

ELEPHANT

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DESTINATION

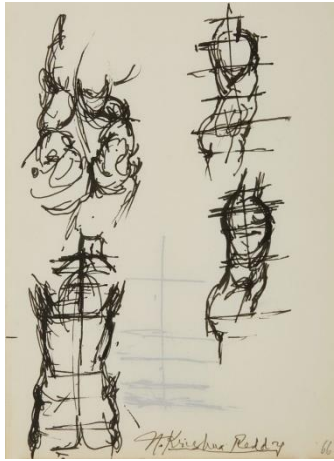
Kolkata: The City of Car Horns, Creativity and Cake

The capital of India's West Bengal state is undergoing something of a creative resurgence in recent years, after decades spent in the shadow of its own Modernist history. With new, large art spaces cropping up and a host of smaller commercial galleries (not to mention plenty of mouthwatering sweet treats and vibrant markets) now is the time to visit. Words by Louisa Elderton



Do Ho Suh, Passages: Main Entrance, 388 Benefit Street, Providence, RI 02903, USA, 2016. Shown in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The World Is One Family at Emami Art

The former capital of India during British colonial rule, on the one hand Kolkata is full of constant car horns and plumes of pollution; on the other, it's a whirlwind of colour, art and architecture. While Kolkata is called India's capital of culture, its art scene has dwindled over the past twenty years. Quick art-history lesson: the region went into an economic decline in the 1960s, with very little money available to nurture and develop artistic practices. While Bengal art flourished in the early twentieth century with the likes of Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose of the Bengal School, the 1920s saw Modernism becoming the city's favourite style, which then dominated for three decades. As such, artists from the 1970s to 1990s lived in this movement's shadow, obscuring experimental practices, which were forced to develop elsewhere—in Mumbai and Vadodara. In other words, Kolkata became out of step.



Krishna Reddy, Left: Untitled, Drawing 176 Right: Untitled, Drawing 181. Experimentier, and the Estate of Krishna Reddy

This imbalance is now being redressed, with an increasing number of contemporary art spaces developing in the city. Kolkata Centre for Creativity opened in November last year, a multi-disciplinary art centre-commercial gallery off the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass. As one of Kolkata's largest spaces for art at over 70,000 square feet, it also houses the commercial gallery Emami Art—which funded the venture with the aim of preserving the artistic legacy and heritage of Bengal. Designed by architect Pinakin Patel, it stands tall amid the surrounding wetlands, a terracotta-red hoarding slicing through the slatted grey façade. Its current exhibition, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The World is One Family, brings together craft and design with fine art, in an eclectic display of works from around the globe—think Chinese urns meets Indian glassware, interspersed with conceptual design. Most impressive is Nassia Inglessis's *Disobedience* (2018): a "living" sculpture made of woven recycled plastic, it appears as a complex skeleton (imagine the spine of a whale), which you can walk through to make it expand and contract (imagine this spine breathing). Also, go to Grace, the vegetarian restaurant on the third floor (nutritious and delicious).



Amrita Sher-Gil, Untitled. Shown at Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The World Is One Family, Emami Art

The commercial gallery to prioritize in Kolkata is Experimentier, which has recently opened its second space on Ballygunge Place, a restored 1930s building typical of early-twentieth-century architecture in Bengal. Its green shutters and wrought iron banisters are classic. The other space on Hindusthan Road has a tiered depression in the middle of the floor, formerly the courtyard of an old building (note: don't step back without looking). Currently showing the Indian artist Krishna Reddy's works on paper—from monochrome figure drawings to more colourful abstractions—its varied programme includes the likes of Moyra Davey and Raqs Media Collective. On an educational tip, they also host residencies where international curators, writers and philosophers fly in to contribute to the cultural landscape of the city.

“For historical buildings, head to the north of Kolkata, where the vestiges of India’s wealthiest elites stand in fading glory”



Krishna Reddy, Great Clown 5 of 20, 1981. Courtesy of Experimenter, and the Estate of Krishna Reddy

Depending on what piques your interest and how “international” you think contemporary art needs to be, it’s just about worth popping your head around the door of Akar Prakar Gallery. It focuses on contemporary Indian artists (many of whom you won’t have come across) and is currently exhibiting Jayshree Chakravarty’s *A Wild Ecology*—pleasant nature paintings made of tea stains, seeds and leaves. As a side note there’s Chemould Art Gallery—whose main space is in Mumbai with a much smaller offshoot in Kolkata—which works with more recognizable talents from Reena Saina Kallat to Shilpa Gupta and Lavanya Mani.



Jayashree Chakravarty, The Nature Whispers, 2018. Oil, acrylic, jute, leaf, cotton, paper on canvas © the artist, Akar Prakar, New Delhi

And that’s just the art... It’s worth every lost sleep cycle to get up early for Kolkata’s Mullick Ghat flower market—I’m talking 5am. Located next to the bank of the Hooghly River, it’s a feast for the senses: hundreds of flower sellers spread out their bounty of multi-coloured plants along the roadside before sunrise. In India, flowers are cultivated for weddings, religious rituals, small shrines—you name it. Walking through the market, endless floral offerings stretch into the distance, yellow and orange marigolds piled high and threaded into garlands interspersed with bags of white jasmine. You might even manage to catch the first Pehlwani wrestling of the day down at the river’s edge—men sizing each other up at dawn.

“It’s worth every lost sleep cycle to get up early for Kolkata’s Mullick Ghat flower market”



Chhau dance. Photography by Louisa Elderton

For historical buildings, head to the north of Kolkata, where the vestiges of India’s wealthiest elites stand in fading glory—families including the Mullicks and the Targores became eye-wateringly rich because of colonialism. A nineteenth-century Neoclassical mansion called the Marble Palace is named after the twenty-seven types of marble used on the floor and walls, and includes chandeliers, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and paintings by Ruben and Reynolds. Another large marble building worth visiting is the Victoria Memorial, dedicated to—you guessed it—Queen Victoria. In the memorial’s gardens, you may be lucky enough to see the eccentric masks and costumes of an all-male dance troupe from Bengal’s rural village of Charida, who perform the Chhau dance tradition.



Shopping-wise, New Market on Lindsay Street provides just about everything from fabric to swishy hairpieces. Nestled deep within the bustling market is Nahoum & Sons, Kolkata’s last Jewish bakery, established in 1902. A mouth-watering array of rum balls, lemon slices, sugared almonds and fruitcake are displayed in glass cases, which you can either stare at salivating, or get stuck in. Seemingly out of place, it’s the remaining symbol of Kolkata’s Jewish heritage, caught within a bustling city that feels simultaneously ancient and modern, with an energetic time register all of its own.