

Hong Kong art dealers head south to Art Stage Singapore

Art businesses look towards Singapore to expand their network with collectors in Southeast Asia

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Indonesian artist Eddi Prabandono (in white) works on his 'After Party #3' installation at the Art Stage Singapore fair. Photo: Reuters

Hong Kong-based art dealers are venturing into Singapore to cultivate the untapped Southeast Asian market.

Art Stage Singapore, a fair which opened to the public yesterday at Marina Bay Sands, attracted a number of Hong Kong gallery owners. Many said they hoped to expand their network with Southeast Asian collectors as well as the region's artists.

"Hong Kong is already important, but Southeast Asia is emerging, both in terms of being a market and in the artistic sense," said Sundaram Tagore, an international art dealer who landed in Hong Kong in 2007. Already running two branches of his gallery in the US, Tagore opened a fourth in Singapore a few months ago at the new art complex, Gillman Barracks.

Tagore said he sold an important piece to a Hong Kong client during his first participation in the Singapore fair two years ago. This year, he brought a number of works from around the world to the fair, including *The Farmer*, a mixed media work on paper by Egyptian artist Georges Fikry Ibrahim from 2006.

"The Singapore [fair] focuses more on Southeast Asia, which Hong Kong hasn't done. It complements Hong Kong, rather than act as competition," Tagore said. "The art in Southeast Asia is a distinct cluster of cultures ... the flavour is very different and does not get enough exposure."

Hong Kong-based French dealer Edouard Malingue returned for his third time, showing works by the Rome-based Jannis Kounellis, a key artist of the 1960s *arte povera* (poor art) movement.

"As a gallery based in Hong Kong, it is important to meet clients from Southeast Asia," Malingue said. "Some [clients] here are very savvy."

Catherine Kwai of Hong Kong's Kwai Fung Hin Art Gallery, which was taking part in the fair for its first time, said she had sold works by Korean new media artist Lee Lee Nam during the VIP preview. "We have got more Singaporean clients over these past few years. There's an interest in collecting in the region," she said.

One fair pavilion dedicated to Indonesian art featured top artists like Entang Wiharso, who will be representing Indonesia in the country's first pavilion at the upcoming Venice Biennale.

The fair also attracted big name collectors including Uli Sigg, who earlier donated and sold a major part of his collection of Chinese contemporary art to West Kowloon's M+ visual culture museum, Prince Maximilian of Liechtenstein and German collector Nanni Burchardi.

Founder and fair director Lorenzo Rudolf said that while the May art fair in Hong Kong was more international, he hoped to keep the Asian focus of Art Stage by supporting and protecting Asian galleries - 75 per cent of the 131 participating galleries are from the Asia-Pacific, compared to about 50 per cent of Asian galleries at the coming Art Basel Hong Kong. At least 12 showing at Art Stage are either from or have opened shops in Hong Kong.

"We said in the beginning we wanted to support and protect Asian galleries so that they can have a chance to grow ... Southeast Asia will be the next big trend," Rudolf said.

He said the fair in Singapore would not sit in rivalry with Hong Kong's.

"It's important that both are close to each other but not copy each other; that both have their own identities," he said. "This will mean that if Hong Kong is successful, we profit; and if we are successful, Hong Kong profits."

Art Stage Singapore runs until January 27.