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THE SINGAPORE CONVERSATION

WORDS JONATHAN TAN PHOTOS ALBERT TAN

Gallery owners here share their thoughts on the vibrant local art scene and tell us more about the up-and-coming Singaporean names that have caught their eye

CRUZ PHUA AND DANIEL FONG

The Art Fellas

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

The increasingly vibrant art scene in Singapore is mainly driven by the convergence of wealth from the region into Singapore. As wealth increases, so does the demand for lifestyle products like art. In addition, government support is also important. With three major art schools in Singapore offering tertiary education, this helps to raise overall art literacy.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

Of course, some of this vibrancy will directly translate into art purchases. The infusion of cash from the private sector is the second wing to help sustain our artists and enable them to further develop their trade. The other wing being governmental funding.

What are the challenges faced in promoting Singapore artists and do how u overcome them?

The question is two-fold actually. One is generally the challenge in promoting art in Singapore, and then promoting Singapore artists.

Level of art literacy and the vibrancy of the art scene has definitely picked up in recent years. However, compared to developed/ matured markets, we are still not getting ourselves into the sweet spot yet.

The challenge is in how to get more people to be interested and buying art. One strategy our gallery adopts is through active and innovative engagement of corporations. With increased literacy and exposure, people become more predisposed to buying art.

As for promoting Singapore artists, the occasional challenge may be the unrealistic expectations they may have. We are however generally able to overcome them with creative working arrangement to align them to our strategies.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

Singaporean artists could seek further breakthrough by having key representations and showcases with reputable platforms or galleries overseas. The Art Fellas' vision is to establish ourselves well in the global art scene, bringing our Singaporean artists to a bigger stage.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

They would be our key artists from our gallery such as Leo Hee Tong, Yeo Siak Goon and Chan Chang How, just to name a few. Most of them have decades-long track record, with art award wins and a unique stylistic identity in their work.



IOLA LIU

Asia Art Collective

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

I think that this is a very positive sign of a fast growing art scene and art market. There are more art galleries than ever, with both international and local art galleries bringing out a very diverse mix of artists and introducing new programmes. Many programmes organised by private galleries are accessible to the public, and increasing crowds are participating and looking forward to art-related events and activities. The art scene in Singapore will continue to grow and that's great for everyone.

For the private art gallery, a vibrant art scene stimulates the art market and influences a culture of art appreciation and art collecting. We are seeing many younger art collectors emerging and a more active secondary art market for Singapore artworks.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

All artists require a global stage and exposure to a wide international audience. Singapore is a highly cosmopolitan city, and a very vibrant and dynamic art scene will draw more local and international interest and participation in art-related events - museum shows, art exhibitions, fairs, auctions. There is more knowledge and understanding of Singaporean artists and more exposure to their works. This promotes appreciation of local artworks.

I think that Singaporean artists are motivated by the increasing public interest in their art, and it's a great encouragement that an international audience is growing to appreciate Singapore art. An increasing number of major art exhibitions, art fairs and auctions give Singapore artists and their art an international platform and also raises their profile.

What are some of the highlights / challenges you've encountered in promoting Singaporean artists and their work? How did you overcome them?

A major challenge I encounter in promoting Singaporean artists is a lack of knowledge and art appreciation of some local buyers. I feel that new art buyers are very savvy. They are inquisitive and quick in learning about Singaporean artists, especially the ones they have an interest in. New

art buyers are visiting art galleries, auctions and art fairs and exposing themselves to a wide variety of art. I feel that a very vibrant art market gives the local buyers a lot of information and more transparency, and local buyers are gradually well-informed and confident of Singaporean artists. I would communicate with our collectors and show them the artworks by artists we represent and guide them in understanding the artists. There is an interesting process which a new collector goes through to pick up an artwork that he or she really enjoy and is also happy with the decision. Not being rushed into buying, but taking time in understanding the local art market, the Singaporean artists out there, and then finally finding the artworks which appeals - this is a very enjoyable process.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

Every artist has a defined style, which is a reflection of their influences. I think that the work of Singaporean artists is special and interesting as Singapore is a giant melting pot of cultures. I think that our local artists are influenced by this, which sees them produce very exciting work. I think that the increasingly vibrant, fast-growing art scene and art market will be able to promote and propel Singaporean artists to a global stage.

