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Next big art thing: Gillman Barracks opens in Singapore

Singapore vs. Hong Kong as Asia's art capital gets serious with launch of new center for international galleries

By [Zoe Li](#) 17 September, 2012



Singapore boosts its art cred with the Gillman Barracks.

Build it and they will come is the mantra in Singapore after Gillman Barracks opened to the public on September 15.

A colonial-era structure, the barracks has been transformed into a S\$9.76 million (US\$8 million) hub for contemporary arts, another step in a government-driven development of Singapore into an Asian arts hub.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong's answer to arts and culture keeps getting delayed. The most recent date for construction to begin on the West Kowloon Cultural District is 2013.

The Gillman Barracks project, backed by the Singaporean government, is launching with 13 international galleries selected out of 30 applicants by a government-appointed committee of private and public arts experts.

The roster is self-consciously international, including New York-based Sundaram Tagore. Two more galleries will open next year: Germany's Michael Janssen and Takashi Murakami's Kaikai Kiki Hidari Zingaro gallery.

A 15-minute drive from Singapore's central business district, the refurbished former barracks, which date from the 1930s, is set amongst tropical greenery.

Art galleries alone will occupy about 4,200 square meters. Artist studios, an art research center and restaurants and cafés will take up another 4,800 square meters.

By 2013, it will include the Centre for Contemporary Arts, which will focus on artist residencies, research and exhibitions.

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Whose show is it anyway?



"Bad Taste (2011)" by Indonesian artist Uji Handoko at Equator Art Projects in Gillman Barracks.

Despite the hype of Hong Kong as the regional art hub, Singapore is primed to take over as the next center of Asian art sales.

The city state is now home to the largest proportion of millionaires in the world -- 17 per cent of households have wealth over US\$1 million. It also hosts the [Singapore FreePort](#), a state of the art storage facility at Changi Airport for art pieces and other valuables.

The number of art companies registering in Singapore has doubled in the last seven years, at 856 registrations in 2011. The launch of the government-backed [Art Stage Singapore](#) last year, with 123 participating galleries was one of the first signs of the city aggressively advancing onto Hong Kong's art turf.

But the problem with Singapore is typically pervasive government control, paradoxical to artistic

expression. Eugene Tan, the program director at the Singapore Economic Development Board overseeing Gillman Barracks, insists that galleries have free reign over their choice of shows.

Tan told [ArtInfo](#) that an art community of Gillman Barracks' caliber would not have developed organically if left to free-market forces. The government stepped in to "address the failures of the open market."

But gallerist Sundaram Tagore told [Bloomberg](#) that his gallery outpost in Singapore is "not entirely autonomous in terms of marketing, and that's very important."

He did admit that "the plus is, you have top officials' support, you get the right curators and the ability to make things happen very quickly."

Tagore's first Asian gallery opened in Hong Kong in 2008. It was also the first international gallery to land in the city, preceding a wave of openings in the following years including Gagosian Gallery and White Cube, each taking advantage of what the world's third-largest art auction house has to offer.

Yet art critic Robin Peckham has criticized Hong Kong as being "logistically an art hub, but a logistical hub is not an intellectual hub."

Which kind of art hub will Singapore become?

Gillman Barracks, 9 Lock Road, Singapore. Gallery opening hours, Monday and public holidays: closed; Tuesday-Saturday 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sunday: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. www.gillmanbarracks.com