

INDIA HOUSE ART GALLERY IN BALEWADI WILL OPEN DOORS ON MARCH 20 FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE COVID-19

'Let 100 wealthy art lovers come together and donate Rs 1 crore each'

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Ramprasad Akkiseti, the Managing Director of CCBA Designs and the Curator of India House Art Gallery. (Express Photo)

After an absence of five years, a thousand flowers are set to bloom at the India House Art Gallery in Balewadi. The gallery was always a space for ambition, calling on artists to give wings to dreams and to audiences to let the magic overtake them in ways that only great art can.

Created by the architecture firm CCBA Designs, the 5,000 sqft space had hosted more than 50 art exhibitions between 2010 and 2020 as well as classical dance and drama, literary events and musical concerts.

On March 20, its doors will open for the first time since the pandemic and the death of CCBA Designs' mentor Prof Christopher Charles Benninger. The exhibition, "Let A Thousand Flowers Bloom", is a convergence of drawing, painting and photography inspired by Odissi dance. The vivid and powerful works are by artists from Malaysia, Bhubaneswar and Chennai.

Ramli Ibrahim, the legendary dancer from Malaysia, will present a performance and screen his documentary. "When 'Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom' began its journey in India earlier this year, it was never conceived merely as an exhibition. It was envisioned as a movement—an unfolding conversation between memory and imagination, between nations, and between artists who recognise that culture does not

belong to borders but to shared human experience," says Ibrahim.

Yet, as the artwork go up on the walls, Ramprasad Akkiseti, the Managing Director of CCBA Designs and the Curator of India House Art Gallery, is caught between the enthusiasm of a new show and the concern that few people in the city will show up or share a love for high art in Pune.

"A gallery is not just a place, where you display paintings, it is the centre where the birth of new ideas and philosophies start," he says. "But, I find that the people of Pune haven't developed the sensitivity to appreciate the fine arts, more specifically, visual arts. A gallery might promote art, but where are the people? Citizens also have to participate. If you go to Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata, you see so many people waiting for shows and attending. The idea is not about buying or selling art, it is to understand art, and let it become a part of your thought process," he adds.

"Pune calls itself a cultural centre, I doubt if that is true compared to many cities I travel to like Bhubaneswar, Kochi, Ahmedabad are far ahead being cultural centres," he says.

Akkiseti hits a raw nerve for, though Pune is famous for its thriving theatre, music and dance performances, visual art is a faded form

in the background. Art exhibitions of international standard and important exhibitions, such as of the works of Spanish surrealist Salvador Dalí that came to Delhi last year, pass by Pune. In most parts of the country, art galleries attract few people from all sections of society and Pune galleries are no exception.

According to Akkiseti, Pune is in urgent need of a performance centre on the lines of the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai, which was set up by JRD Tata and Dr Jamshed Bhabha. "Pune has a number of billionaires, some of the wealthiest people in the country. It is a hub of industry and IT professionals. A city can't just be an economic hub, it has to be a cultural hub too. Look at New York, London or Paris, they are both economic as well as cultural hubs. Let 100 wealthy art lovers come together and donate Rs 1 crore each. I am ready to give the first Rs one crore. Rs 100 crore would be good enough for us to put a great performance centre," he adds.

Sure, he could have used the vast gallery space as a retail outlet which, located in prime real estate, would have made financial sense. "I didn't want to do that because I feel that I want to keep it as a gallery. One day, it will be known and people will come," he says.