

[Home](#) > [Arts](#) > [Nurturing intercultural dialogue through art](#)
[Arts](#) | [Front Page News](#) | [Visual arts](#)

Nurturing intercultural dialogue through art

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Artists from India and Australia collaborate in a groundbreaking art exhibition


Art has been widely recognised in a plurality of ways as a vital and beneficial part of society. In particular, visual art can promote a culture of peace, dialogue, cultural cooperation or diplomacy, integration and social cohesion through community participation. An inspiring exemplar is the Australia India Institute's Artists' Retreat program that fosters intercultural dialogue.

First held in Red Hill, Victoria, in 2011, and then in Jaipur, 2013, the Australia India Institute's Artists' Retreat program has provided professional development opportunities for established Australian and Indian artists. Invited painters, photographers and sculptors collectively embarked upon a ten-day voyage to India's historic city of Jaipur to create original artworks, namely a collaborative group piece and a new work by each artist. They also had the unique chance to participate in a series of curated sessions and visited sites of inspiration in India, such as the Amber Fort.

Rooted in the notion of a residency, an artists' retreat enables an artist to experience the character of a locale in great depth, with the aim of enthusing a diverse range of rich and vibrant artistic interpretation. Such cultural immersion naturally facilitates the development of a deeper understanding of varied practices and perspectives, increases community involvement, empowers freedom of expression, fosters equality and enhances the creative process.

Held at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in Melbourne, the inaugural AII exhibition was the vivacious result of contemporary art exchanges between renowned artists from India and Australia, including Jon Cattapan, Charles Green, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, Fiona Hall, Lyndell Brown, Kate Dew, Hossein Valamanesh, Gigi Scaria and Mithu Sen. The selected artworks formed part of a larger permanent collection held by the Institute, comprising works produced during the Institute's Artists' Retreats.

The exhibition boasted a striking array of figurative and abstract art across a range of mediums including painting, photography, drawing, printmaking and mixed media.

"The artists were selected because they represented a national identity," said Robert Johanson, Chairman of the Australia India Institute.

Certainly, when viewing the exhibition, it quickly became apparent that many of the artists chose to comment on issues pertinent to their local and global environment.

A monochromatic sprawling cityscape revealing the complex layers and stark contrasts of Delhi, is unmistakably the work of Delhi-based artist Gigi Scaria. His immersive photo-based mural, *City Unclaimed* (2012), was manipulated and stitched together from photographs he has taken around Delhi. The panorama illustrates an imaginary cityscape with an operational twelve-foot high fountain that signifies both a monument to a splendid past and a reminder of accelerating societal tension that is characteristic of Delhi; the differences in social and economic class, issues about scarcity, abundance and the allocation of resources in urban spaces.


 Gigi Scaria - 2013 Artists Retreat, *City Unclaimed*

Similarly, Kashmiri-based artist Veer Munshi reflects his anguish at the situation in his home state. Through his artwork, *Endangered (Hangul)* (2013), Munshi communicates a fear that plagued many Kashmiris who were displaced to Delhi in 1990 and were forced, like the artist, to relinquish their home and heritage. The animals in Munshi's artworks are symbolic of, and trapped in, a system of paranoid securitisation. Munshi highlights the increasingly narrow space that exists for culture and art in his state. However, he also celebrates the universal nature of art by participating in residencies on the international stage, believing that art plays a significant role in the resolution of the Kashmir situation.

"Some of the artworks are works of individuals, whereas in other works, two artists collaborated on a piece together," Johanson said.

A prime example of collaboration is Lyndell Brown's and Charles Green's artwork, *Nainsukh* (2013). Created using paint, photography and digital technologies, the work is a juxtaposition between Indian miniature painting and contemporary photography. It invites contemplation concerning historical culture, emerging technologies and the dichotomy between dissimilar cultural periods and contexts. Akin to other artists in the exhibition, the artistic duo developed their uniquely recognisable styles and engaged with themes explored in their previous works. In particular, they explored illusory worlds that disrupt boundaries between past and present, fact and fiction.


