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Right top row, left to right

*Keep it Simple. Keep it Fresh.*

(Poppy Red, Grayed Jade, Tender Shoots, Dusk Blue, Linen, African Violet, Emerald, Lemon Zest, Monaco Blue) by **Meg Cranston & John Baldessari**, 2013.

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 106,7 x 91,4 cm.

Courtesy Galerie Michael Janssen Berlin/Singapore.

Right centre

*Keep it Simple. Keep it Fresh. (Nectarine)*

by **Meg Cranston & John Baldessari**, 2013.

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 106,7 x 91,4 cm.

© Farhan Darma

Courtesy Galerie Michael Janssen Berlin/Singapore.



WHATEVER YOU DECIDE TO DO,  
REMEMBER TO KEEP IT SIMPLE,  
KEEP IT FRESH, AND HAVE SOME  
IDEA OF WHAT YOU ARE GOING  
TO DO.

# Gillman Barracks: A Type of Odyssey

By Paul Khoo

Implicit in the idea of Gillman Barracks is that of the economic cluster, an idea associated with and best articulated by management theorist Michael Porter. It says that a critical mass of businesses in the same industry, along with the appropriate supporting institutions, creates economic synergy: think Silicon Valley or Hollywood. The idea of an art-gallery cluster is not new, with Manhattan's Upper East Side the paradigm. In fact, scholars of the creative industries, notably Elizabeth Currid, who wrote *The Warhol Economy*, have studied the economics of New York gallery clusters, identifying favourable demographics, proximity to museums and density of galleries as factors in their success.

history research and artist residencies. This is not surprising, given the involvement in the project of the Singapore government's Economic Development Board, which historically takes a cluster approach to attracting foreign direct investment.



As such, Gillman seems to tick the right boxes: a certain critical mass of galleries; enough name branding to attract the jet-setting new rich of Asia; and intriguing supporting infrastructure – in this case, the new Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), with its focus on art-

But the creative industries have their own idiosyncratic

Left

*Faith* by **Apichatpong Weerasethakul**, 2006.

Two-channel digital video installation, duration 11:04 (looped).

Courtesy the artist and Future Perfect.

Below

*Emerald (Ruined)* by **Apichatpong Weerasethakul**, 2008.

Giclée diasec print, 120 cm x 79,5 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Future Perfect.



dynamics, most notably in terms of the centrality of intangibles, whether they be defined as hits or buzz, in determining success. The question, then, is whether Gillman has buzz. While some define buzz as the spotlight of media and celebrities, hence the usual flutter over the party circuit

during art fairs, it may have a limited role outside places like New York and London. Currid's study also looks at the emergence of new gallery clusters in areas of New York such as Chelsea and SoHo, identifying artistic style or identity as their driver of success – so, beyond the intentions and ef-

forts of the policymakers, we need to go back to the art: is there a Gillman style, beyond the agglomeration of galleries pushing generic name-brand art? And does this style have to be related to unique local identities, be they specifically Singaporean or Southeast Asian more generally? ▶



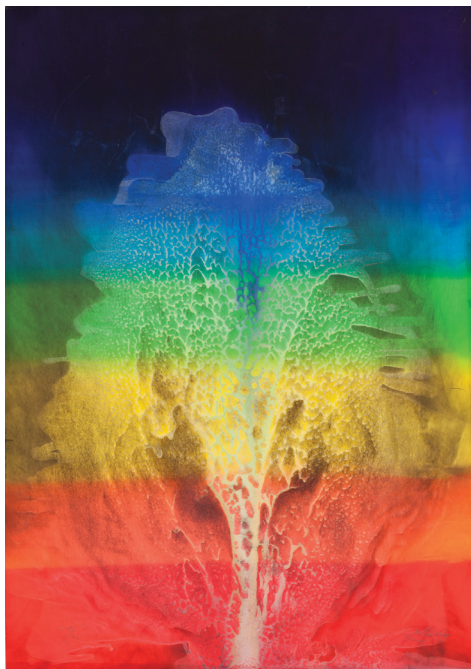


The various Gillman shows, many of which opened concurrent with Art Stage in January, offer a possible way to answer this question. With respect to local identities, Galerie Michael Janssen's *Keep it Simple, Keep it Fresh* is very ambitious. The show introduces US west coast conceptualist John Baldessari via a collaboration with his former student, contemporary artist Meg Cranston, in the form of a series of single-coloured canvases blaring the title of the exhibition, using only the 10 colours officially released for 2013 by Pantone – a practice that stems from Baldessari's writings, where he argued for a stripped-down aesthetic. Judging by the art-buying habits of the Southeast Asian elite at events such as Christie's auctions, this work certainly falls outside the usual boxes: some form of national/ethnic affiliation (Lee Man Fong); local political or cultural tropes (Heri Dono);

pop style (Eko Nugroho); or preferably a combination of all the above (Nyoman Masriadi). Instead, we have a regional (US west coast) conceptualist (intellectual by any standards), although one given the stamp of approval by collector interest aboard and the curatorial blessing of the Tate Modern. Perhaps the question the marketing of Baldessari poses is whether the Southeast Asian jet-setter class has evolved beyond regional tastes and is ready for big, global names.

