reputation and make networking with established professionals a possibility. Considering it's impossible for artists who

have just graduated from art school, to own their own studio, residencies provide a nurturing space," he adds.

Living in a remote and tiny village situated between Khajuraho and Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh, the Gurgaon artist Megha Joshi has gone incommunicado. The current resident enjoying the creative solitude at Art Ichol and artistic production is working on Migration as a theme. She is sure it wouldn't have taken off if she was not part of the ecosystem of exchange. "All the people here associate themselves with different ethnic identities. Some migrated because of family, others for work or love, and because of political or social turmoil," says Joshi. This led to the realisation that the womb is the only permanent 'home', which led her to create an eponymous work surrounding the idea. The networking advantages Singh refers to in America was available to Joshi in India, where she could gain access to other residencies through other artists. "I try to participate in one residency a year, since it takes me away from peer pressure and gives a supportive environment. Residencies are great spaces for fresh perspectives and experiments," says Joshi, who will soon be off to Iceland for the Fresh Winds artists in residency programme in December 2019, her second visit after 2012. The theme this year is 'the edge of the world', that sends artists on an internal journey through disassociation from regular life. Home is where the art is; singing, dancing and revelling in the folk colours of Nayapalli village in Bhubaneswar, New York artist Paula Jeanine has not been homesick even once. The Kalanirvana International

Artist Residency gave her the right infrastructure and environment to build her art piece, not available in workshops, studios or sporadic classes. Her work is inspired by folk theatre to engage the women's issues of the 21st century, in collaboration with the local women of Nayapalli. "It helps that I am eating, sleeping and ideating in the same place that I am creating my work. I developed a sense of ownership that helped my creative process," she says, adding, "And I tell you, if an artist is also given food while they are working, there is no greater nourishment for the soul." A common thread that binds these creative spaces is Indian ruralia. Goa's Vaayu Vision Collective provides artists with an outdoor experience in an interactive community with watermen and waterwomen for painters, street artists, video sculpture artists and installation artists who use sustainable materials. It has an outdoor gallery, open studio and traditional Goan rooms with wifi.

### THE FACILITATORS

The Founding Director of Art Ichol, Ambica Beri, understands the need for a stress-free creative space. "There is enough room in the world for practicality and functionality, but what about dreams? Art Ichol provides an inspirational environment for writers, photographers and artists to push the envelope," says Beri. There are wrinkles in this contentment. Curator and Director of Kalanirvana, the 44-year-old Ashish Kumar Pahi, thinks Indians do not appreciate their country unlike foreigners who are enchanted by India. He says, "I wanted to create a cohesive environment for Indian students to work



with visitors to learn and appreciate the treasures in their own backyard". Kalanirvana is the only private art organisation that has over 300 international artists from more than 40 countries. Pahi believes their artist-in-residency format is different since it leverages cultural engagement. Why did he found the residency? "Art galleries are often reluctant to show new names. They would rather place their bet on well-known artists whose work fetches a lot of money. Residencies are impartial, and in fact, prefer to support fresh talent," says Pahi.

NGO Khoj-run residency programmes are meant for artists, run by artists. Khoj offers a five-week residency programme PEERS for emerging artists. Besides mentoring, exposure and hands-on experience, it has no conditions; residents are not compelled to show a finished product at the end of the term. They are expected to keep open studios for visitors who can see their works in progress. The idea behind PEERS is to promote art irrespective of a definite outcome, allowing artists a mutually rewarding space to function and experiment. "Our artists add value to the overall creative dimension. Every small shift in perception helps. Our mutual conversation is enriching, and we benefit as much as the artists," says Radha Mahendru, curator and programmes manager at Khoj.

### DEALING WITH DISPARITY

At Sangam House, writers have lunch with the dancers and members of Nrityagram, and at the end of the day, writers meet to chat. Writers are not the only residents; there are three affable dogs, a couple-friendly cat. "It is India's only funded residency for writers. The rest have either not earned a good enough reputation or are struggling to survive," says Chetan Mahajan, founder of Himalayan Writing Retreat in Uttarakhand that calls itself Asia's first and only writing retreat. Writing retreats offer accommodation and food for a price. Mahajan sees himself as a mobiliser of literary pursuits. "The success of the residency format has led us to introduce 10 writers who will live and write here over two to three weeks in 2020. The formal announcement will be made in August. Such residencies provide the kind of focused mentoring and social isolation required for introspection unlike few other interventions," says Mahajan, a published author and former corporate executive. It is not for starving writers though; a single room costs ₹6,500 for two-six nights and ₹8,000 for a double room; it includes stay, meals, snacks and taxes. But their repertoire is generous, ranging from workshops for advances for writing, story-telling and even blogging. Another Himalayan retreat gaining a

reputation is the eclectic Atelier Bir Billing, not just for writers but also for filmmakers, photographers and artists. The workshops there are a tryst with reality, encouraging interactions with villagers and children. Twice a year, residents can view or participate in documentary and film festivals. The hills hold a special attraction for such retreats; the Panchgani Writers' Retreat in Maharashtra is a potpourri of New Age creativity based at the 90-year-old residential school, Sanjeevan Vidyalaya that combines yoga, ayurvedic food and nature trails.

Indian residencies have created reputations for foreign artists such as Egyptian police officer-turned-full-time artist and photographer Walid Elzonfoli who worked at Kalanirvana's International Art Residency in 2014. The experience gave him access and direction. The residency opened his eyes to temple architecture and the street culture of Bhubaneswar. "It was a stepping zone for me, which established my identity on the artistic map. I got inquiries and my work was recognised. I keep updating my inventory of photographs so that I can hold an exhibition right after I complete the programme," he says. The knowledge of fine art photography he received at Kalanirvana opened his eyes to the expanding possibilities of the medium. His current projects are on environmental issues.

## Himalayan Writing Retreat

**Satkhoh,**  
**Uttarakhand**

*Calls itself Asia's first and only writing retreat. Writing retreats offer accommodation and food for a price.*



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