To do this, Singaporean artists need to persevere and continue to be motivated to produce the best artworks and be confident of their art.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

The prices of Singaporean artists have risen in the past five years, and that is due to an increasing appreciation and understanding of Singaporean artists and their artworks. But they are still undervalued. Singapore's first-generation artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Georgette Chen have been highly successful in pioneering a unique Nanyang style of art which not only defines their own experiences, but also Singapore during the nation-building years. Fan Chang Tien, a first-generation artist has made great contribution to the development of ink painting in Singapore.





JASDEEP SINGH

Gajah Gallery

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

The contemporary art scene in Singapore has definitely progressed in recent years; in terms of the way art and individual artists have been recognised both in the market and in local culture. This growth in appreciation has fuelled increased art activity, including international art fairs such as Art Stage setting up in our own country – which has been fantastic for artists across the South East Asian region. There have been a few setbacks or rather missteps, where forced developments created an imbalance in the industry and some galleries were affected by this; however I am very optimistic about the upcoming opening of National Gallery Singapore. I believe it will boost the prestige and appreciation of fine art locally and regionally, and it will certainly contribute to Singapore's position as a Southeast Asian art centre.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

The establishment of Singapore as the art hub of Southeast Asia has been a phenomenal on-going effort by galleries, private institutions and government agencies. The presence of art fairs solidifies Singapore as a destination for collectors and the greater art community. Where previously local galleries had to extend resources overseas in order for our artists to reach the international market, now we can experience the international market visiting us on our own ground.

Developments like these greatly encourage Singaporean artists and their work. The increasing number of commercial and non-commercial programs has created a lot of targets for artists to achieve, it is surely healthy. And the increased media attention has brought awareness to local names, generating opportunities for them to exhibit their work well beyond Singapore; artists like Suzann Victor and Jason Lim have been featured prominently in Hong Kong, Yogyakarta, and as far as Havana, Cuba.

What are some of the highlights / challenges you've encountered in promoting Singaporean artists and their work? How did you overcome them?

Prior to the South East Asian art boom in 2007, many galleries, ourselves included, found it difficult to promote artists mainly due to financial constraints from a scattered market – there just wasn't as much of an audience for contemporary art then.

Today, the art culture of Singapore has grown vastly, and more and more we engage with educated audiences and collectors. We've found that investing heavily in our artists has led to greater opportunities.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

Entering the international art market is challenging for any artist, so linking up with galleries that have international ambition certainly helps. We regularly participates in various art fairs around the world; our artists have been featured in Hong Kong, Jakarta, Yangon, New Delhi, London, Havana, and most recently in our new gallery in Yogyakarta. It is vital for Singaporean artists to be bold about exhibiting in other countries, but they can also build a strong foundation for themselves by exhibiting locally as well.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

There are many too choose from, but I must say, the late Teng Nee Cheong is an artist that I will always admire. In 2009 he started working towards his Tattoo series, which can be seen in the book *Those the Gods Love Grow Mightier*, one of his last projects with our gallery. His sensitivity to the human figure was astounding; he paired intricate and delicate curves with an almost aggressive, dark colour palette that brought a sensual weight to his work. This contrast made his paintings distinct and iconic. He was building this body of work for an exhibition in 2013 before he passed away, and I firmly believe these works secure his place as an honored artist in the history of Singapore Art.

Another artist who constantly surprises me is Suzann Victor. She is one of the pioneers in the Singaporean Contemporary Art scene and her work has travelled across Europe and Australia. Her work manifests in various forms, from towering installations to tiny glass fragments – a testament to her versatility and daring.

