

Text and images : Sharareh Bajracharya



Around four to five in the evening, in the open courtyard space of Gyan Mandala, students of art, music, and dance, of all ages and backgrounds, mingle and casually share stories with established people in their fields. They are coming out of the restored three-story building that used to be Gyanodaya College. The building now has purple borders with interspersed unpainted areas as if waiting for an artist's brush. The first two floors of the building are run by the Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre. The second floor has independent studios and work spaces, including the Hana Healing Centre and the Initiative Outdoor. On the very top is the established Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory and the Kat Jazz Studio. Over the past two months, the Gyan Mandala area has earned the right to call itself a complete space for the arts, from visual arts and music to acting and dancing. It is one of the first places in Nepal where different forms of contemporary art maintain their individual integrity and at the same time, display, perform, and create within a shared space.

#### How did this collaborative space come about?

The Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre, KCAC, opened on 17 January, 2010 through the joint efforts of the founding directors, Sangeeta Thapa and Celia Washington. The idea stemmed from a series of discussions begun three to four years ago. Having received a positive response, Celia began a series of fundraising events in England, established a British charity and created publicity to support the contemporary arts in Nepal. In 2008, KCAC was declared London's charity of the year for Asian Art. While the search for a space in Kathmandu had already begun three years ago, it was only in 2009, after the 'Open Door' exhibition in London, when they came across the space in Jhamshikhel. In February 2009 Nirakar Yakthumba of the band 1974 AD read an interview given by Sangeeta in the ECS magazine where she articulated KCAC's search for a space in Kathmandu. He contacted Sangeeta and offered the current space for rent. By April, Celia flew in and all parties agreed to begin the centre. The Jazz Conservatory and Moksh had already begun their ventures in this safe enclave. The mutual excitement about the location was that it had the potential to both enhance the space as well as absorb its creative energy. The Centre took the ground and first floor. Once the space was confirmed, a spacious gallery was created out of four rooms on the ground floor, the library was installed and the artists-in-residency programme was conceptualized. Yuki Shirai, one of the founding patrons, played a key role in the conversion of the

space from empty cement rooms into painted, furnished spaces. The International Arts Festival “Separating Myths from Reality” 2009, organized by Sangeeta, was the first activity launched at the Centre, and the formal opening on 17 January occurred after completing an array of logistics such as the logo, website, and setting up the ‘Big Draw’.

From the beginning, the main concern was to ensure the centre’s self-sustainability - it had to pay its own rent. Offers to run a dance school, Nritya Aagan, by Subima Shrestha and an acting school, Actor’s Studio, by Anup Baral both fulfilled the centre’s vision as well as the practicality of raising the funds to pay the rent. A bookshop which would sell art supplies as well as arts-related books was taken up by Ajit Baral of FinePrint. Finally, the centre opened on 17 January with a vision to encourage contemporary arts in Nepal and to create a locus for regional and international collaborations.

Although the visual arts remain its focus, the centre has adopted a philosophy of promoting art in its diverse and rich forms. The founding directors are demonstrating an open and visionary sense that the various art forms can support and strengthen each other.

### **What does KCAC offer?**

Two months since its opening, KCAC has grown to become an important force in the contemporary art scene of Nepal. It has the potential to become a state-of-the-art facility for the creation, study, and display of the arts for people of all ages.

For the visual arts on the ground floor, gleaming glass doors open up to a gallery which encourages contemporary Nepali and international artists. Currently, Emma Ponsart’s ‘Reminiscences’ is on display in the gallery. Preceding this French artist’s works were the solo exhibitions of Birendra Pratap Singh’s ‘Electrocardiogram: Internal Stories’ and Sauranga Darshandhari’s ‘A Printmaker’s Feelings’. Except for a few days to prepare for the next show, the gallery has no plans of remaining empty. Its hours of 10 to 6 are strictly followed. People can find the exhibition schedules on the website [www.kathmanduarts.org](http://www.kathmanduarts.org). The website also has a virtual gallery that is currently holding a virtual exhibition by Chris Jordan entitled, ‘Midway: Message from the Gyre’.

The exhibition ‘Reminiscences’ by Emma Ponsart is a culmination of her six-month stay in Nepal sponsored by the Alliance Française. Ponsart was a student of the University of ESAG (Ecole Supérieur d’Art de Grenoble). She is currently living at the Centre and constantly interacting with others. Her stay will end on 28 March, and she will be followed by a German artist, Katherine Biocca, who has been studying Thangka Painting. She will remain at the centre for three months and work towards an exhibition.

One flight of stairs above the gallery, in the corner, stands the library. It is a quiet area filled with beautiful books about the practice of the arts in different parts of the world. The library has over 2000 books, of which 400 were donated by the Tate Gallery in London. For members, entrance is free, while others pay 100 NRs per day (for membership, refer to the website). The library is a reference library, so books are kept on location. There is however, an exchange bookshelf where people can swap their own paperbacks and DVDs.

Adjacent to the library, is a large room with four artists in-residence, sharing ideas amid hard work and the unpredictability of their creations. They are accompanied,

periodically, by international artists such as Emma and Katherine who live in the space and prepare for their exhibitions, acting as mentors and inspirations.

