We cannot be humans without art

For the owner and director of eponymous art gallery Sundaram Tagore, it’s not unusual that the Gillman Barracks’ new life as an arts district is experiencing growing pains.

The 52-year-old, who owns galleries in New York and Hong Kong, opened an art gallery there just a year ago. My Paper speaks to the globe-trotting art gallery owner on how Singaporeans are developing a palate for art, and why that is enough for him to remain optimistic about the art scene here.

How do Singaporeans perceive art today?

The first time I participated in an art fair here was in 1993. Most of the people who came in and saw the collection of impressionist works from famous names like Pissarro and Manet thought they had walked into a museum. I believe that, at that point, very few people interacted with art. They did not see art as relevant in their day-to-day existence. That has changed dramatically today. Look at the number of art galleries here, the number of art exhibitions and museum presentations, the media’s coverage of art, and people talking about art. Singapore has definitely acquired an artistic patina. There are a lot of very talented local artists, but emerging and established, like Jane Loo.

I think it is the result of a combination of people being interested in art and the government taking the initiative... Singapore has done really well (economically) and has taken care of its inheritable future, but now people see that there’s a need to focus on the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of living.

Gillman Barracks, reopened with a bang a year ago, but things have quietened down since.

Any thoughts on this? It cannot really work, and now it’s going through some growing pains. With every organization or individual, it’s only natural that there are struggles. You can’t expect everything to be hunky-dory. It’s also because the Asian culture, at the same time, both ancient and new. So many things are happening across Asia, and people go from one new thing to another very quickly. Attention span is short, and as we want to learn fast.

In Europe, people usually spent a lot of time and attention at a museum, either for pleasure or because they want to learn, or be in an introspective and reflective state. Very few Asians, whether in Hong Kong, Mumbai or Singapore, do that.

But I’m very optimistic about Gillman Barracks purely because Singaporeans have a voracious appetite for art now. They have a real interest in it but they don’t know how to approach it. Where do they go, what’s an art gallery? What do they need to see, what kind of discussion are they supposed to have?

That’s why education is important, like the art lectures, talks, and tours where Gillman Barracks offers. They contextualize the works and lay out the structure, talk by brick, on which culture will be built.

As a collective, Gillman Barracks has to be more proactive and drum up things up. We need to repackage, look at whatever is missing, and fill those. And the public has to show up to support, and give it a little bit of time to come together.

Should art be viewed as an investment? This is one thing I steer away from. Art as an investment means that the art is only of value if it sells, which is, for me, the wrong approach.

We cannot be human beings without art. It’s fundamental. People were drawing in caves some 40,000 years ago. It comes down to that as human beings, we need to express ourselves, and art is a kind of inner expression. It’s also a more passionate about art and learn about it, immediately, you become cognizant about what is rich and powerful in the artistic context.

If you have the eyes and the knowledge to interact with such works, you will find that they can rise in value in the terms of thousands. Art — not for investment’s sake — has the