

ART

PLACE

ARTIST

MARTA SINGH .

Born and raised in Argentina, **Marta** is renowned for the skill of her crafting, her poetic use of language, unique expressiveness and passion of presence. Her one-woman shows lend language, body and voice to what comes forth when fairylore crosses paths with personal narrative. Expect beauty, depth and emotional impact.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Through listening, telling and deeply responding to folktales embodying physical and emotional journeys, we will image, voice, and shape the narrative of the immigration journey.

PARTNER SITE

Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) has been providing comprehensive settlement and integration services to the Ottawa community since 1978. OCISO's award-winning programs include community integration, public education, mental health counselling, school based programs, and English language instruction to newcomers.

OCISO directly serves about 10,000 immigrants and refugees every year. We have three locations in Ottawa (central and south). Our multi-faceted programs and services are delivered in over 50 languages to clients from 120 countries by OCISO's team of knowledgeable, skilled and professional staff. Our work is augmented by the generous efforts of our enthusiastic, caring and talented volunteers, both established and new Canadians.

ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place, a 3-year professional artist-in-residence program, addresses social issues by placing artists and arts groups in community settings to co-create art projects and provide free of charge arts programming. The 2015-2016 projects enable participants from non-profit groups, in Ottawa, to take creative journeys through theatre, dance, music, storytelling and visual art. Art Place amplifies voices in various underserved communities touched by the project, to tell their stories and share their unique perspectives.



INTERVIEW WITH MARTA SINGH

February 29, 2016

How would you describe yourself as an artist?

I am a storyteller. I tell stories from the treasure trove of universal oral literature – from which I draw to create my own performance material – not through film, dance, painting or writing, but orally, in the moment, through the spoken word.

What inspired you to pursue a career in the arts?

What else? A story!

What are some recurring themes in your art practice?

Oh, desire, love, lust, greed, wrath, compassion, curiosity, illness, death, power, tyranny, justice, war, loss, jealousy, revenge, abandonment, good, evil, beauty, ugliness, longing, blessings, curses, deceit, truth, betrayal, loyalty, survival, poverty, hunger, resilience, redemption, envy, grief, hope, spells, darkness, light, rebirth, quests, joy, adventure, resourcefulness, creativity, persistence, independence, perseverance, stubbornness, courage, faith, wholeheartedness, generosity, transformation, gold! The hero's journey. You know. Life as we know it.

What are your most important influences?

Carl Jung, *Beauty and the Beast*, Joseph Campbell, *Snow White*, Julio Cortázar, *Little Red Riding Hood*, My Grandmother, *Hansel and Gretel*, Jan Andrews, *Baba Yaga*, Jennifer Cayley, *Cinderella*, Katherine Grier. Every Friday and Thursday I spent with Juan Marcial Moreno.

What is your experience in art projects engaging social practice?

About three years ago, I heard about a pilot storytelling project in Berlin, Germany. It took place in a school with low literacy rates and a high-immigrant population. In a nutshell, listening to folktales and fairytales once a week for one year not only mediated the German proficiency of first grade and second grade students, but instilled in them the narrative power of the old tales. Furthermore, kids who had been unresponsive and unmotivated became thoughtful listeners and critical thinkers. They began to speak in

metaphor. Something came very alive in them. In 2012, the government of Berlin institutionalized the project, assigned it a permanent budget and made it part of the national education program. Imagine that! I did. And so, I have embarked on a collective adventure. Every Wednesday, from 9:20 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., as from this November until the end of next June, I will be telling folktales and fairytales to Miss Celia's class at Queen Elizabeth Public School, here in Ottawa. For the record, I look forward to mediating linguistic proficiency through the art of storytelling. Off the record, I fervently seek to awaken, nurture and support Miss Celia's children's ability to create their own images from the spoken word, to help them fill them with meaning and feeling that is relevant to their lives, to who they are and who they want to be in this world.

What did you gain from your experience?

You ask me to show you the gold that awaits at the end of the journey? Ask me in June!

How long have you been active in the Ottawa arts community?

Not long enough, not long enough!

What interested you about working with AOE Arts Council?

An unexpected conversation with fellow artist Christine Mockett, a participating first year ART PLACE artist during 2014-2015.

What made you want to participate in Art Place?

