

# Engaging with Contemporary Art in Singapore

By Sally J Clarke

Contemporary art in Singapore is thriving, not only through investment in the arts, the many youth art, engagement-based initiatives such as *Art Outreach* in our schools and further education colleges, and the artists' own passions, but also because of the recent government drive to establish Singapore as a creative hub in Southeast Asia.

In 2011, numerous events generated international interest. January's inaugural *Art Stage Singapore*, with exhibits from Ai Weiwei, Yayoi Kusama and Takashi Murakami, attracted 32,000 paying attendees. In September 2012, Gillman Barracks opened. This former officers' barracks has been developed into an art hub, complete with international gallery brands, a sculpture park and a new arts institution. The Singapore Biennale 2011 drew a record-breaking 913,000 viewers. In 2015, the 60,000-square-metre National Art Gallery will open, the largest visual arts venue in Singapore.



Redwhite 19 - Domestic helper from Philippines walking the dog, Ong Hui Har, photo courtesy of the artist

Currently, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) is running its *President's Young Talents*. Later in the year, SAM is hosting the Singapore Biennale 2013 with the theme *If the World Changed*. The title is an invitation to artists from across Southeast Asia to, "respond and reconsider the worlds we live in and the worlds we want to live in". The taproot for this year's theme is the speed of transformation in people's lives.

The Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS) is arguably the country's most active and avant-garde institute of art. In its role as the curatorial division of LASALLE College of the Arts, ICAS covers the arts spectrum in innovative, fresh and dynamic ways with experimental art from the Fine Arts, Design, Media Practices and Performing Arts. Recently there was an exciting exhibition *Situationist Bon Gun* by Tang Da Wu (born 1943), the Singaporean artist who works in a variety of media, including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation art and performance art. He is a pivotal figure in the development of contemporary art, having founded *The Artists Village* in Ulu Sembawang, the first such community here. The exhibition title is a "play on the Hainanese expression *pom gang* (foolish) and a reference

to the avant-garde art practices of the Situationist International, which reached its height during the May 1968 protests in Paris."

As the garden city state grows, so does the focus of young Singaporeans on their possible futures, with their art works exploring many topical themes. For example, Ong Hui Har (born 1976) is a painter whose works portray the people who have opted to become Singaporeans. Ong

uses photographs as a base for her portraits, the majority of which depict the subject with his or her family and aspects of Singapore life. Ong Hui Har states, "The red and white lines traversing and weaving through the paintings represent the organic nature of beings. They may symbolise blood vessels flowing through pulsating life, or threads that weave and bond, or roots that sink in over time metaphorically."

Other young artists such as Joey Soh, produce works using mixed media. Her sculptures are organic in construction and speak to the alienating conditions of daily life. The *Urban Dew* series purports to analyse the human condition in contemporary life and takes an interesting twist given Singapore's housing challenges and desire to be a garden city. She incorporates acrylic mushrooms on the branches of her trees and wooden treehouse-like structures. The series *Urban Dew III* was created specifically for the Concourse Exhibition Hall outside the Esplanade theatre.

This year promises to be an exciting time for anyone with an interest in contemporary Asian art in Singapore and across the region. With the Singapore Biennale opening its doors on 25 October, we will have the opportunity to see a broad range of artworks in a variety of media. I would encourage people to go and engage with the artists' responses to the biennale's theme. "We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there" (as Charles F Kettering, American Inventor and Businessman said).



Urban Dew III, by Joey Soh, photo courtesy of the artist

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