Among the up-and-coming artists, Ng Joon Kiat is one I've been watching for a while as well. His work at the 2013 Singapore Biennale titled *Lit Cities* was the first to catch my attention. If his work is in any way indicative of the next generation of contemporary art in Singapore, the local community is in for an exciting scene. With the influx of ideas and investment in the local art culture, I expect to see more inspiring Singaporean artists in the coming years.

PATRICIA LIANG

Mulan Gallery

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

Despite being portrayed to be vibrant, the Singapore art scene has been rather quiet. Although many attend art events, buying has not been strong. Appreciation of art in Singapore is still growing but has yet to mature. With increasing numbers of galleries and art events (like Art Stage), I am confident the art scene in Singapore will continue to grow in the years to come.

Today, however, Singapore is a very small market. Galleries here are vying for the same artists, artworks and collectors. Reputable art fairs like Art Stage still depend largely on foreign buyers. With the market slowing down and increasing operational costs, a number of foreign and local galleries have already disappeared from the art scene.

Moreover, auctions here target mostly Indonesian collectors and a small group of local collectors. Serious collectors travel abroad frequently to visit international art fairs and exhibitions all over the globe to hunt for art work. Hong Kong, on the other hand, is favoured by the large auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's. These top two auction houses conduct their auctions in Hong Kong because of the more developed industry and its potential to access a huge Chinese market.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

The increasing numbers of art fairs and art galleries have definitely created platforms and opportunities for the younger emerging Singapore artists to exhibit their works.

What are some of the highlights / challenges you've encountered in promoting Singaporean artists and their work? How did you overcome them?

Unfortunately, the local collectors are not very supportive of our emerging artists as they tend to compare them with the more established artists who have already made a name for themselves in the market. Despite rising affluence and a greater willingness to invest in art, many people are not really willing to pay big dollars for local work. As most Singaporean artists are only known locally (including our pioneer second-

generation artists), only a handful of Singapore artists have a strong following. Therefore, Singapore artists need to be realistic when pricing their work. With many international art fairs accessible with the advent of cheap travel, collectors have access to a wide choice of artwork if they have a budget of say, S\$10,000.

In some cases, our gallery has compromised by taking lower commissions in order to give local artists an avenue to showcase their work when we find their work interesting. The artistic journey is a very challenging one without any short cut. Unfortunately, many of our local artists are not full-time artists as they need full-time or part-time jobs to supplement their income.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

The Singaporean artists have to be disciplined in their approach on top of creating original and high-quality work. It is also important for them to upgrade themselves frequently by taking up overseas residencies, attending overseas art fairs and interacting with other artists.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

Singapore has a handful of emerging artists who are at their peak and have broken into global art markets. Take for example Sonny Liew, an Eisner-nominated cartoonist. He has worked with the likes of Marvel, DC, First Second Books and Dr Fate. Another artist is Koh Hong Teng, a local graphic novelist who has won international acclaim, winning a Bronze at Japan's 2014 International Manga Awards for his graphic novel 'Ten Sticks and One Rice'. A further example is Ee Shaun. He was recently commissioned to paint the one kilometre-long mural hoardings for Project Jewel, the new retail lifestyle complex at Changi Airport.

In addition to the above, there have been some outstanding ceramic artists too in Singapore. Agnes Lim, Tan Gek Lin, Koek Chwee Kim, Suriani Suratman and Hazel Ng, all were Iskandar Jalil's students — these are some names whose works have garnered a strong interest among many ceramic collectors.





STELLA CHANG

Yavuz Gallery

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

I think it is great that the art scene in Singapore is getting better and better every year. With more arts events going on across all sectors, be it visual, music or performing arts, the people of Singapore are being exposed to more art every year.

The very basis of art is a platform of thought. It is a medium where people are trying to communicate. Singaporeans are thus able to communicate and be introduced to various different ideas and experiences from around the world, without actually leaving Singapore itself.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

I think this has created great new opportunity for Singaporean artists to showcase their works. Artwork should be shared. It should not be just produced and left in the artist's studio. But we need platforms in which to showcase the works.