The priceless opportunity to take my art to people, places and communities that may not have experienced it otherwise, so that they may be moved further and deeper into the fabric of life by it, transformed by it, engaged in social and personal action by it, and in so doing, to help them experience storytelling as an art that tells our very own story and that is our very own human heritage.

What inspired you to pursue this project with this community?

This year, the Toronto Storytelling Festival hosted a three-day storytelling camp. Every day at noon, the camp hosted a story-talk.

The first talk featured Katherine Govier, founder and director of The Shoe Project, an ongoing writing workshop for women who are new to Canada. During the story-talk, an Afghani writer read her own shoe story. When her story started, I didn't know I was going to apply for a grant with Art Place. I didn't even know about the existence of Art Place. All I knew as I listened was that something was going to crack open. Like an egg. And be born. From within, I heard a little voice go, "Hey, *you* are an immigrant woman. Hey, your last solo show was born out of Argentinian shoes!" I went "Hey! What do you want from me? Shut up! Let me listen." And the little voice let go. Not for long. That was March 2015. In early May 2015, Christine Mockett emailed me a link to this grant. That is when the little voice roared, "Hey! This! This is what we want!" The rest is listening.

How would you describe the project you will be working on?

Immigration is such a long journey: from the known to the unknown; from what we loved to what is yet to call love forth in us; from who we were to what calls forth in us to be; from no "Canadian experience" to discovering new means, skills and resources to support life in a new country; from isolation and unworthiness to community and respect; from loss, despair and helplessness, to discovering our inalienable power and capacity for joy. This project will story that journey. It will seek to avail participants of the precious means that this art form afforded me on all of these journeys. It will strive to help participants embrace their journeys wholeheartedly and provide them with life-affirming tools to image, story and restory self, past, present, community and belonging. It

will endeavor to support them on their way home.

As an artist, what do you hope to get out of this process?

Ah! A crystal slipper, coal for my fire, a golden egg, three bristles from a silver pig, milk from a wild mare, a shaggy talking horse, a sword of power, the scales from my snake husband that my sisters burned in the fire. My mother's blessing. A glass of water. A crust of bread. A glimpse of home. A feather from the firebird!

What do you hope participants will gain from this process?

I seek to awaken participants to the narrative structure of folktales and fairytales, that it may illuminate participants' experience of life as story and reveal participants as heros and heroines of their own journeys. I hope this process will unveil and embody the moods, images, melody, poetry and diving rhythms of participants' own narratives. I hope they will hear the call to find, shape and voice their own stories.

How will your project give voice or expression to the social issue(s) you will be exploring?

In this work – the work of physically and emotionally absorbing, inhabiting, exploring, owning, journeying into a story's heart to be moved by it into creative action – lies a power capable of forever transforming both the ability and the capacity to narrate life, community and self. The uniquely singular way in which this creative power will manifest in each of the participants and in us, as a co-creating community, will dictate the shape of what will be voiced and expressed through it.

How will you know your project is a success?

In the way I least expect, as always!

STORYTELLER IN RESIDENCE, BREATHING

Blog post 1 – March 8, 2016

She struck me as an ambassador of the strength that fairytale heroines are made of. We shook hands and sat across each other. Two years, she had been in Canada. At OCISO, just a few weeks, volunteering to help bring Syrian refugees.

She asked all the questions. "What is the goal of your project here?" "Why do you do it?" "Why did you become a storyteller?" I told her. She nodded. "We need to find meaning in our lives," she said. "I like to explore art – no – to find in art things about ourselves, to explore. So

important. Especially now, with what's going on here, and in the world."

She told me other things she liked. To walk. Nature. Beauty. She walks a lot, she says. So much to see. So much beauty. "I used to be very active." She shakes her head. "Now, I want to contribute. I want life to be a commitment. You understand, yes?" I nod. "So much to learn!" She's been learning French. Now she wants to learn Spanish. And Persian. And how language changed my relationship to this land. I tell her. She nods. She knows of what I speak.

We travel the same road. We cannot go home, even if we go home. The past is a different country: that place we parted from where we can no longer arrive at. "Why did you come?" she asks. I tell her a love story. I ask what brought her to Canada. "I wanted a better life. As a human being, as a woman." I nod. Fairytale courage.