 Lyndell Brown & Charles Green, 2013 Artists Retreat, *Nainsukh*, 2013

The Artists' Retreat enabled Indian and Australian artists to produce a dynamic environment where different views could be voiced openly and respectfully, and where 'shared spaces' for cultural exchanges were treasured.

In a reflection of his experience at the Artists' Retreat, Australian artist Jon Cattapan stated, "It struck me when we were in Jaipur that marvelous things can happen when people work in an organic way, where they can talk to each other, and where there's an easy cross cultural dialogue".

Having lived and worked in many of the world's metropolises including London, Seoul and New York, the artist expressed a special affinity with India, where he has also worked extensively and collaborated with Indian artists including Surendran Nair.

Being immersed in India's vibrant colour palette influenced the aesthetic qualities of artworks made by several of the participating Australian artists. Cattapan's painting *Storm Experiment (Jaipur)* (2013) for instance, depicts hues of luscious reds and green that bury visions of buildings and people, and instead, foregrounds a reflective psychological space through colour.


 Australian artist, Jon Cattapan with his artwork from the 2013 Artists Retreat, *Storm Experiment (Jaipur)*, 2013

"Whereas blue is deeply reflective, red for me is about life energy," Cattapan said. This pictorial response is reminiscent of the artists' experience of lively Indian marketplaces, festivals and urban landscapes. "These deeply saturated works came directly out of the experience of going to India," Cattapan continued.

In another account of how prolonged visits to India can stimulate artistic inspiration, Australian artist Kate Daw said, "I am interested in decorative art and objects made by women. In the West, these are not usually considered to have the status of art that other objects have, but in India, there's incredible respect for culture and decorative arts and that has really struck me".

Kate Daw's print *Love, Work (detail, Rose Garden)* (2013), is a reaction to the expansive and generic white walls that typify the Indian Art Fairs held in Delhi. The exhibited work was one of 800 floral prints that formed the wallpaper for the artists' booth at the Indian Art Fair, which resulted in a sepia coloured rose garden. The artist took inspiration from both Islamic gardens and the flora in her Melbourne home, exemplifying cross-cultural inspirations.

When asked whether she would participate in future art residencies in India, Daw stated, "I want to have an ongoing relationship with India. I took my students to India and we've got another project in mind".

Curatorial adviser Chaitanya Sambrani said engaging with artists from outside Australia is important as "cross-cultural interaction produces new kinds of dynamics for artistic practice".

The process of mixing Australian and Indian artists together to converse, collaborate and produce works metaphorically became part of the paintings. Indeed, the enthusiasm, curiosity and interest between two groups of artists from different countries immediately pervaded the gallery. It was apparent that the focus of the exhibition was not solely on the art, but rather, centred upon relationships. As Australian artist Daw reinforced, "Meeting the artists and being involved in the conversations made the experience so wonderful".

Importantly, art projects that promote intercultural dialogue not only benefit the cultural and artistic community, but also facilitate progressive cross-country interaction. Johanson noted, "The works provide a fantastic legacy for the collaborations and conversations between Australians and Indians".

While politics and economics form the most pressing topics in Australia, culture has always been held as important in India and is at the forefront of the agenda within the Australia India Institute. The venture was conceived by Professor Amitabh Mattoo, Director of the Australia India Institute. Inspired by a similar project he conducted during his time as Vice Chancellor at the University of Jammu, Professor Mattoo capitalised upon the vast potential of art as a vehicle to improve ties with Australia's South Asian neighbours. This project deserves to be further celebrated for the relationship it has formed with the Victorian College of the Arts, particularly for providing Australian academics, artists and students the ability to think intercultural.



Professor Amitabh Mattoo, Director of the Australia India Institute, at the inaugural exhibition of the Artists' Retreat program