With more galleries, museums and art fairs opening in Singapore every year, there are more opportunity for artists – not just Singaporeans, but artists from the region to share their works. And with more exposure to our local and regional artists' works, the Singaporean public can also understand our local artists better.

What are the challenges faced in promoting Singapore artists and do how you overcome them?

We go to many international fairs each year, either as participants or visitors, and a highlight is always seeing positive reactions to Singaporean artists and artworks on an international platform. We meet a lot of people who are being exposed to Singaporean artists for the first time, and have been able to place their works in some amazing collections worldwide.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

Take advantage of social media, and update regularly so that people are always tuned in. This also means that you create work regularly, and the more work you create, the better you get. Make yourself easily contactable, and put all of your works out there. You never know who is looking. Look for overseas residencies; try to participate in international exhibitions, regardless of what stage in your art career you're at. When all else fails, shameless self-promotion always helps – network, network, network.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

Michael Lee, Alan Oei, Jason Wee, Donna Ong, Jane Lee and Ezzam Rahman, to name just a few.

TERRY LEE

Art Seasons Gallery

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

Very encouraging and yet, becoming very competitive! The increasingly vibrant art scene has brought a lot of attention to Southeast Asian artists; especially to Singaporean artists. It also becoming very competitive as the traditional galleries businesses are now being forced to compete with more and more art fairs in Singapore and the region; especially the collectors and buyers are increasingly more attracted to visit and buy from art fairs. Auction houses are behaving like galleries as they are doing private sales and exhibitions themselves!

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

More exposure to international art audiences. Five years ago, you'd only have heard of David Chan in the international art fairs and auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's. Now, you have much more artists like Jane Lee, among many others.

What are the challenges faced in promoting Singapore artists and do you overcome them?

In the past, it is very difficult to sell Singapore artist artworks in the international market. It still is, but it has gradually improved with a combination of hard work and investment in overseas markets, in institutional art shows and at international art fairs.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

Singaporean artists should be encouraged to pursue overseas residencies in addition to working with local or foreign institutions and commercial galleries to attend art biennales, art fairs and art exchange programmes.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

Jane Lee, Donna Ong, Jeremy Sharma, David Chan and Phunk.





VERA ONG

Art 2 Gallery

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

The vibrancy of the Singapore art scene has definitely increased quite tremendously, with many art fairs being organised here and also with the growing number of galleries setting up in Singapore. Last year, we had five art fairs, which in my opinion was an overload. Whilst visitors and collectors had a wide spectrum of art readily available, I think it was too much for collectors to have a real sense of collecting and it does dilute their thoughts on collecting.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

I suppose competition is far greater for our Singapore artists and their works. Collectors are spoilt for choice, as they can now easily compare and research what is available in the art market right here at their doorstep.

However, having said that, I think on the other hand it does in a way help our artists to be immersed in the variety of genres, mediums, forms, etc. that their counterparts in Asia and Southeast Asia are currently doing. It's an opportunity to boost their inspiration, moving forward.

What are the challenges faced in promoting Singapore artists and do how u overcome them?

Art-2 has been representing and promoting Singapore artists since we started in 1991, as I strongly believe that we should support our own artists, thus about 80 per cent of our artists are from Singapore.

Our expertise lies in areas where we work as art consultants for several prestigious clients to engage artists to create specially commissioned public art. These are especially the highlights for us and the artist, where we bring their work over and beyond their singular artwork into a work of art to be appreciated publicly in a building, public spaces or places of interests in Singapore.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

It is always important for a Singapore artist to be able to work closely with reputable galleries to present state of the art exhibitions of their work. As a gallerist, we play an important role to assist and ensure that we expand the exposure and continuity of the development of their artwork to enhance their work further to be in the realm of the international market.