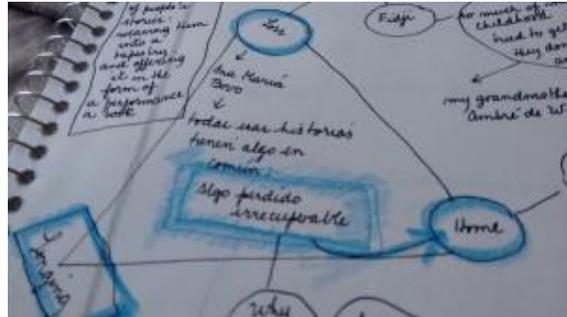
I walk her out, and as I hurry back to the storyteller-in-residence room, my nose quivers in the air. I stop. I track a scent down to the reception desk. "Something smells good here," I say. "Something I know!"

I lock eyes with the black, wide-hipped woman who makes pumpkins roll in Caribbean folktales. She sits behind OCISO's reception desk, on Thursdays. I sniff the air around her. "It is *you!*" People call her Viki. She holds out her hand. I press it to my nose and breathe in deeply. "It's crema Hinds!" I shout. "¡Crema Hinds! ¡Crema Hinds!"

En la mesita de luz, en el botiquín del baño, en el bolso playero, en los avisos de televisión, rosa la crema, rosa la tapita de plástico, rosa claro y rosa oscuro los tres pétalos de la etiqueta, rosa la nariz pelada por el sol por eso fría y todo, arde, arde hasta que absorbe, y entonces todo

es rosa y crema Hinds: mi mamá, mi madrina, Mar del Plata, the sand, the sea, the sun-burned skin from all those summers at the beach, from all those women who raised me, forever young in their scent, forever sauntering out of pink bathrooms, skins glowing, heads Hollywoodly wrapped in towels, filled with life to the brim, and me pulsing with that eight-year-old radiant longing, wishing if only, if only and forever all we could breathe was this happy crema Hinds.

But Viki shows me the bottle. It isn't Hinds cream. It is some white plastic tube with no



label and a pumping nozzle sticking out of it. She rolls her swivel chair towards me: "I know exactly what you mean! For me, it is Fidji. That perfume! *My childhood*. So much of my life! I search for it, but can't find it. The way it was, they don't make it anymore!"

And I know exactly what she means. We cannot go home, even if we go home. The past is a different country: that place we parted from where we can no longer arrive at. And what are we to do?

Walk! Search! Story! For the scent of meaning. For the scent of beauty. For every foreign scent where we belong, what are we to do but run to burrow our nose in the kind wrist of a black woman who knows, and breathe, breathe, breathe.

WHAT KAFKA SAID ABOUT A GOOD BOOK

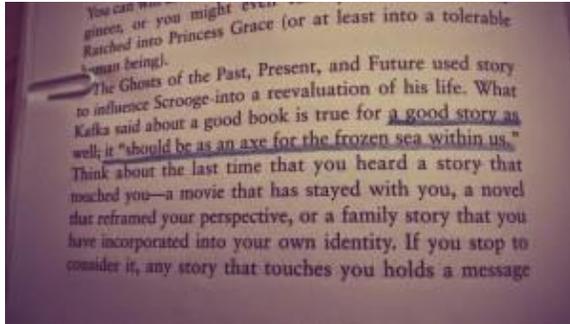
Blog post 2 - March 16, 2016

I didn't quite see her come in. By the time I shook her hand, she had sat herself as far from the storyteller in residence as the room would allow. I started looking for ways in, but nope. No

one told her stories where she grew up. She told none. She had no use for folktales. So.

I prayed for an axe. The good forces handed me The Rolling Pumpkin. I asked her for permission

to tell it. Permission was granted. A deep breath and Once upon a time, there was a little old lady who lived at the bottom of a very steep hill.



When the little old lady started singing rickatikatick, rickatikatick, here I go on my walking stick, something softened. When the little old lady talked the wolf into eating her later – was that laughter?! When I asked did you like the story: “Yes. Cause you’ve got to be smart! It’s like life. Someone’s always trying to get you.” And she told me.

