

Arts Acre for

Shuvaprasanna's labour of love is all set to be the new cradle of art

Arts Sake

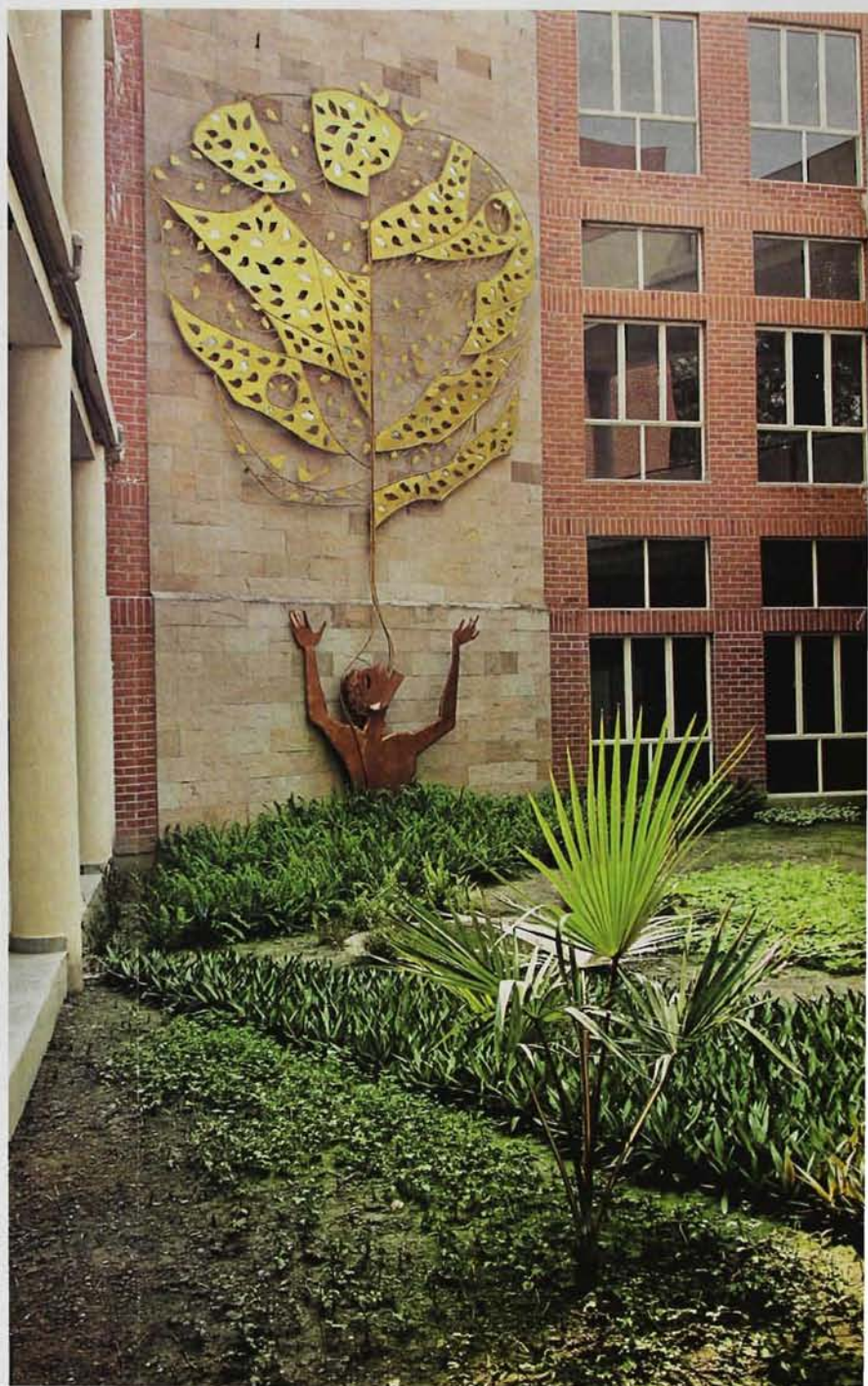
■ BY KAKOLI PODDAR

Arts Acre, set amidst idyllic pastoral settings on the outskirts of Kolkata, far from the maddening crowd, aims to be a haven for artists and art lovers.

