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Artistic license

Montalvo Arts Center's residency program offers inspiring opportunities for creative pursuits

By Shannon Burkey

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Artist-in-residence Nilea Rohrer-Parvin works on a pastel piece that will... (Photo by Neal Waters)



Each morning, as Shelley Senter is awakened by the sunrise that penetrates her Saratoga cottage through the curtainless, floor-to-ceiling windows, she is reminded of how lucky she is. Peacefulness and serenity is not something she is accustomed to in her everyday life, but it is quickly becoming a vital part of her creativity and inspiration in this place she is temporarily calling home.

As a dancer, choreographer, teacher and mother, Senter says she does not have a lot of time to herself to be an artist. So when she was invited to live at Montalvo Arts Center for three months to take part in its artist residency program, she knew immediately it was an opportunity she could not pass up.

"I have been juggling art and family for some years," Senter says. "Time, space and the collaborative, supportive community here at Montalvo are giving me the opportunity to focus on process and practice and to develop some ideas that I have not had a chance to do with my family life to pursue."

Senter isn't the only artist taking advantage of Montalvo's tranquility and world-class facilities. Creativity is thriving at the arts center, and it is quickly becoming a Mecca for artists from all over the globe and of all disciplines seeking the solitude needed to compose their greatest pieces of work.

"To value, make sacred and to give artists a space to do what they need to do is invaluable and so utterly important and brave on their part," Senter says of Montalvo.

So invaluable, in fact, that Senter, a critically recognized post-modern dancer from the East Bay, says she cried the first time she saw the cottage and adjoining dance studio tucked into the Saratoga hillside that she would call home for three months.

"It's just unbelievable. I spent most of the first day crying because it's such a huge gift. I think I watered the grounds with my tears," she says.

Though today it is recognized as a leading program by artists from around the world, a smaller version of Montalvo's artist residency program has been around for years. From the time the villa was built, in 1912 by Sen. James Phelan as his summer home, it was a haven for artists. Phelan, a big supporter of the arts, often invited the leading artists and writers of his time to stay in his home and take advantage of its environment to create their work.

Per Phelan's request, upon his death in 1930 the property was to be made a public park, "used as far as possible for the development of art, literature, music and architecture by promising students." In 1939, the property was reopened as an arts center with a gallery in the villa and 10 dwellings for artists in residence, making it the third artist residency program in the country at the time.

Then in 2004, with a desire to take the program to a whole new dimension, the Sally and Don Lucas Artists Program was opened, replacing the original artist residency program. With \$10.5 million to build the facilities for the new program, six teams of architects and artists were put together to design the 10 discipline-specific live/work spaces and commons building that would house the artists.

"We brought in major architects working today with a ready interest in art," says Robert Sain, executive director of Montalvo. "Each architect collaborated with an artist to make sure each studio was geared strictly toward one discipline. We wanted each studio to be a retreat for the artist."

Nestled in the hills above the main villa at Montalvo, each space was individually built with the specific artist's needs in mind, including studios for musicians, writers, visual artists and dancers, as well as a commons building with a large kitchen, living room and dining room where the artists gather nightly for dinner together. In addition to a work space that was built to be the perfect environment for creations of all kinds, each living space also has a small kitchen, living room and bedroom surrounded by nature and tranquility at its best.

Pinaree Sanpitak, an internationally recognized visual artist from Thailand, says she doesn't think she would have been able to create the work she has recently accomplished if it had not been for her studio. Since arriving at Montalvo in April, she has worked on a painting series that she started a year ago but had not been able to finish. With the solitude of her studio and the inspiration she found in its surroundings, Sanpitak says she was able to accomplish more than she ever thought she would.

"The way I paint has changed in the three months that I have been here," she says. "The light is so amazing and dramatic here, and there is so much privacy. And the buildings are designed to match the artist's work. If I had been put in another studio, I don't think I would have been able to produce the work I have—I got matched with the right studio."

Nilea Rohrer-Parvin, a visual artist residing at Montalvo as a teaching artist fellow, says she cannot stress enough the importance of the privacy that Montalvo has given her, and with it, she has been able to evolve with her artwork.

