

## Artists' Sanctuary

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# cultural index

the arts at a glance

## Artists' Sanctuary

Malihom Estate tucked away in Balik Pulau, Penang provides a retreat for artistic exploration

A fortunate few have spent time in Balik Pulau, Penang, atop Bukit Penara, a hill dotted with tropical fruit trees. Fewer still have been privileged enough to spend six months at the Malihom artist residency on the same hill, some 400m above sea level. The steep ascent to the privately-owned estate comes as a shock to the average urbanite. The air is crisp and cool, and there is a breathtaking view of rows and rows of trees. Peacefulness shrouds the hill — no motor, no incessant karaoke music from the neighbours, and no annoying ring tones. A mobile phone reception is thankfully poor atop Bukit Penara.

Businessman and philanthropist Datuk Seri Stephen Yeap and his architect wife Irene, built Malihom Estate in 2006. Apart from being a beautiful retreat, Malihom provides for artistic exploration through its artist-in-residence programme. Now into its second year, the RBS-Malihom Artist in Residence (AiR) Programme is the brainchild of Irene, who was inspired to start it after visiting another artist residency, Rimbun Dahan in Kuang, Selangor, few years ago.

Together with co-sponsors Royal Bank of Scotland (formerly known as ABN-MRO), AiR has provided more than a dozen international and local artists this year — working for six months at the retreat's studio and gallery and living in one of the four artist sanctuaries. Artists are screened by an advisory board, represented by the bank, Malihom, as well as

the Wawasan Open University, which is also the governor of AiR. The residency programme provides qualified artists living and studio space, a preparatory allowance and stipends over six months at Malihom, as well as a peaceful stay which is interrupted only by the thump of falling durians and incessant humming of cicadas.

AiR alumni Sharon Chin, Gabrielle Bates and Chan Kok Hooi speak about their works, expectations and the valuable experience of the residency programme.

**Gabrielle Bates**  
Although Australia-born Gabrielle Bates is no stranger to the region, she can still view it from an exotic perspective. Since 1993, she has produced and exhibited her artwork throughout Australia, Philippines and Malaysia. She did a residency at Rimbun Dahan in Kuang, Selangor before being awarded the AiR programme at Malihom.

Bates is a fervent durian lover and has adopted a kitten, Mexico, that wanders around her humble and spartan artist resident unit at Malihom. From her previous visits, she finds that Penang's energy is "very different from KL".

Bates makes it a point to immerse herself in the local culture. She absorbs Balik Pulau through her senses, "buying, tasting and exploring everything" at Balik Pulau's market.

The exposure has certainly crept into her work, as we learn. "(Goddess of Mercy) Kuan Yin has made an appearance," says Bates. She's describing a series of works

BY GRACE CHIN

PICTURES BY PATRICK GOH/THE EDGE

Chan (left) with Bates at the artists' simple residence

based on her observations of patterns in human behaviour and the obsession of acquiring and collecting. In this case, representation of gods and religious entities and the habit of accumulating is explored in discovering how patterns relate and become relevant to religious devotion.

"The idea I'm playing with is, what is spiritual is actually very material, but again, not at the same time — so it's a paradox," she explains.

The idea could offend some. The series *God in a Box* is an unconventional association of commercialism with religion. Bates sees sacred materials and ideas usually stored away, like in a box, which is how some of the titles are derived: *Forgotten* and *Cold Storage*.

Her first month has been very productive, she shares. "Although I am a full-time artist, I have other obligations back home. I don't know when I'll get a chance like this again."

Some of her ideas come from traveling around Southeast Asia. From the Philippines, an obsessive devotion with the Santo Niño dolls in Cebu, Manila, has seeped its way into her canvases. "It's a saint and a doll. At night, it wakes up and runs around doing good deeds; at dawn it returns and becomes a statue again, with muddy feet. It really appeals to my sense of humour. I like the way they look — like a Chucky doll."

Other religious representations also. She describes a mixture of Western and Eastern religious entities and deities. "I've really fallen in love with all the Buddhas and Kuan Yins in Penang, so they too have emerged in the works as well," she says.

Her time in Sydney with a collector of religious statues is the main influence in this series, Bates' explains. The series of different statues huddled together in her work are painted in shades of gold and brown, colours of value. "The feeling is that you have stumbled upon these treasures. These statues came to represent something — are they sacred, or are they just another object? When the different objects are put together, they're all there in their universes. It weighs them with a sense of life. It can be creepy, but when you've got an energy like that it creates interesting potential.

"It gets quite intense when they come together — they fight and complement each other. The oldest animistic statues, the Baal, and the elephant gods from Africa collide with each other. You need a neutral space (like a canvas), not a temple," she adds.

Bates' observation of attitudes and relationships towards religion in the West is that "people are not very religious anymore. There is a stronger emphasis on intellectualism or materialism — a religion

sculptures by former resident Katsumi Mukai stand before the artist studio and gallery at Malihom

Chin, photographed at Gallery Seksan where her recent exhibition *Chin Chai* was shown