

Singapore Recasts Itself as Newest Asian Art Hub

By KATHERINE TARBOX

SINGAPORE — For decades Singapore has concentrated on developing its reputation as a global financial center, a focus that only recently expanded to include its cultural growth as well.

“The Economic Development Board realized that in order to make Singapore a world-class city, they needed to establish more of an artistic infrastructure,” said Sundaram Tagore, president and curator of Sundaram Tagore Gallery, which opened its fifth global location last month in the city-state.

The gallery is in Gillman Barracks, a former army site dating from the 1920s that has become a centerpiece of Singapore’s artistic plan.

In 2010, the development board committed 10 million Singapore dollars, or about \$8.18 million, to turning the 4,200-square-meter, or 45,208-square-foot, barracks into a contemporary art center.

Also on the horizon is the National Art Gallery, a 60,000-square-meter building that will be the largest visual arts space in the small country.

When Gillman Barracks held its opening night on Sept. 14, more than 1,000 people visited the Tagore gallery alone, which featured “The Big Picture,” a collection of iconic photographs that included works from Annie Leibovitz and Robert Polidori.

“Two years ago, the board invited galleries from around the world to open here, and we wanted to be a part of that movement,” Mr. Tagore said.

Leow Thiam Seng, the director of JTC, the state property developer and management group, which oversaw the barracks’ conversion to gallery space, said: “Singapore stands a chance of becoming an arts hub in Asia, given its status as one of the region’s most developed cities and the progress it has made in developing its visual arts space.”

Today, a visitor to the barracks can stop at galleries from 10 countries, including China and Indonesia. Six more galleries are to be added in phase two of the redevelopment, set to be completed this year.

At the Ota Fine Arts Gallery, which initially opened in Tokyo in 1994, whimsical metallic paintings and abstract trees by the artist Yayoi Kusama are almost sold out, despite price tags of \$250,000 and more.

In between the gallery spaces are exhibits like Donna Ong's "And We Dreamt We Were Birds," an installation of 12 beds hanging from the ceiling, which is intended to inspire viewers to dream.

Even though the barracks' focus is contemporary art, a much larger collection — more than 4,200 paintings and sculptures — decorates the Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore.

Anyone is welcome to enter the 608-room hotel and take a 30-minute iPod tour to view "Moby Dick," the commissioned Frank Stella fiberglass sculpture that hangs in the lobby, or the Dale Chihuly glass blowings that flank each end of the hotel.

The collection, valued at more than 5 million dollars, includes work by Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Henry Moore.

The hotel is owned by Pontiac Land, a business of the four Kwee brothers, one of Singapore's wealthiest families.

"When the hotel opened in 1996, the owners wanted to showcase their private collection and commissioned another 350 pieces specifically for the public spaces," said Tang Wenxian, an e-commerce executive with the hotel.

At that time, much of Singapore's art scene was limited to art fairs; collecting fine art was a rare pastime for residents.

Today, Singapore has the greatest percentage of millionaires in the world — prime targets for art dealers and artists seeking wealthy patrons.

According to a recent report by Boston Consulting Group, 17 percent of the country's resident households have more than \$1 million in disposable private wealth, which does not include property or businesses.

And, as the population's wealth has grown, so have art fairs, like the Singapore Biennale, held at the Singapore Art Museum.

In 2012, the works of more than 63 artists from 30 countries attracted a record 913,000 viewers. And in January, the country was host to Art Stage, an inaugural contemporary art fair that drew 32,000 visitors.

Both attractions were made possible by millions of dollars from the Singapore government, which also finances the city-state's School of the Arts, which opened its permanent campus in

2010.

Even as Singapore pours money and effort into building its reputation as an artistic destination, observers question whether expression can really flourish in a place where the government is known for censorship of a range of political, social and religious topics. For example, all exhibits at Gillman Barracks must be approved before display by Dr. Eugene Tan, program director at the economic development board.

Mr. Tagore said he did not believe that the approval process would restrict the display of provocative artistic work on themes like sex. “The board is committed to making this a cultural destination for some of the greatest modern art in Asia,” he said.

IF YOU GO

Gillman Barracks, 9 Lock Road, Singapore; GillmanBarracks.com.

Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday.

The barracks has three restaurants: Masons, open for lunch and dinner; and The Naked Finn and Timbre @Gillman, open for dinner only.

The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, 7 Raffles Avenue, Singapore. +65 6337 8888; RitzCarlton.com/en/Properties/Singapore

Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore, +65 6332 3222;

SingaporeArtMuseum.sg

Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday to Sunday. Adult admission is 10 dollars.