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## OCTO

ETERNAL VALUES

BVL 193 MANUFACTURE CALIBER WITH TWIN BARRELS,  
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The 4,400 sq ft Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Singapore is part of contemporary art destination development, Gillman Barracks

# Space for art

Curator Sundaram Tagore tells **Aimee Chan** why the new art development at Gillman Barracks is so current and important

**A**rt is important, insists Sundaram Tagore. "In order to be a world [class] city, you need not just economic infrastructure but art infrastructure. That is an evolved way of living." And he should know. Tagore is director of four eponymous galleries in New York, Hong Kong and Los Angeles and has shown works by such creatives as Judith Murray, Tom Doyle, Frè Ilgen and even Singapore's own Jane Lee. His latest investment is the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Singapore, which is part of the contemporary art destination development, Gillman Barracks, which opened on Sept 15.

With its prime location right at the entrance of Phase One of the development, the newly opened, 4,400 sq ft gallery will have the largest space there. It is deliberately set up like a museum with long corridors to encourage quiet contemplation and small windows to play with and control the harsh natural light. And if the opening exhibit is anything to go by, the programmes on display will be impressive: Entitled *The Big Picture*, it features photographers such as Annie Leibovitz, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Sebastião Salgado.

## Art is life

A city in which commerce is seen to be valued over creativity might seem an odd choice of location for someone so well established in the art world. Yet, Tagore thinks the Gillman Barracks collaboration between government and curators is essential to the city's enlightenment and

growth — to moving away from being viewed as a place that is "cash rich and culture poor".

"You cannot eat art or drive art, but it is the most important thing in our existence because, without art, we stop being human beings. This is why economic recessions have come and gone, but art has existed for 60,000 years," Tagore muses.

Although it may take time for the international art community to take Singapore seriously as a long-term destination, Tagore is sure this can happen. He has seen it before. When he opened his gallery in Hong Kong, he recalls, there was no significant art presence. Now, the island is the world's third-biggest art market.

"It takes one single, cogent artistic organisation to change a city. Like the Opera House in Sydney, it [can be] one symbol that is very powerful for the whole city," he says.

## The time is now

As with many lifestyle precinct developments in Singapore, government bodies have been heavily involved in the conceptualisation, execution and selection of the first 13 tenants for Gillman Barracks. Tagore is not worried that government involvement will stifle or limit his creative licence — instead, he attributes the success of the project to such involvement.

"This kind of idea [Gillman Barracks]



Tagore: Without art, we stop being human beings

can take place in Singapore because the government has an interest in making the society better and in taking care of society. They feel art is an integral and important part of economic and social life." As such, both the government and the galleries alike are invested in ensuring the development flourishes and integrates well with the international art community.

"[It could not have happened] without government endorsement," he says realistically. "This experiment in creating a new mould or a new way of culture-making is

a very post-Modern way of looking at the world. A single entrepreneurship cannot create the artistic fabric in a short span of time like Singapore is trying to achieve, so you must condense everything. This can happen only with the combined forces of government, gravity and the dynamism of private entrepreneurship."

While Tagore acknowledges that the very planned and organised nature of Gillman Barracks lacks some of the organic spontaneity of other significant art precincts such as Chelsea in New York, he is clear that rapid artistic development must come with some sacrifice. "It might be contrived," he admits. "But, in New York or London, it took 100 years." Singapore's way will be much faster.

In fact, Tagore views the collaborative nature of Gillman Barracks as a critical indicator of how current the Singapore government is. "You couldn't have done this [type of development] in the 20th century. People would not have taken it seriously," he reflects. It is only now that art collection has become more democratic that something such as Gillman Barracks can happen.

As to whether Sundaram Tagore Gallery and Gillman Barracks will prove to be a success, only time will tell.

*Aimee Chan is a writer and editor whose work has taken her all over the world*