

February/March 2020
\$2.95

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Ravi RAJAN

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS

MEET THE PRESIDENT OF CALARTS

Ravi Rajan

BY ARNOLD BRYANT
PHOTOS BY JOIE DE VIVRE PHOTOGRAPHIE

For nearly six decades, CalArts has been known to be a space that ignites the passions of artists through education and immersive experiences, bringing about a multi-disciplinary community. Created by Walt Disney at the height of his fabled career, this renowned college of the arts has produced innovators, such as Tim Burton, Mark Bradford, Brenda Chapman, Stephen Hillenburg, Todd Gray and Cecily Strong, who have shaped our world through their creative lenses. At the helm of this school sits someone who found his calling for engaging the young minds of the future through artistic expression.

Ravi Rajan was raised in Norman, Oklahoma, and knew early on that he wanted to teach and work with youth. Rather than following in his family's footsteps in science he was inspired by the innovations in art, writing and music of the Harlem



Renaissance. “Growing up I knew that I liked kids and liked teaching; at first, I wanted to be a pediatrician... but in high school I was really immersed in the art and culture of the Harlem Renaissance. It was at a Romare Bearden exhibition that I attended where I found a moment of clarity. At the same time, I studied photography and trumpet because I loved Gordon Parks and Miles Davis.” Ravi decided that, “doctors help people live but art gives people purpose.” From this moment on, he chased his purpose and found his way to New York. “After finishing my undergrad in Oklahoma, I went to Yale for my graduate degree, and from there I ended up in New York. I loved the idea of New York and always really wanted to live there.” In his time on the east coast, Ravi got the opportunity to play in Broadway shows and underwent one of the most defining moments of his life. “I was living in New York during 9/11 and remember seeing the towers on fire from a roof top and hearing the sirens... days later I was heading to work on Broadway, getting off the train, and a group of guys started hurling insults at me, using the N-word and shouting. This was the first time this had happened to me in New York. When I got back to my apartment, teaching came back to mind. I thought about how I could get closer to young people so that generational change can happen.”

Working closely with department heads and other staff members, Ravi builds relationships throughout the community and further, so that CalArts remains one of the top ranked-schools in the arts. “Every day is

different, I have a lot of meetings with different people either at the school or in the community; there is a lot of fundraising involved and relationship building which is a large part of my job.” While keeping to the mission of CalArts, Ravi and his team work tirelessly to provide a space for creative cultivation despite the underfunding of art education and the misunderstanding that an art degree is not as useful as traditional STEM fields. “Our students engage in a different process. Although they understand that reading and writing is important, they engage in different vocabularies of expression: a musician is choosing to do it audibly; a dancer chooses to do it through movement; when you go to see a documentary film, you are still learning and understanding...you’re still engaging with ideas.” Students from around the world come seeking to learn those different vocabularies, finding inspiration in many things and creating a thriving multi-disciplinary community.”

The school and the community around it continue to grow and with that growth Ravi is looking to the future adding a new perspective on higher education and extending the vision of CalArts. “CalArts and Santa Clarita have grown parallel since the school opened...now we are partnering with companies like Westfield to get the students’ art out there more, and engaging with the local school districts. I am just so thankful to this community for embracing us the way it has; it has been really great to get to know Santa Clarita.”