Left  
*Last Flight*  
 by **Isabel & Alfredo Aquilizan**,  
 2009. 275 x 198 x 91 cm.  
 Courtesy The Drawing Room.

Other shows hedge their bets on this front. Sunduram Tagore has a group exhibition, *Home and the World*, which talks about the local and globalisation. While packing in the usual stars, including Cartier-Bresson, Burtynsky, Hirst, Liebovitz and Polidori, the show tries also to speak to the Southeast Asian region via an ambitious sound installation by the American Taylor Kuffner. *The Gamelatron Jalan Jiwo* combines traditional gamelan with robotic technology to create a series of gamelan-like installations, consisting of gongs and robotic mallets. The piece is impressive in scale, and combines a type of new-media conceptualism with traditional Southeast Asian themes and tropes. ▶



Pushing the edges of media through a grounding in cultural familiarity is also the strategy at the Fost Gallery's show *Nowhere Near: A Solo Exhibition by Chun Kai Feng*. Playing on feelings of nostalgia for the past among the Singapore public, Chun creates 11 mainly metallic sculptures that offer an idiosyncratic take on material objects in the Singaporean landscape.

These include *Totem*, which stacks park benches in a manner that becomes a type of symbol. *Same as Ever Was* resembles Claes Oldenburg's stacking of rings, but on closer observation is actually made of parts of containers used to burn paper offerings in traditional Chinese festivals. *Nowhere Near* works on nostalgia and recognition, qualities that are normally absent in

Gillman for the Singapore audience, who are more often subjected to a barrage of decontextualised art objects, given their cachet by the market or the curatorial elite. Not surprisingly, the low-key Fost show has had impressive sales and evoked strong feelings among visitors.

With its roots in Manila, The Drawing Room Contemporary Art gallery presents an ambitiously broad section of the work of biennale stars Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan in a show called *Proto-types*. In contrast with the modesty seen in Chun's work at Fost, *Proto-types* is suitably ambitious, doing justice to the public installation work that has characterised the Aquilizans. The star of the show is *Last Flight*, a sculpture of angel wings created using bright slippers found on a Philippine beach. The piece is almost three metres high, giving it a type of powerful majesty; the slippers, a very



common Southeast Asian household item, ground and humanise it. This contrast of monumental scale with the modesty of common objects is a theme of much of the Aquilizans' more public work, which has been seen by Singapore audiences in previous biennales. Another piece, *Transportation*, stacks multiple pallets hosting miniature shanties which are made of the cardboard packaging boxes used by the Philippine diaspora for shipping goods back home.

