



Manit Sriwanichpoom's Pink Men vs. Pink Buddha installation was shown at Art Stage Singapore in January. Image courtesy to ART STAGE, Lucas Schifres

## Growing pains in Singapore's art scene

Art appreciation is on the rise, but commercial success has been slow. Is Singapore's contemporary art scene losing ground to its art rivals in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia?

With more than a thousand events across the island in January, as part of or coinciding with Singapore Art Week 2018, art lovers were spoilt for choice. These events included an inaugural visual arts festival featuring outdoor artworks and public programmes, an Instagram-worthy festival of light art in the Civic District, and a night-owl party at Gillman Barracks. More than 9,000 people attended Gillman's Art After Dark programme, many slowly crawling through the 12 crowded galleries, as well as exhibitions by NTU CCA and Supermama.

First organised in 2014 by the National Arts Council to create additional interest around Art Stage Singapore, the 12-day event has come to eclipse the flagship art fair. Art Stage Singapore started with much fanfare in 2011 as an answer to Art Basel Hong Kong (called Art HK at the time) but it has lost momentum in recent years with attendance dropping from a record 51,000 in 2015 to 26,500 this January and the number of exhibitors seen dropping from 170 at the peak in 2016 to 84 this year, with big guns like White Cube, Paul Kasmin Gallery, Galleria Continua, or Pearl Lam no longer present. At the same time, despite several years of low foot traffic and weak sales, the Gillman site has slowly but steadily seen increased attention averaging 500 visitors a day, according to the National Arts Council, and open house events usually drawing over 4,200 visitors — almost double the

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"On the positive side, I do believe we have a wonderful set of collectors for our population size. Singaporeans have the capacity to buy a lot of art when it's well priced, and they can be quite broad-minded about what they collect as well. And, unlike say Hong Kong, our market is no longer dependent on expats for sales, so the base is there, and not going anywhere. But the main problem is that Singapore is too small! There is only so much a collector can buy before their walls get filled up," noted **Pwee Keng-Hock**, owner of the long-established Utterly Art gallery.

### Growing pains

As the art sector has developed some galleries and event organisers may have been overambitious, sometimes leading to commercial failure. Pwee describes much of the art at Gillman as having been "too contemporary and expensive, and often irrelevant to the local collector" and points out that even on its more modest scale Art Stage may be "too big for every gallery that takes part to go home happy, rather they head home smarting with the bill and unfulfilled expectations."

Art Stage is just one of the local events that have faced

difficulties in recent years. The Singapore International Photography Fair and the Singapore Art Fair, both launched in 2014, never returned after disappointing inaugural editions, whilst the Singapore Contemporary Art Show, launched in 2016 only enjoyed a two-year run. Even the well-established Affordable Art Fair, which had ambitiously moved to two editions in 2014, has decided to revert to just one edition this year. “This decision was not taken lightly but we feel strongly that it is what the local market needs right now,” says Affordable Art Fair’s director, **Camilla Hewitson** adding that reverting to the once-a-year format will allow for a more closely curated experience for visitors and also “encourages a sense of urgency to buy.”

Meanwhile, the state-led initiative of Gillman Barracks, which saw a cluster of 13 hand-picked galleries open in the former military compound in 2012, has had mixed success, with only six of the initial galleries remaining.

One of the main problems at Gillman Barracks has been its decentralised location. However, **Angie Chan**, co-owner of home-grown gallery Chan + Hori, which recently relocated to Gillman from the now closed Raffles Hotel Arcade, has been positively surprised to find higher foot traffic at the new location. “It is mainly from tourists, which doesn’t necessarily equate to sales,” she said, “and whilst collectors would often visit the old location at lunchtime or after work, that happens less at Gillman Barracks due to its location.”

Yet Chan remains undeterred and is committed to help make Gillman the go-to arts destination in Singapore. In collaboration with the National Arts Council, Chan +Hori launched the nine-month-long DISINI festival, replete with funky outdoor artworks and an activity program that included moonlight yoga, action parties, and break dancing. “We hope this kind of event will help develop the next generation of art collectors, making art more accessible to the millennials,” she explains.