How someone, over the phone, told a little old lady they were Canada Revenue Agency and unless she gave them her money, they’d send the police over to arrest her. So the little old lady said she’d be hanging up now, to get dressed and ready for the police, cause she had no money to give them.

BUT WHAT IS IT THAT YOU DO?

Blog post 3 – March 24, 2016

How to language it, eh? The work we do in this storytelling residency.

Take yesterday. Two young women and I. They had been in Canada for less than six months. One had come from China; the other one, from Ireland. To “What interested you in this project?” one replied “For my English. Is no good.” The other one shrugged, smiling.

I could tell you *what we did*, but that’s not *what happened*. I could tell you where we sat for the three hours of our time together, but we’d gone far, far away from there by mid-morning. I can tell you this: “True places are not found on maps.” Herman Melville told me.

And you too know of what he speaks.

You too have been in a house that you have loved. Perhaps it was home to you, perhaps your love for who lived there, for how life felt

How when people tried to eat away her quiet time at home cause they didn’t know what to do with theirs, she just told them “Listen, I don’t have a stove where I can take my phone to, so I must give my stove my undivided attention,” and hung up on them.

How a British lady had once told her, “If you ever live to be retired, get up, get dressed, get your breakfast and get going.” Cause staying home watching TV will do you in. And hanging around seniors all day will kill you.

What Kafka said about a good book came to me much later. At 4:00 pm, I asked her: “Shall we walk out together?” That’s when I saw her reach for her cane, make her way to the door, wave at me, as if rickatikatick, rickatikatick, here I go on my walking stick.

If you are lucky, the axe always cuts deeper than you intended. As I stood there, my frozen sea welled up to the throat, lapping at my waist, all I managed to say was, “Come next Thursday! I’ll tell you a wondertale!”

She said, OK. She said, maybe.

there, for who you were there, made it home to you. Then your story took you elsewhere. But wherever you went, you never forgot.

And time went by.

One day, you found yourself back in the land of that house you loved. You went to it, but what was this? Every room, a different color, a different purpose. The wooden floors? Replaced with carpet? Gone, the lovely furniture? And the ones you loved, gone, too.

It is the same address. The same street. The same building. But *it is not the same house*. That house, the house you loved, cannot be found on a Google map. But lost, it is not! It can be found inside you. Sometimes, by listening and responding to a fairy tale.

So, put into one sentence, that is the work we do. We go looking for true places.

PROJECT CHECK IN WITH MARTA SINGH

March 31, 2016

What changes are you noticing in the participants through the course of your workshops? Are you working with staff as well? What changes/impacts are happening with them?

When I first arrived, both storytelling and story were mostly associated with counselling, therapy or healing. This perception was very alive both among staff and clients who came to inquire about my presence in OCISO. A week or so into the residency, storytelling and story took up a new light: the shaping of the personal journey. "I'm here because I want to tell my story," I was told one Tuesday morning. In the last two sessions, folktale, fairytale, story, personal, journey took on a new meaning. There was, I sensed, a new awareness of what story and storytelling may offer both as an art form, as a source of pleasure, and as a way of experiencing our very own lives.

What issues are the participants voicing through this artistic expression in their participation in Art Place?

Only now, at the end of the fourth week of this residency, is commitment consolidating into a small group of three. In the first three weeks, staff members and clients interested in the program dropped by and stayed either for a little while or for the whole morning/afternoon, but did not return. They never met each other. They did not share their paths. Yet, as I worked one-on-one with whoever walked into the room, it struck me as remarkable that in every case fundamental aspects of the immigrant experience were lent image and voice by the work. Forefront in my memory are: the challenge of emotionally connecting to *here and now* after having severed all the internal and external ties to *there and then*; Canada's stunning natural beauty as a beacon of hope and a promise of a better life; the sense of home as an irretrievable, almost mythic moment in time and place; the need to find meaning, to sustain the new life; how long it

may take to reclaim one's joy, strength and trust; the urge to claim back our past, once we feel affirmed in our present if we are to thrive as who we fully are; the need to constantly reinvent ourselves; how, invariably, we do find our strength back; the all-affirming power of deep listening to support the shaping and the narrative of story and self.

What does a typical session look like and how do you work together to transition from exploring their personal journey and storytelling in a way that is moving towards a sense of transformation and empowerment?