Sunita Maharjan, Sanjeev Maharjan and Wies Olde Rieherink, are recent art student graduates, while Jonas Wijtenburg is in his third year. Two artists are Nepali and two are Dutch. While they do not live at the Centre, they have been given a shared studio. The Nepali artists are receiving a monthly stipend for materials. After six months, their artworks will be presented at the gallery. In exchange for the support of the Centre, the artists-in-residence help manage the gallery, run the film club, and provide support to the library.

Once every two weeks the film club shows a documentary series about how various New York based artists work with different concepts and mediums. The themes include 'spirituality', 'identity', 'consumption', 'stories', 'loss & desire', 'time', and many others. There are twenty sessions planned. The descriptions and timings are given on the website. Anyone is welcome. The tickets are NRs 100, with special discounted offers for students. Those who purchase four tickets at a time receive one for free.

For young artists of 7-15 years, Yuki runs two sessions of basic drawing classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4 to 6 p.m. She focuses on pencil, oil, and acrylic media. There are possibilities of additional art classes which Wies and a French artist may assist. Seasonal camps are offered in winter, spring, and summer. A spring adventure camp will be offered in collaboration with Initiative Outdoor from April 5 -14. Interested individuals can visit the website [www.initiativeoutdoor.com](http://www.initiativeoutdoor.com) for more information.

On the opposite side of the first floor, KCAC has provided space for the performing arts with Nritya Aagan for dance and Actor's Studio for acting. Actor's Studio, led by Anup Baral, runs a three-month course to train people to become dynamic and skilled actors/performers. The goal is for people to realize their full potential to be exactly who they wish to be at that moment. In addition to this regular course, they work throughout the country with the belief that the performing arts have the potential for social transformation. They recently ran children's theatres in Palebhas, Parbat and held storytelling workshops in Besi Shahar, Lamjung. A few months ago, they organized street drama addressing caste discrimination, domestic violence, and accusations of witchcraft. They were sponsored by OHCHR. The current batch of students is now in the middle of their course. Their student production will be held in another one and a half months.

A much younger organization, Nritya Aagan, is led by Subima Shrestha. She is beginning with what she knows best—kathak. As soon as one enters her space, one can experience the steady rhythmic beats from dance bells and gentle laughter coming from young children and adults. They become their own instruments as their bells respond to each movement of their feet. She holds classes on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays from 4 to 6 p.m., both for children and adults of different skill levels. Her long term goal is to incorporate different classical dances from the South Asian region, maintaining each dance form's individual identity. The quality of the teaching at Nritya Aagan stands at the centre of its vision. Students are to identify and push the limits of their own bodies as well as respect and understand the techniques and histories of their dance forms.

With the music school (Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory) only two floors above and a music and performance venue across the courtyard space at the Moksh restaurant, the

possibilities for collaborations among the performing arts are many. As an awaiting audience, I can merely anticipate the joys of such an affair.

Four years of raising funds and creating the concept for the Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre have materialized into reality. Although idealists in their vision, the approach of the founding directors has been practical. They are running a membership drive both locally and internationally. This includes free membership of the library, discounted prices to the movies, a space to make their own quality coffee at discounted prices, and exclusive access to the events. The gallery itself will be geared towards supporting the centre. Actor's Studio and Nritya Aagan are both running their independent programs while giving the centre a regular income through their rent. A bookshop run by FinePrint is now underway. In order to ensure that the establishment runs smoothly, a manager with a background as a tour operator, Kabin Shakya, is now overseeing the centre's activities. He is a consistent presence throughout the centre. Yuki continues to provide daily support to the centre with the committed assistance of the staff—Som Bahadur Ale and Sabitri Tamang.

Gyan Mandala is a space that is coming into its own at an important time in the history of contemporary arts in Nepal. An array of art schools, studios, and tuition classes have burgeoned around the city. Young people and artists are searching for places that encourage and inspire them. KCAC and the entire Gyan Mandala space is becoming both a resource centre as well as a place to show one's effort and creativity.

## Profiles of KCAC Artists-in-Residence

### Sunita Maharjan

Sunita recently earned a BFA in painting from Kathmandu University, Centre for Art and Design (KUArt). She is continuing her interest in playing with texture and forms on a flat surface.

### Wies Olde Rieherink

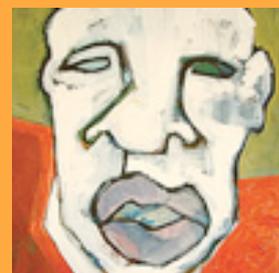
Wies is a recent Fine Arts and Arts & Education graduate from the School for the Arts, Amsterdam. Her focus on video installations in Amsterdam has transitioned into oil paintings of her renditions of people's faces. She has not, however, stopped experimenting with video.

### Sanjeev Maharjan

Sanjeev is a recent KUArt BFA graduate in painting. His interest in making portraits of young children on the streets has shifted to portraying carcasses and the slaughter of pigs along the streets of Kathmandu.

### Jonas Wijtenburg

Jonas is a third-year student of fine arts at the School for the Arts, Utrecht. In the Netherlands, he is both an oil painter and a stage builder. He works with three friends in creating monumental sets for summer music and arts festivals. He is currently working with plywood, taking a break from his painting.



1. Sunita Maharjan
2. Wies Olde Rieherink
3. Sanjeev Maharjan
4. Jonas Wijtenburg