

State of the Art in Singapore

The first international art event of the year opens in our very own city

By Shelly Dee



Alexander McQueen: Burning Down the House 1996 by David LaChapelle; Chromogenic Print; 29 X 40 inches 73.66 X 101.6 cm © David LaChapelle

More art galleries than Starbucks and McDonald's combined. A new state-of-the-art freeport for art storage. Regional and local auction houses setting records. And with what appears to be a new museum opening every year, the Singapore government seems intent on Singapore becoming the art capital of Southeast Asia.

Since 1989 the government has invested more than S\$1 billion to create such facilities as the Asian Civilisations Museum, the new National Library and the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay. And that doesn't include renovations to the National Museum of Singapore or the Peranakan Museum. Looking forward, work is starting on The National Art Gallery of Singapore (at an estimated cost of S\$300 million), which will exhibit the collection of modern Southeast Asian art that the government has been building for years. A new museum at Marina Bay Sands will host blockbuster exhibitions from around the world and a Natural History Museum at the National University of Singapore is also slated to open in a few years.

Although quantifying the economic effect of spending on the arts is not an exact science, a 2007 report by Americans for the Arts (a non-profit organisation for advancing the arts in the United States) found that every US\$1 billion of spending by arts groups and their audiences resulted in about 70,000

full-time equivalent jobs. The connection between arts spending and increased tourism revenue has also been cited in several studies. "Being a global city and a meeting point in Asia for enterprise, talent, cultures and ideas will be a source of competitiveness and growth in its own right," said the Economic Strategies Committee, a panel of leaders from the public and private sectors, in its February 2010 report.

A panel appointed by the Singapore government recently recommended that establishing Singapore as a 'leading cultural capital' and a 'distinctive global city' should be a very high priority in the coming decades.

Besides the state-run institutions mentioned above, Singapore is also host to several commercial art fairs including Art Singapore 2010 (October), the Affordable Art Fair (November 2010), and now Art Stage Singapore (12-16 January 2011). Art Stage Singapore is the first such project in Singapore supported by a special task force including state agencies such as the National Arts Council, the National Heritage Board, the Singapore Tourism Board and the Economic Development Board.

The goal of Lorenzo Rudolph, newly appointed director of Art Stage Singapore, is to create an international art fair to rival the best in the West (or at least in the East!). But the competition in Asia is intense: the Hong Kong International

Art Fair in May 2010 drew 155 exhibitors from 29 countries and an audience of over 46,000 including museum curators and collectors from around the world. At the same time, and often in the same building, several international auction houses held Fine Art auctions.

Not only is the art fair competition intense, but Singapore has fallen behind in the growing Asian art auction business, losing ground to Hong Kong when Christie's left in 2002 to consolidate its sales in Hong Kong; Sotheby's followed suit in 2008. While smaller, more regional auction houses such as Larasati Auctioneers and Borobudur Auction hold regular sales in Singapore, they are hampered by the imposition of a 7% goods and services tax imposed in 2007. (Hong Kong does not have such a tax.)

Developing a climate that is artistically energetic and financially beneficial for both sellers and buyers must be a priority, says Rudolph. He believes the Hong Kong market is more focused on North Asian art and that its history as a trading hub makes it likely to respond to economic rather than to cultural or artistic stimuli. Thus Singapore is poised to make a mark, particularly in Southeast Asian art.

Rudolph intends to make Art Stage Singapore (which precedes Hong Kong's International Art Fair by several months) the first major international art event of the year. In an attempt to draw savvy collectors and gallery owners from around the world, the venue for Art Stage is the glamorous new Marina Bay Sands Exhibition and Convention Centre. Of the 120 galleries expected to participate, all must pass qualitative criteria to be considered for inclusion. The galleries represent a mix of young and established artists. About half the galleries are based in the Asia Pacific region and half will be international galleries.

In order to differentiate Art Stage from other art fairs, Rudolph has teamed up with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and leading collectors in the region to present a first-ever blockbuster of Asian contemporary masterpieces from private collections. The exhibit of approximately 30 pieces that have been housed in India, China, Indonesia, Japan, Hong Kong and Korea and not previously available for public view, will include significant works that represent the range of developments in Asian art during the last decade. According to SAM director Tan Boon Hui, the decision to collaborate with a commercial art event was based on the hope that such collaboration would translate into greater



Dancer Calice 2009 by Cai Guo Qiang; 300 x 400cm; Gunpowder on paper; Courtesy Eslite Gallery / Cai Guo-Qiang



Skinspots 01 2009 by Tabaimo; Mixed Media; 130 x 167 cm (51 ½ x 65 ¾ in); Courtesy Singapore Tyler Print Institute / Tabaimo

public awareness of the importance of contemporary Southeast Asian art.

As part of the Art Stage/SAM collaboration, an extensive educational programme of lectures by artists, collectors, and curators will cater to potential buyers, collectors, art students and general art lovers. There will be special exhibitions at local art spaces and even at top nightclubs in hopes of attracting a younger market. To attract important collectors from the West, there will be a VIP programme of 'by invitation only' events.

Additionally, Project Stage, Art Stage Singapore's curated platform dedicated to cutting-edge artists and alternative galleries in the Asia Pacific region, will provide opportunities for discovering the next stars of the Asian art world.

Says Rudolph, "There are a lot of national art scenes growing in Asia, a lot of interesting art, but they remain limited to geographic regions — India, China, Indonesia. There really isn't a place where you have all these platforms coming together, and that's a role that Singapore, given its melting-pot culture, could play."

Rudolph knows what it takes to create a successful art fair. In the 1990s, he turned Art Basel into one of the world's premier events for modern and contemporary art. Singapore's Economic Development Board first approached him 15 years ago with the idea of an art fair, but he declined because he did not think the time was right. But times have changed and now he sees this as the right time.

Can the Lion City really become a 'Creative Cat' and a true art capital of Asia? The proud roar of the Art Stage organisers says it all.

Shelly Dee collects Asian art and serves on the Board of the National Museum of Singapore

Art Stage Singapore, 12-16 January 2011

Marina Bay Sands Exhibition & Convention Centre,
10 Bayfront Avenue

Open daily from 11:30 am – 7:30 pm (closes at 5:00 pm on Sunday).

For more information, www.artstagesingapore.com