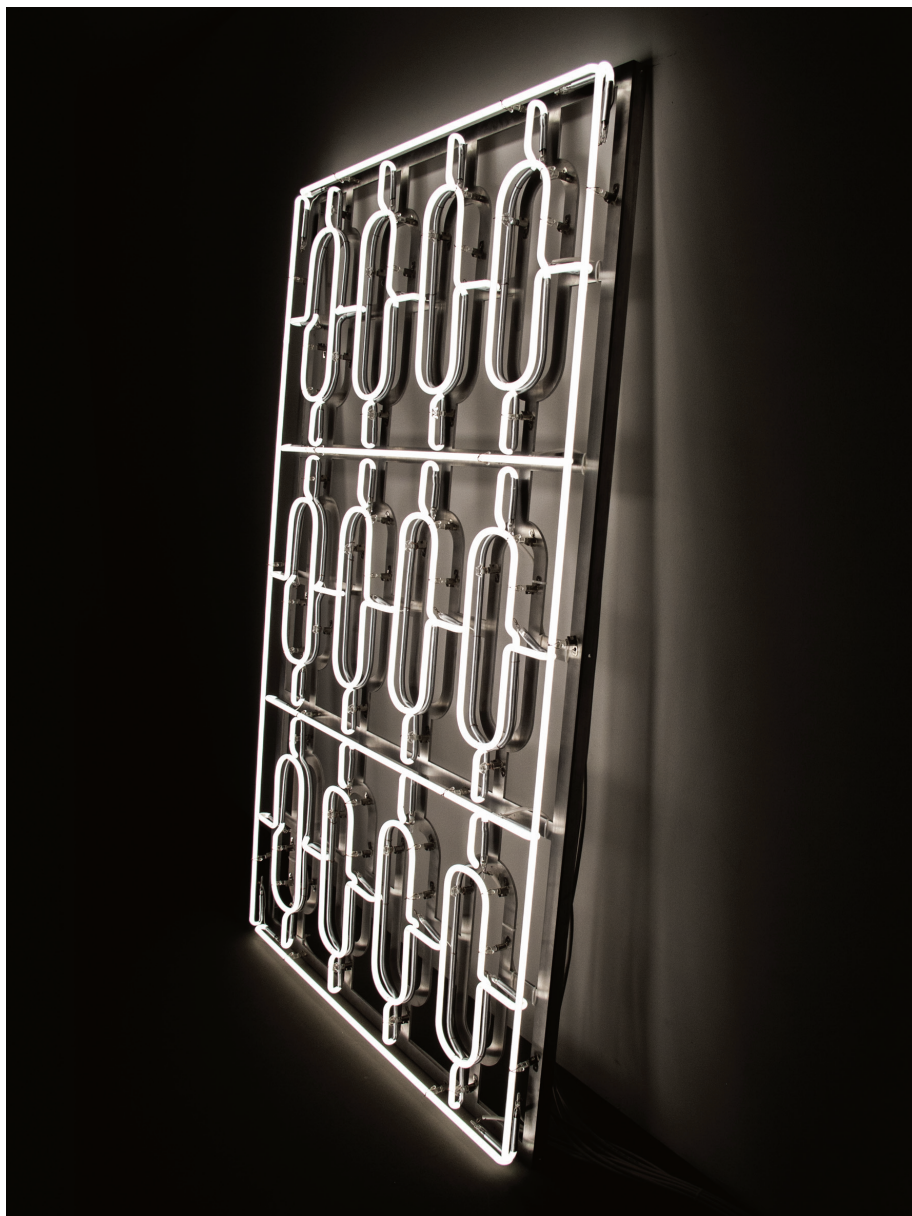
The Aquilizans are not the only Southeast Asian biennale stars at Gillman, with Future Perfect hosting *Api-chatpong* *Weerasethakul: Fiction*. The show brings together mainly video works from the career of Thai independent film maker Api-chatpong, winner of the Palme d'Or at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival. Playing on the theme of liminal spaces, the videos explore the borders between man and machine, countries,

and the living and dead. The centrepiece is *Faith*, a 2006 video made for the Liverpool Biennale which explores the journeys of two astornatus in a style similar to Kubrick and Tarkovsky. A similar type of postmodern self-awareness also evades an older, seemingly analogue piece called *Haunted Houses*, in which a cast of country folk re-enact a famous Thai soap opera.

Left  
*Untitled* by **Otto Piene**, 1972.  
 Fire gouache on board, 99 x 69,5 cm.  
 Courtesy Arndt Berlin/Singapore.

Below  
*The Gamelatron Jalan Jiwo*  
 by **Aaron Taylor Kuffner**, 2012.  
 Kinetic sculpture installation.  
 Courtesy the artist and Sundaram  
 Tagore Gallery.





Certainly, *Fiction* is the equal of Janssen's Baldessari/Cranston show in terms of ambition. Historically, sales of video to collectors have been limited in this region, mainly confined to art institutions. Regional affiliation, in this case with the leading Southeast Asian filmmaker, may help shorten the distance between the medium and the usual collector interests.

If ambition is an enabler of style, Gillman seems to have moved beyond the generic name-branding strategies seen at its opening. Enough new media are being explored, including the monumental installations of the Aquilizans, the videos of Apichatpong and the radical conceptualism of

Baldessari. There is also the confidence to show fairly comprehensive retrospectives of individual artists, as opposed to the tired group shows patched together with clichéd academese or orientalist generalities.

But more importantly, there seem to be efforts to engage local identities, be they Singaporean or South-east Asian, in an organic fashion. One of the major potential bugbears about the Gillman project could be the marginality of Singaporean art – making the CCA, which is now showing *Engaging Perspectives: New Art From Singapore*, covering a younger mix of Singaporeans who have not broken into the biennale circuit, particularly important. Unfortunately, from a style and identity perspective, many of the works in the CCA show, sociological one-liner multimedia pieces, suffer from a type of global homogeneity; the commercial galleries have suc-

ceeded better on this front. Fost's Chun Kai Feng, for example, focuses on issues of distinct national identity, with minimal need for pedantic positioning, through the power of his objects. Perhaps this balance of medium ambition and a broad sense of local grounding is necessary for Gillman to develop its own identity – something integral to its sustainability amid the global proliferation of gallery clusters. ■

Left  
*Like That One*  
 by **Chun Kai Feng**, 2012.  
 Neon lighting mounted on aluminium  
 frame, 180 x 108 x 6 cm.  
 Courtesy Fost Gallery Singapore.