





Rose Children's Home

*Artreach teams artists with children's NGOs to create fun imaginative spaces. Projects are collaborative: the children decide what they'd like to paint and they do most of the painting. They enjoy this hands-on creative experience and when it is over they get to live or work in the space they have transformed. The Rose Children's Home was Delhi based artist Alexis Halliwell's second project with NGO Salaam Baalak Trust. **Charly Dugdale** writes about the venture.*



BEFORE OUR CAR HAS EVEN STOPPED GIRLS ARE spilling out of the door. They're trying to reach Alexis first, to greet her with affectionate hugs and get their requests in early. With her help they have spent an intense week painting their home and they have clear ideas about the finishing touches required. "Didi didi, we must have a sign that says "Rose Children's Home,"" says Jyoti, "One more big parrot in our room," pleads Komal. At the moment 25 girls aged between 5 and 17 live at the Rose Home, a four storey house tucked behind the airport in Palam Village, Dwarka. The NGO Salaam Baalak Trust runs this and five other such full-time care shelters in Delhi, housing children from the streets or from street families. They aim to provide these boys and girls with "security, a sense of home and an opportunity to receive all the critical inputs of childhood." Rose girls go to school every day and have classes in dance, computers, sports, needlework, embroidery, life-skills. They have access to medical care and counsellors.



COVER STORY

Alexis hugs the girls and making a mental note of their requests enters the building surrounded. The first thing she notices is that they have carried on painting the stairwell. "We only started this late yesterday," she says to me in amazement, "Look how far they've taken it!" We crane our necks upwards to the second floor where work has stopped only because the paint has run out.

I look around. The transformation is thrilling. A week ago the place had looked institutional, with bare grubby walls, "like an office" said programme head Meenakshi; now it feels much more like a home. The girls liken it to a garden.

On the walls of the main room on the ground floor are – appropriately – three rose trees with colourful birds perching in their branches. Downstairs, the once gloomy basement (an indoor play and study space) is a punchy lime green with a frieze

of elephants marching along it. In the first floor dormitory a line of girls, in the style of "Charlie and Lola" children's books, dances along the wall. And on the second floor, in the older girls' dormitory, a giant shimmering peacock, palm trees and a collage of cut out elephants and butterflies make another cheerful garden-like room. I remember the first day of painting when Roopi (the third of our artreach group) and I started. We had had too many rollers and too little control and used up far too much paint. But covering their bare walls with forest green was fun and liberating for all of the girls. Programme head Meenakshi told me later, "I was so happy when five year old Laxmi was rolling the paint. 'Now they do it with us!' she said, pulling me downstairs to see... She couldn't believe that she was allowed to do the painting. She was so happy and I was so happy to see that."

They managed the more difficult bits too: the corners and top sections where the green wall met the white ceiling were expertly handled by Jyoti, Roshni and Tarannum working up the step ladder. At the end of our session washing out rollers and paint trays on the roof erupted in to an impromptu Holi party: faces, hair, clothes all turned goblin green.

The following day Alexis was drawing life size girls on the wall of the first floor dormitory. One drawing for each girl who sleeps there. They had very clear ideas, "I want mine to have a dress," "I want jeans," "Make mine short, "No salwar kameez." Once Alexis had drawn the outline, each child painted in their own clothes and face and hair. "I couldn't draw quick enough! They were on me," she laughed.

Most of the ideas – the roses, butterflies, trees, and so on – came from brainstorming sessions with the girls, but the "self-



portraits" idea was Alexis's, inspired by her daughter and younger sister and their "dressing up, innocence, and imaginary worlds... These girls haven't had too much of that I don't think."

Today, the final day of the project, it's barely possible to keep track of the action: girls and adults are running up and down stairs, in and out of rooms with paint and brushes and trays and glue and paper. "It's a management thing, crowd control," laughs Alexis as she's pulled in five directions. Downstairs in the basement I find her father, a doctor (and DIY expert), perched up a ladder finishing the lime green. In the first floor dormitory girls are completing their figures, neatening outlines, adding hair accessories. Komal is quietly painting her parrot in the second floor dormitory and there is sticking on of cut out butterflies in the stairwell. Outside Jyoti and Tarennum are painting a sign and more butterflies over the door.

At around 4pm things start to wind down. We're all painted out. And it's time to go back to our comfortable homes and our families. The girls ask hopefully, "Are you coming tomorrow, didi?" and we have to say no. "When we left on that last day I was really quiet, I had a heaviness from it," Alexis recalls, "I remember thinking 'Oh I just hope they're going to be all right.'" I know what she meant. After such an intense collaborative creative effort, a bonding, leaving the home felt like an abandonment.

Revisiting after a couple of weeks is therefore a great pleasure, a happy reunion, and girls and staff (they painted too) seem pleased with their handiwork. "The butterflies bring good luck," says Neelam didi, "and they're also symbols of independence." "It's fresh, like a garden,"



Alexis with her team

smiles Komal. "The parrot looks like it's about to start talking to me," laughs Reet, and Roshni chips in, "the birds are about to start flying." "The girls are like our friends, now we don't feel alone," the younger ones chorus. And they all agree that it feels much more like a home and that because they painted it themselves it feels like it's their home. We talk it through later. I love the way these projects are about creating intensively for a short period of time, the way they engage people to such a degree, taking us all out of our humdrum lives into new quite exhilarating territory. I love that they are always collaborative and can move in unexpected directions all of a sudden. And that the work is permanent or at least good for a couple of years so the children who make it get to enjoy it every day.

But in the end for Alexis it was more about the connections she made with the girls than about the painting. "I found the girls deeply moving," she tells me, "maybe because they were girls and many of them the same age as my own children... All the things that are missing in their lives, I just wanted to fill those gaps. You start off thinking 'Oh it's an art project,' but it's not actually, the art is secondary to the contact, the love and the contact." 🌱