"When you aren't interrupted in undiluted creative time, it's as if the borders and the boundaries are knocked away," she says. "With nothing to interrupt you, the depth of creativity is only limited by one's imagination. There is so much that occurs in the silence of oneself. The reason Montalvo is a gift is because it is hard to achieve that silence in everyday life."

Rohrer-Parvin, who is from Austin, Texas, is one of the few artists at the residency program who actually applied to be admitted (most are selected by an international panel). In 2007, the center created the Teaching Artist Fellowship, the first of its kind nationally, and put out a call for arts educators. More than 100 applied for the four-month residency, which would require them to not only work on their own projects but also teach at a local high school and work on Montalvo's education program.

Rohrer-Parvin, who taught at San Jose's Downtown College Preparatory while in residence, says for her, teaching is a reaffirming life experience, and she has enjoyed being a part of the new trail that Montalvo is blazing.

"Part of an artist's responsibility is to help illuminate the creative process in everyday life," she says, "and I find teaching very vital to my own work."

Rohrer-Parvin's path to Montalvo was unique. Most artists who come through the program cannot simply apply, but must be invited to do so by an ever-changing group of nominators and jurors affiliated with Montalvo. Those applications are then reviewed by a jury of recognized artists and professionals from within the artists' discipline before a decision is made.

For Senter, knowing that she was selected on her own merits by a group of her peers has been a large part of the self-discovery process since she arrived at Montalvo.

"It has validated me in a very deep way," she says.

Each day at Montalvo starts in the same way for Senter. She takes a morning walk along the grounds and collects a movement journal based on what she experiences along the way.

"Sometimes it is very literal, like maybe a statue. Other times the movement comes from what I see in nature. It is random and arbitrary, which is what I think choreography is," she says.

The movement journal has been the basis for the choreography she has been creating since she has been at the program.

"It has been wonderful that Montalvo has not required me to create a specific piece of work," she says. "It's been great going into the studio and not knowing what I'm doing and just being able to play around with different movements. Hopefully, a solo will come out of the raw material from my movement journal."

Executive director Sain says watching what the artists create while part of the program has made him realize that one of the greatest gifts you can give to an artist is time and space, and he is proud that Montalvo has created a site where that exists.

"To have the opportunity to entirely focus on their work, it's something where there are not enough places on the planet to make that happen," Sain says. "And to find a place this stunning, that is not so removed but in the epicenter of evolution and impact, well, it's really a phenomenal confluence of ingredients."

Viewing artist residency artwork

Although many artists come and go without the local community ever seeing what they worked on while at the Montalvo Arts Center's artist residency program, there is an upcoming special opportunity to view a piece created by visual and performance artist Lesley Dill while she was in residence. On Aug. 13, *Divide Light*, Dill's innovative new opera, which incorporates all 1,775 of Emily Dickinson's poems, will make its world premiere at the art center. The idea for this unique opera, which will feature the 48-voice The Choral Project, the Del Sol String Quartet and three operatic voices, was developed at the artist residency program as an interdisciplinary collaboration between Dill and composer Tom Morgan.

"*Divide Light* is a very special theatrical presentation--it's unusual for an opera to include a string quartet and choir, as well as operatic voices, plus visual elements all on stage," Dill says. "One of our goals for *Divide Light* is to further express what opera is today and with the inclusion of so many different voices and musicians, we are certainly achieving that goal. Montalvo Arts Center's quest for innovative artists and thinkers makes it the perfect venue for *Divide Light* and we are pleased to collaborate with this organization."

"*Divide Light*" premieres on Aug. 13 at 8 p.m. at the Montalvo Garden Theater. For tickets, call the Montalvo Box Office at (408) 961.5858 or visit www.ticketmaster.org.

Montalvo also offers a variety of concerts, lectures and exhibits throughout the year and the Project Space Gallery is open to the public Thursdays through Sundays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. For a complete list of upcoming programs, exhibits and tours, visit www.montalvo.org.