The ArtsAcre Foundation—Museum of Bengal Modern Art is artist Shuvaprasanna's dream project. Spread over a sprawling four and half acres of land, this creative hub encompasses a built up area of 165,000 square feet. At the extreme end of Rajarhat New Town area of Greater Kolkata, almost at the back of the beyond, where your long drive leads you to lush greenery of farmlands and meadows, you are stunned by the majestic façade of the stately architecture of Arts Acre with its modern, straight, no-fuss lines fusing effortlessly with the typical Bengal touches of terracotta brickwork and other art installations.

ArtsAcre Foundation was formally inaugurated by the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, and luminaries from across India like writer Mahashweta Devi, Dr Karan Singh, Dr Balamurali Krishna, Pandit Birju Maharaj, Anjolie Ela Menon, Javed Akhtar, among others, attended the inauguration.

Incidentally, Arts Acre had been conceived much earlier, over three decades ago. In fact, in March 1984, sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar had even laid the foundation stone for it. In January 1987, the modestly built original campus was inaugurated by Nobel Laureate Gunter Grass.



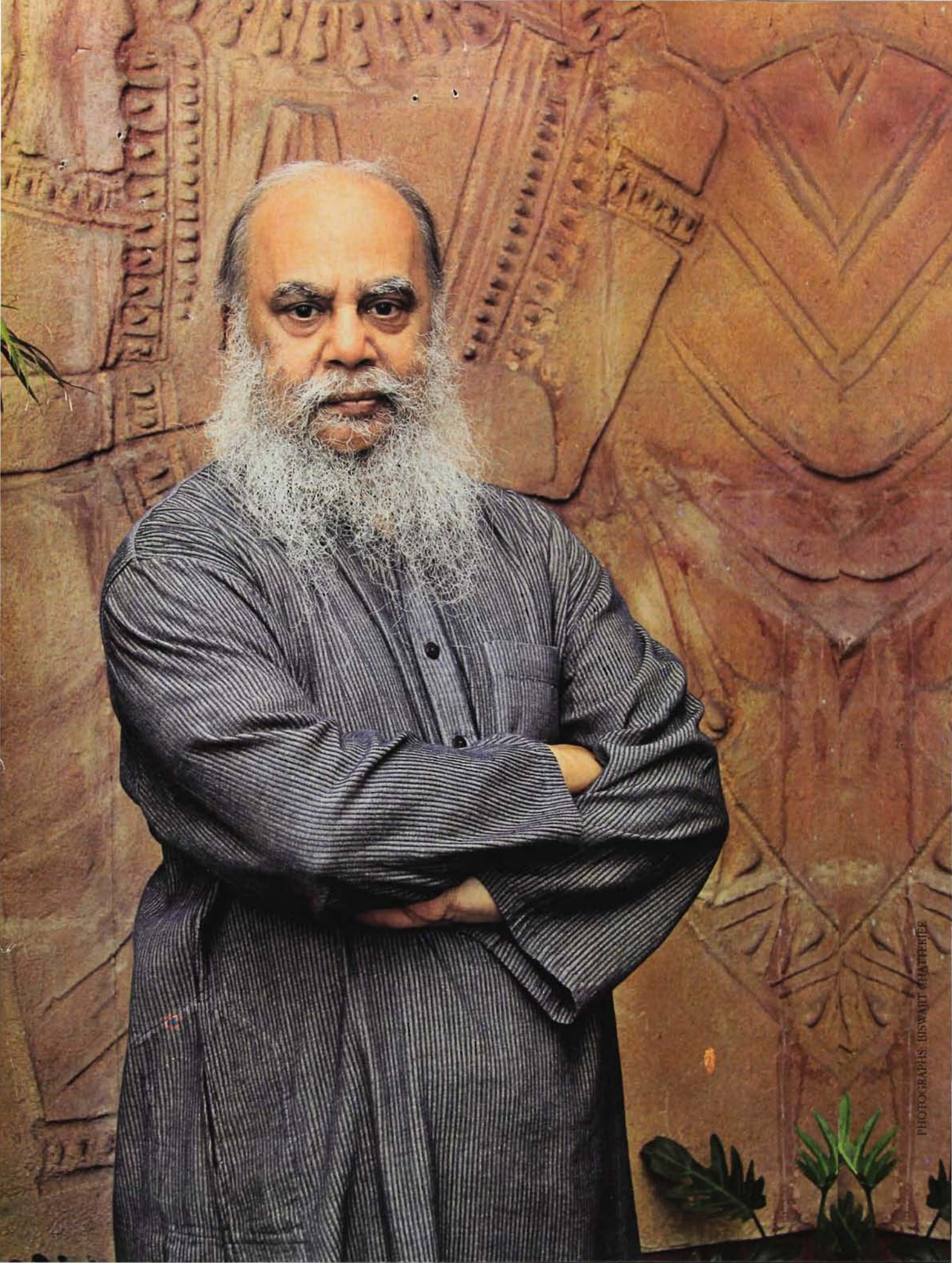


After graduation, Ayesha worked at the Yacht Club of Hyderabad for three months. "I ran the club for them. I did everything, from getting people on the water to running the classes. In three months, we had over 2,000 people out on the water. In Hyderabad, that too!" she exclaims. Having gained some experience, Ayesha felt confident enough to start her own company back in Mumbai. So, she set up Lobo Sailing and Yachts. "In this city, you have to be a member of some club or the other to sail. But with us, people can just come and chill on the boats if not learn to sail. We've had people proposing to their partners on the boat. We've opened up the sport to all. We started out small. Currently, we have tied up with the YMCA. All the money that comes in goes for the team and development of new students, team mates. I don't get a salary," she states.

Ayesha is also back on the professional circuit. "In June and July last year, I went to the UK and France for sailing events. We also went to China in October. An Indian team has never gone to China to race, and a Chinese team has never come to India to race. Nobody expected us to win, including us. We just thought we'd go and do our best," she recounts. "The Japanese, Chinese, Americans and Australians, all the teams underestimated us. But, by the time of the main event, we were leading. On the last