We have not yet had a typical session (and although I did once long for one, I am now beginning to hope we will not have one!), because in all the sessions we have had, this has proved essential:

- Taking the time to meet participants *where they are* in relationship to story.
- Telling them a folktale or a fairytale.
- Shining light on the images that the listening brings forth.
Engaging the senses, to allow these images to speak.
- Building connections between the listeners and the fairytale.
- When it has been appropriate or requested, mining a particular image for its current relevance in the participant's life or journey.
Making myself vulnerable.
- Listening with everything I have and everything I wish I had!

I don't know how to *move* towards a sense of transformation and empowerment any more than I know to *make* a tree grow. The work we do has a way of its own. We do the work. Then the soil, the seed, the sun, the rain and the force that through the green fuse drives the flower do theirs.

LIKE OPERAS INTO SOFAS

Blog post 4 – April 14, 2016

And on the fourth Thursday of my residency, I arrived to the storytelling room early enough to keep Mustafizur company while he had lunch. Between bite and bite, Mustafizur asked me questions. It was his last question that caught my hand: “And what, if you please, do you expect will be the impact of this so very interesting project?”

I wrote the question down. It’s such a tricky one to answer. I’m never sure whether to sin on the side of too little or whether to sin on the side of too much. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost time. I sinned on the side of too little. Just after Mustafizur had left the storytelling room, the just-so answer caught my hand.

Once, long ago, storyteller Ruth Sawyer wanted her sofa upholstered. The good forces brought the master of a guild to her door. A little man he was, and very old. He was so old, he had been young before Germany was Germany. He had hardly measured the front of her sofa, when he told her his story.

He had been born in a little town in Bavaria, by the Danube. When he was 12, he began his

apprenticeship in Wurzburg. When he became an under-master, he went to work at the palace of King Ludwig. Every year, King Ludwig had all who worked for him take part in an opera. You could sing? You went to the chorus. You could play? You went to the orchestra. From the great cities, the King brought soloists. From Dresden, the King brought a conductor to direct the orchestra. Even the great Wagner came!

For a week the feast was held. Then everyone went back to work. And what this Bavarian upholsterer said, Ruth Sawyer always remembered: “All the goodness, the lift of the heart that we got out of playing in those operas, we would put back into our work – in the draperies and tapestries we hung, in the cabinets we made. Nothing was lost.” He said to Ruth Sawyer: “Madam, something of those operas will go into your sofa!”

Dear Mustafizur: This I know to be true. Nothing is lost in Story! Everything we gain in crafting and sharing the stories of the work we do will carry that work forward, and the music we play will find its way into the world. Yes. Like operas into sofas!

TO THE EXTRAORDINARY HEART OF LITERATURE

Blog post 5 – April 21, 2016

Two weeks into my residency, I discovered that OCISO runs a youth program, YOCISO. I called them, we conjured and I visited them in their creative headquarters at 1800 Bank Street, last Monday afternoon. The task I had been entrusted with? To elicit from a young circle the seed of a story, to be transformed into a script, to become a spoken word performance.

Have you ever asked yourself: what have you been unable to part with, after moving twenty-two times in the last fifteen years? What did you manage to leave behind, only to find how much you wish you hadn’t? What moment in life does

the shirt you are wearing carry? And what does that bright yellow bracelet you wear *just because you like it* say about the invincible African sun of this Canadian winterland you walk?

In a circle of five we listened. Intensely. In a circle of five we watched the ordinary transform, take a life of its own, take on meaning, take on images. In a circle of five we wondered. Truly. What transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary? And is that not what great literature does? And is not story at the

great heart of literature? And who lives at the heart of story, but us?

Have you ever tried it? Go on! Try it now. Choose a friend, a good colleague, a trusted neighbor. What are they wearing? What do they carry in their shirt pockets? Go not for the gold,

but for the ordinary grit of everyday life. Ask for the story of it. And when the story comes, listen. Intensely. Then, watch it transform! Watch it become, the way we and our lives do when listened to, the extraordinary heart of literature.