The synergy of a Singapore artist and a gallery representing them is very crucial to help them make a mark on the global stage.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

We represent the following Singapore artists and these are the artists that definitely caught my eye several years ago till today. Among the established names, Anthony Poon, Chua Ek Kay, Chng Seok Tin and Iskandar Jalil. As for young artists, Gart Yeok Kuan, Devaki, Hong Sek Chern, Max Kong and Mona Choo are some names that come up.

SUNDARAM TAGORE

Sundaram Tagore Gallery

What's your opinion on the increasingly vibrant art scene here in Singapore?

In the last decade or so, Singapore has acquired a rich artistic patina and presence. Singapore has always had infrastructure, such as museums and exhibition venues to host art fairs, however, the production of art and the intellectual components were still developing. Today, the infrastructure, or hardware, and the know-how, or software, are on more equal footing. Art fairs, such as Art Stage Singapore, and world-class museums with noteworthy collections are making a mark on the global art scene. Gillman Barracks, as one example, has been host to numerous exhibitions that feature leading international artists. Singapore is now also home to a rich variety of artists who are increasingly making a mark outside the region. This has been an on-going process.

How do you think this has helped in the development of Singaporean artists and their work?

Art and artistic activities do not exist in a vacuum. In order to create an artistic culture and artistic patina, one needs dialogue. To create a dialogue you have to have a variety of participants in the conversation.

Singapore has invited artists from across the globe to present their work and create a dialogue with local artists. By doing so, local Singaporean artists can see and understand the art that's relevant in today's globalised society. They can see first-hand the diversity of material and subject matter. This observation is one of many tools artists can use to create work that has visual power and conveys a message of importance. Singaporean artists within the last three or four years have been exposed to a variety of work by an international community of artists and they have managed to create a dialogue that has been very beneficial, directly or indirectly.

What are some of the highlights / challenges you've encountered in promoting Singaporean artists and their work? How did you overcome them?

Up to now, most people outside the region haven't had much exposure to Singaporean art. The dialogue has been very introverted. We need to change that. We are working toward presenting the work of Singaporean artists on the wider international art circuit.

We have mounted two major exhibitions featuring

Singaporean artists. One was a solo exhibition of work by painter Jane Lee, whom we represent. Her show, which took place in our New York gallery in 2012, was an outstanding success. It was a sell-out show. The other exhibition was a joint show of Singaporean and Thai artists. It was curated by Loredana Paracciani and mounted in both Singapore and New York in 2013 and 2014 respectively. People were really curious to see what was happening in Singapore, and we had great feedback.

How do you think Singaporean artists can further make their mark on the global stage?

In order for Singaporean artists to make their mark they have to think globally. The outlook has to be more international and outward. The fact that Singapore was debating whether to participate in the Venice Biennale or not is a reflection of the ambivalence. A year ago, Singapore had pulled out of the Biennale, but then decided to sign a twenty-year lease, which will insure art from Singapore will be on view at the Biennale, which is the world's most important art exhibition. They need to have a clear-cut idea of how to make their name internationally.

We are the only gallery that has taken Singaporean artists abroad in a systematic sense and we continue to do so. Singaporeans have to make a much wider push and it requires the blessing of the government. Singapore's 50th anniversary presents the perfect opportunity to make the nation's artistic presence felt. Mounting Singaporean art outside of Singapore in conjunction with the anniversary is ideal.

Within Singapore there's a great deal of activity taking place. The opening of the National Gallery is a good example. Future collaborations between museums and galleries, institutions and art fairs will only enhance the visibility of Singaporean art in the larger world.

Who are some of Singaporean artists that have caught your eye?

We are presenting a significant group of Singaporean artists in Dear Painter, our upcoming exhibition to celebrate Singapore's 50th anniversary, which is being curated by June Yap. The nine artists in the show are: Chun Kaifeng, Chun Kai Qun, Martin Constable, Warren Khong, Jane Lee, Kai Lam, Francis Ng, Shubigi Rao and Jeremy Sharma. It opens September 4.



Photo Sundaram Tagore Gallery/Tracy Abbott Szatan