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Southeast Asia's New Art Hub

With a growing scene of museums, galleries, and studios, Singapore is becoming an international center for art **BY PETER HILL**

Over the last decade, Singapore has taken on the mantle of global crossroads, rapidly developing into an equatorial hub of commerce and culture. Various recent initiatives demonstrate the city-state's dogged pursuit of international excellence in the visual arts, such as the Singapore Biennale and the revamped Gillman Barracks, a former colonial barracks that has been transformed into a complex of international commercial galleries including Space Cottonseed, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, Equator Art Projects, Silverlens, and Pearl Lam, which opened in January. Also sited within the complex is the brand-new Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), which became fully operational last month.

Due largely to its cultural expansion, the city has exerted a powerful draw on art-world leaders from around the globe. The list of recent arrivals includes Ute Meta Bauer, former Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, cocurator of Documenta 11 in 2002, and codirector of the 2012 World Biennial Forum No. 1 in Gwangju, South Korea, along with curator and writer Hou Hanru. Bauer left her position as dean of fine art at London's Royal College of Art last year to act as founding director of the CCA, which was created as a national research center of Nanyang Technological University in collaboration with Singapore's Economic Development Board.

"Singapore is very well placed due to its central location within Southeast Asia and its unique cultural diversity," Bauer

says, "and there is a lot happening here on a transnational level. With the CCA we want to be a useful platform for the art scene, but also to be part of the regional debates and cultural infrastructure in Southeast Asia." Describing the institution's projected agenda of exhibitions and artist-in-residence programs, Bauer adds that Singapore is a cultural axis of convenience within the immediate region, since "artists do not need visas to

RIGHT Ute Meta Bauer, founding director of Singapore's new Centre for Contemporary Art. BELOW Ken + Julia Yonetani's 2012-13 installation of neon-green chandeliers, on view at the National Museum of Singapore for the Singapore Biennale 2013.

travel and airfares are affordable."

The rest of Gillman Barracks, meanwhile, includes a mix of national and international commercial galleries. Recent shows there involved such global names as John Baldessari, Meg Cranston, and Nam June Paik, and last fall, Sundaram Tagore presented the exhibition "To Be a Lady," which featured works by women artists from around the world.

"In my experience, collectors in Singapore are buying both international



TOP: ©2011 CHRISTINE FENZL; BOTTOM: COURTESY SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM



ABOVE Susie Lingham, director of the Singapore Art Museum. **RIGHT** Installation view of *Satanni*, a collaborative community project commissioned for the Singapore Biennale 2013.

art, as well as local art," says Tagore, listing Japanese painter Hiroshi Senju, Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado, and Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky among popular purchases. "Local artists generate a lot of excitement and interest, there's no question. But, that said, buyers in Singapore recognize that the value of a work of art ultimately depends on the artist and the artwork rather than the artist's nationality. Singapore art can do well internationally, especially when there's a lot of interest at home."

That view is echoed by Tony Godfrey, curator at Equator Art Projects. "Singapore is an international town, and there is an awareness of art outside Asia," he says, adding that taste remains a bit on the conservative side, and that figurative painting sells more easily than anything conceptual. "From our point of view, we see a growing awareness in art from Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and the Philippines, as something different and unique. There are very good Singaporean artists and some are finding

collectors and shows outside Asia, but there is less interest in their work in Asia per se—perhaps because Singapore is associated, by other Asian cultures, with efficiency and banks, not artistic creativity. Over time," Godfrey says, "that will change."

The Singapore Biennale 2013, which closed last month, was overseen by the well-established Singapore Art Museum. Supervised by Susie Lingham—who previously taught at universities in the United Kingdom and Australia and was hired as the museum's third director last August—it included works by 82 artists and collectives at ten venues. But the biennale was deliberately regional rather than global, spotlighting contributions from 13 surrounding countries. "We brought together 27 curators—many of whom are practicing artists," Lingham says, "and they brought an idiosyncratic perspective to the art of this region, stretching from Tokyo and Laos through to Indonesia and Sydney."

Some works, however, dealt with global issues. On view at the National Museum of Singapore, Australian-based Japanese artists Ken + Julia Yonetani's 2012–13 installation of 31 chandeliers, made in response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster, glowed sickly green in the dark. Other artists, such as Vietnam's Tran Tuan, explored their own nation's painful past—in this case the Vietnam

War. In a work called *Forefinger* (2013), Tran presented several large finger sculptures, set on the floor like expensive furniture, made from crocodile leather, cow hide, and carved animal bone. But the work's title suggests its darker theme, referring to the peace activists in Vietnam who cut off their "trigger fingers" to avoid military conscription.

Eugene Tan, whose vast professional experience bridges politics, education, and the world of cultural institutions, has been instrumental in Singapore's transformation. Elected as director of the forthcoming National Art Gallery—which will unite refurbished versions of City Hall and the former Supreme Court building when it opens in 2015—Tan has a Ph.D. from the University of Manchester and an encyclopedic knowledge of the contemporary and the historical Singapore art scene. Former program director of contemporary art at Sotheby's Institute of Art in Singapore, he also worked for a time as program director of special projects at the Economic Development Board, and was largely responsible for the transformation of Gillman Barracks into the dynamic art-gallery hub that it now is.

Much of Singapore's current cultural renaissance, Tan explains, is not in fact due to private development but is the direct result of governmental attention. "The Ministry of Culture, Community,

and Youth,” he says, which was founded in November 2012 after a restructuring of governmental departments, “seeks to inspire Singaporeans through art and sport. It also helps promote philanthropy and volunteerism, and does a lot to strengthen community bonds.” He points out the importance of an initiative called the “Renaissance City Report,” published in 2000, which set up a ten-year plan for the visual arts in Singapore and included



a strategy for the first Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001, as well as looking ahead to the first edition of the Singapore Biennale in 2006. The report also projected the development of art colleges and museums, evidence of administrative involvement in the cultural and educational topography of the city. A more recent report announces the city’s plans for a permanent pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, and anticipates the opening of the National Art Gallery in the last quarter of that year—just in time for Singapore’s 2015 golden jubilee celebrations. The museum’s inaugural exhibitions will showcase the world’s largest public collection of modern Southeast Asian and Singaporean art.

Tan was also founding director in 2003 of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS) at LASALLE College of the Arts—a leading art school with strong links to Goldsmiths College in London and RMIT University in

LEFT Eugene Tan has been instrumental in Singapore’s cultural transformation. BELOW Rendering of the National Art Gallery, Singapore, slated to open in 2015.

Melbourne. ICAS recently hired Bala Starr, formerly senior curator at the University of Melbourne’s Ian Potter Museum of Art, as its director. She is charged with curating 50 exhibitions each year across seven galleries, with a projected program of both regional and international shows.

One of Starr’s many colleagues is Milenko Prvacki, an artist and senior fellow at LASALLE who moved to Singapore from Vojvodina, Serbia, two decades ago. A painter with a strong social conscience, Prvacki is intimately involved with the local population, having recently set up visual-arts projects with prisoners in Singaporean jails. He is confident that amid all the changes, Singapore will find a way to remain true to the work and esthetic of its own people. He expects that Tan, along with the numerous new heads of Singapore’s flourishing cultural center, will tap into their “excellent international networks to bring greater confidence in local art.” ■

Peter Hill is the Sydney correspondent of ARTnews and a Scottish Australian artist, writer, and independent curator. He is completing a book titled 60 Contemporary Artists.



COURTESY NATIONAL ART GALLERY, SINGAPORE (2)