Photo used with permission from YOCISO

AND ONE FOR THE ROAD: THE FEELING IMAGE OF SUCCESS

Blog post 6 – May 6, 2016

Last Tuesday, as my Art Place residency came to its end, I met the question that awaits at every project's ending: How was your project a success? I answered the question with these true-to-fact words:

It broke new ground – it was my first storytelling residency. It lifted me above a stage-centred practice into artistic insights I could have never otherwise gleaned. It raised me above the fear of what I could or couldn't do and opened windows to everything that *is* possible and that – thank to this residency – I *will* endeavour to make possible, to bring art, artist and community together. This residency was my teacher.

It put every creative belief to the test! It drove me straight out of my known comfort zone to

reveal how much stronger I was in resources and means. It transformed logistic weaknesses into creative strengths that I used to expand, deepen and enrich every participant's understanding and experience of *story*. It taught me how to allow every single woman who walked into the storytelling room to discover how deeply an image can connect to a lifetime and how relevant a one-thousand year old fairy-tale can be today.

And yet ... A big part of my job is to hunt for images – to speak true to story – brimming with feeling, meaning and resonance. In my line of work, it's *what it feels like* that tells you *what it looks like*. So, I thought to myself: Success. What does it feel like? Wednesday and Thursday I hunted. Like a hawk.

Then Friday came along. At yoga, the teacher said we'd be doing the wheel next. I always pass. My yoga practice is not that strong. Got wobbly thighs. Skinny arms. What if my lower back gives? And I'll be 49 next January. And, once, six years ago, walking my dog, I slipped on the ice and got three months of vertigo. Hold the crown of my head above the floor like that?

Only last Friday, my larger than life teacher was teaching. She stood at the top of my mat. She



showed me how to wrap my thumbs and fingers around her ankles. She said now push yourself up. My head rolled back and the crown kissed the mat. She guided something along my spine upwards, held it softly, and like a rainbow, my whole back arched and lifted, and my head rose above the ground.

At long last! I was breathing! With the full capacity of my lungs! With the ribs expanding me upward and forward! A long-hunted image brimmed with meaning, feeling and resonance. And I thought to myself: Yes! This is what it feels like! To trust the strength of what is offered. To rise over the fear of fallible. To rise above the thought of weak. To hear the heart pump at new altitude! To take in your full horizon and see the known anew!

There, said my teacher. That's what it feels like. Now you know.

BREAKING NEW GROUND WITH 'STORY': CONCLUDING THOUGHTS WITH MARTA SINGH

May 24, 2016

How would you describe your overall experience with Art Place?

Ground-breaking!

What are some of the most significant things you've learned through out your project? How was your project a success?

This residency lent image, sound, meaning and feeling to how I can – and thank to this residency, will – take my art to the larger community. It afforded me artistic insights I could have never gleaned otherwise. It opened windows to everything that is possible – and that, thanks to this residency – I will endeavor to make possible, to bring art, artist and community together. It opened doors to people and resources that could support me in that endeavor. It put every single creative, artistic and professional belief to the test (not unlike the tests heroes and heroines meet in folktales

and fairytales!). It drove me straight out of my known comfort zone and showed me how much larger and generous my available comfort zone turned out to be. It expanded, deepened and enriched every participant's – including my own – understanding and experience of "story."

What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when learning about your project?

If they work for an organization, I hope that they may consider hosting an artist in their midst. If they are artists, I hope that they consider applying for an Art Place Residency. If they are in a position that allows them to support these projects in any way, I hope that they be moved to support them. If they are funders, I hope that they will fund generously, in the knowledge that the reach of their generosity will span much, much further and deeper than numbers and charts will ever be able to show!

In what ways did or will the community benefit from your project?

Mine was the first project of this kind that OCISO had ever hosted. Much learning took place. Everyone was as interested as delighted in the idea that “their organization” could be the actual host of an artistic residency; that “their organization” and the arts at large could collaborate inside their doors. It took time to spark insights and it may take time to find the resources to fund them, but this project broke ground for them too, and they are already looking for wills and ways to make this collaboration part of their practice.

In your opinion, what did the participants learn from the project?

Every participant experienced “story” in a way that was different from what story had meant to them before. Every participant was stunned to discover how deeply an image can connect to a lifetime and how relevant a one-thousand year old fairytale may be today.

Do you have anything else you would like to share about your project or the program?

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for this opportunity and for the rock-solid support I was offered along the way.

**Art Place is made possible by the following supporters:
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