day, they disqualified us for something we didn't even do. I'm qualified to be a jury member, so I know what we can and can't do. Also, there was a lot of prize money involved. We were leading by 14 points. They disqualified us and we lost points. Eventually, the Chinese team won and we stood fourth." It no doubt left a bitter taste in Ayesha's mouth. But, Ayesha did not fight too much over it as it would have spoilt the championship's reputation and would be bad for the sport in general.

Ask Ayesha about the sailing scene in India overall, and she shrugs, "The government attitude is the same as towards all sports," but adds that the Tamil Nadu government, in particular, is supportive towards the two junior teams they have out there. "With government support, the women's team can get on the match racing circuit and the Olympic circuit because it's a lot of effort and money that goes into that section. In terms of developing the sport, we can get more J boats into the country to train teams and get kids to sail and hopefully, race abroad—give people a chance to explore more sports." As for inspiration, Ayesha cites her parents and coach, Mahesh Ramchandran. "As an athlete, I really admire Ben Ainslie. I've read all his books." Like most athletes, Ayesha dreams of competing in the Olympics. We hope she realises her ultimate goal and marks her name firmly in the sport of sailing! <<



PHOTOGRAPHS: BISWAIT CHATTERJEE



Artist Shuvaprasanna is very glad that his much cherished dream has become a reality after decades of back-breaking toil. "This art centre is the first of its kind in India aimed at nurturing and promoting all kinds of artistic endeavours—it will not be confined to fine arts, but will encompass all kinds of creativity—photography, music, theatre and cinema. The centre shall act as a vibrant platform for the propagation of art, craft and culture, where artists from all genres will have the opportunity to share their expertise and experiences in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. Our mission is to make Arts Acre an enriching experience for art lovers," he says. Away from the bustle and din of their day to day life, artists can even reside here in the serene picturesque environs and engage in their creative pursuits.

