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We cannot be humans without art



Q&A
Art-gallery
owner
**SUNDARAM
TAGORE**

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 gallerist 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 Renoir 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 exhibitions and museum presentations, the media's coverage of art, and people talking about art.

Singapore has definitely acquired an artistic patina. There are also a lot of very talented local artists, both emerging and established, like Jane Lee.

I think it's the result of a combination of people taking interest (in art) and the government taking the initiative... Singapore has done really well (economically) and has taken care of its infrastructure, but now people see that there is 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 opened really well, and now it's going through some growing pains.

With every organisation or individual, it's only natural that there are struggles. You can't expect everything to be hunky-dory.

In a way, it's also because the Asian culture is, 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 all we want is instant gratification.

In Europe, people usually spend a whole afternoon 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 art 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 that Gillman Barracks offers. They contextualise the works and lay out the structure, brick by brick, on which culture will be built.

As a collective, Gillman Barracks has to be more proactive and drum things up. We need to regroup, look at whatever is missing, and fulfil 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 60,000 years ago. It all comes down to that – as human beings, we need to express (ourselves), and art is a kind of inner expression. But, if you're really passionate about art and learn about it, invariably, you become cognisant about what is rich and powerful in the artistic context.

If you have the eye and knowledge to interact with such works, you will find that they can rise in value in the tens of thousands. Art – not for investment's sake – has the



ON DISPLAY: Jason Wee's Self-Portraits series (Drowned Dog) can be viewed at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery's Anthropos showcase. PHOTO: JASON WEE

tendency to leap in terms of value, both perceptual and tangible.

JACQUELINE WOO

Anthropos, a showcase of the works of Thai and Singaporean artists, is the latest exhibition at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery. It runs till Oct 13.