### Strong infrastructure

All art market players acknowledge that the government has worked hard to raise the profile of the arts in Singapore in their efforts to make it a viable art hub. In a bid to transform the once much derided “cultural desert” into a modern-day ‘Renaissance’ city, the state has invested heavily in its art and culture infrastructure from the S\$600



A recent art installation at Chan + Hori in Gillman Barracks. Courtesy: Chan + Hori

million Esplanade Theatres on the Bay to the creation of the Asian Civilisation Museum and the most recent unveiling of its crown jewel, the S\$530 million National Gallery Singapore. Currently, the Singapore Art Museum is also undergoing an extensive S\$90 million renovation that will add “double-volume” spaces to the former school in order to house larger installations, as well as enhancing facilities for technologically demanding multimedia works.

According to the Singapore Cultural Statistics 2017 report, government funding for arts and culture rose from S\$280.6 million in 2010 to S\$412.8 million in 2016, whilst the total nominal value-added by the visual arts represented S\$628 million in 2015, compared with S\$505.5 million in 2010.

“Over a relatively short time, Singapore has managed to develop a commendable artistic patina. It’s a postmodern experiment in the making, but all of this—meaning creating an artistic infrastructure from the ground up—is a huge endeavour. The problem is, we live in a world of instant gratification, where we’ve become conditioned to see results immediately,” remarks gallerist **Sundaram Tagore** of Sundaram Tagore Gallery. “Although some might say that Singapore has been slow to realise a financial return on its investment, I would argue that an endeavour of this magnitude takes time,” Tagore adds.

### A Southeast Asia role

Whilst Hong Kong has now become firmly established as the premier commercial art hub in Asia—thanks to its concentration of auction business, premier art fair Art Basel Hong Kong, and growing influx of international art galleries—art market players in Singapore believe the city-state can maintain its position as a commercial art hub for Southeast Asia, notwithstanding rising competition from neighbouring countries.

“When it comes to the contemporary art markets of Singapore and Hong Kong, I think the common narrative is to compare the two, framing both markets as working in competition, but as a dealer in both cities, I don’t tend to think of things that way. It’s not a zero-sum game, from my perspective. When Hong Kong wins, it doesn’t mean that Singapore loses—market growth in these two regions



Last November, the Affordable Art Fair welcomed 11,000 visitors who spent S\$3.7 million. This compared with S\$3 million the year before for 12,000 visitors. Courtesy Affordable Art Fair

is not mutually exclusive. Both cities have tremendous strengths, just as they both have areas that require some improvement,” says Tagore, noting that Hong Kong may have a more established foothold when it comes to blue chip or name-brand artists, but Singapore is a strong player in the Southeast Asia market.

**Stephanie Fong**, owner of FOST Gallery says that, at least for now, Singapore remains a leader in the Southeast Asian region for art (mainly trade, scholarship), “simply because things work in Singapore and people are still willing to pay the premium.” However she warns, “if our neighbours catch up, and they are catching up, and simultaneously, if we get too expensive, I am afraid that would really not bode well. We need to really capitalise on this lead time we have.”

**Lorenzo Rudolf**, the founder and art director of Art Stage Singapore and Art Stage Jakarta, points out “Singapore still has advantages over its neighbours: it is multicultural, it has the infrastructure and the money to invest. But all the other Southeast Asian countries are starting to catch up; and most of them have a much more vibrant and sustainable artist scene; and now they are also building up their infrastructure, all based on private initiatives. The danger is there, if Singapore is not waking up and acting quickly, it will earlier or later also be overtaken by them.”

Meanwhile, **Jasdeep Sandhu**, owner of Gajah Gallery, points out that from a commercial point of view Singapore retains many advantages over its neighbours. He mentioned its very efficient customs system that allows art to come easily through Changi Airport, as well as the support from art auxiliary businesses, such as art

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insurers and highly professional art handlers that can be trusted: “This is a very important link in an international art fair scene.”

Sandhu also points out that Singapore is a preferred selling platform for a diverse group of artists. “Most important, outside of each artist’s (home) country in Southeast Asia, I dare say that the next best city to sell your artwork would be Singapore. A Filipino or Indonesian artist has more chances of selling in Singapore than in Shanghai, Tokyo, or Beijing. We have a decent-sized base of collectors that not only collect Singaporean art but are willing to consider artist from around the region. “Singapore’s main problem for the moment seems to be its high costs. In relation to the region and this will be a factor against it.” *Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop*



A Rock is a River (2017) by Maya Rochat  
Courtesy Maya Rochat.



Sundaram Tagore Singapore during Singapore Art Week 2018  
Courtesy Olivia Kwok/Sundaram Tagore Gallery