Designed by renowned architect Partha Ranjan Das, Arts Acre has three terracotta-tiled buildings, all interconnected by overhead corridors, set amidst a vast expanse of aesthetically landscaped gardens. Says Shuvaprasanna, "I have been fascinated by the architecture of Nalanda University that has stood the test of time and always wished that my art hub would be built on similar lines. Bengal is defined by its red soil (*lal mati*) in many parts, and terracotta is an indigenous Bengal craft. I wanted Arts Acre to reflect the artistic ethos of Bengal."

The silhouette of a *baul* (the wandering minstrels of Bengal who sing and dance with the accompaniment of the stringed instrument, *Ektara*) sets the tone of the ambience. This metal sheet installation has been designed by Shuvaprasanna himself. Also striking is the golden face or mask of the female visage set against the terracotta exterior just beside the main signage. This fibre-glass face designed by Shuvaprasanna is 11-feet in height and is eight-feet wide. He says that the mask symbolises the mother image (*matri mukh*) of Bengal.

Block A of Arts Acre houses the museum and art galleries. *Biborton*, the museum of Bengal modern art, showcases the evolution of Bengal art from colonial times, including traditional art forms, different group movements, and works of pioneering stalwarts to the new generation of artists. The 40,000 square feet space includes English lithography, Chorbagan prints, Kalighat *pats*, Tagore, Ramkinkar Baij, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, Paritosh Sen, Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharjee and also new generation artists like Samir Roy, Chandra Bhattacharya, Bhabotosh Suttar and Tarun Roy. The museum has galleries named after prominent donors such as the Surrendra Paul Gallery, Emami Gallery, Purna Chandra Paul Gallery, Saroj-Jyoti Poddar Gallery and Prabhat Chandra Sen Gallery. The storage spaces associated with the museum are state-of-the-art and climate controlled.





While Block B houses the office, the cafeteria, the conservation lab, library and the Art Club, Block C has the auditorium, workshops and guest rooms. There are seven workshops dedicated to painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphics, photography, serigraphy, lithography and filmmaking. It has 18 guest apartments each with a bedroom, living room, attached bath and balcony and there are 15 studios available for the artists working independently.

There would be five multi-purpose conference rooms for seminars, and *Akash*, an open amphitheatre for open-air performances. *Biponi*, the art shop will retail exclusive art, craft, paintings and sculptures. *Shamogri*, the art material shop, will sell paint, tools, clay and every possible material for sculpting, painting, ceramics, graphics and photography required by the artists and the participants in the workshops. The entire campus has an openness conducive to artistic endeavours. Arts Acre is a sort of self-contained mini-city for artists and art lovers.

Arts Acres aims to be the platform for the convergence of varied art forms. The idea is to encourage a creative interface between artists. Says Shuvaprasanna, "Art cannot be constricted in watertight compartments. The varied genres are now blending into one another. Creative people connect

with one another. A painter could be inspired by theatre and a playwright could be inspired by painting. Here, artists from varied genres can come together and work together, and their collaborative efforts would be enriching. Arts Acre would be the confluence of creative people of all kinds, and here they can interact and work without the shackles of government rules. Even artists from abroad can forge partnerships with our artists." Shuvaprasanna has had his share of struggle before the realisation of this ₹ 32 crore project, which he avers has been possible from his own savings as well as generous donations from well-wishers. Recently, BK Birla provided sponsorship for the auditorium and the Sarala-Basant Birla auditorium was inaugurated by Governor MK Narayanan.

Shuvaprasanna has decided to slog it out himself and has not applied for any sort of government funding, because he is keen that this cradle of art should be run independently by its board of trustees and advisors without being restricted by any sort of government rules or political pressures.

Arts Acre is set to be the next hotspot of art—a lifeline for those who believe in art and are passionate about it. There is a faint smile of satisfaction on his face as he shows us around his dream art hub, which is sure to be the dream destination for artists and the connoisseurs of art. <<