

Australia, Calcutta, Syria and Edmonton as seen through a Sea to Sky lens

Four young international artists create projects at Quest University as part of the Vancouver Biennale

By Cathryn Atkinson



PHOTO BY CATHRYN ATKINSON

THE WORLD MEETS SQUAMISH Artists Rathin Barman, Jonathan Luckhurst, Tammam Azzam and Kristen Mclver (l to r) are at Quest University as part of the Vancouver Biennale.

Four young international artists are calling Squamish home this summer as part of the Vancouver Biennale — and exploring how their worlds and this new region can shape their work.

Australian Kristen Mclver, Syrian Tammam Azzam, Indian Rathin Barman and Canadian Jonathan Luckhurst will be taking part in the residency until mid-July. All four said they were happy to be outside of an urban environment to work.

The four are sharing a home supplied by Quest University Canada, which they are also using as studio space. This allows them to swap cultural perspectives and ideas.

The first seven residencies took place in Squamish in 2014.

New York-based Mclver, who has had several solo shows in Australia and the U.S., calls the residency "fantastic."

"I can take some time out of a busy schedule that being an artist often entails. Being in a quiet place to think of new ideas. Often, that's where my concepts come out of, times like this," Mclver says.

She adds that being part of an international biennale is also good for a resume.

Her project is developing into a response to her time in Squamish, particularly meeting the First Nations community. Mclvers often used text, sound and words in her art, and is planning a piece around endangered indigenous languages.

"Australia has a similar history to Canada with regards to the treatment of the First Nations communities... with the express aim of eliminating languages," she says.

Dubai-based Azzam was an established painter in Damascus but the Syrian war turned him into a refugee in 2011.

For the biennale residency, he will create an installation based on his experiences of the war and its impact on his life.

"For me, it's a new experience to do this kind of work. Because I lost my studio, after I moved to Dubai I did digital art for three years. Now I'm back to painting, but I've been making drawings about real things, installations," he says.

"The biennale gives me a chance to do this in my career. It was also good to meet artists from around the world. We are very far apart but now we can discuss the things between us."

Azzam was due to take part in the biennale in 2014, but had trouble securing a visa for Canada. He is happy to be here this summer.

"Squamish is like a new colour for me. I came from grey, black and the yellow in Dubai. This is totally different and I can use this in my artwork as a connection to this place," he says.

Calcutta-based Barman is an installation artist who seeks "interventions in different urban spaces."

"I'm interested in architecture and development of the city. Calcutta is 20 million people living together; so many things going on. Coming here reminds me of my very small village," he says.

"It's fantastic to think about your work for a few weeks, developing a new project in relation to the local context."

In his work, using cardboard, Barman is going to compare Squamish and Calcutta, the chaos, the environment and the people.

"Maybe a roadside teashop, like you'd have in Calcutta," he laughs.

Edmonton-based Luckhurst is a photographer who attended the University of British Columbia. He plans to create an installation project using slide projection.

"This is my first residency and the first time projection will be a new medium in my work," Luckhurst says.

"We were asked to come up with a project based on the biennale theme of open borders and crossroads. My project is based on ecological crossroads, the constructed and natural environments and how they collide."

The residency program will continue until 2016.

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