

THE STRAITS TIMES

Growing pains for Singapore art market



A wood sculpture, Dorothy, by Spanish artist Manolo Valdes, on display at Art Stage Singapore held in January. The art fair is launching a Jakarta edition to connect the Singapore art market to the region. PHOTO: ST FILE

Despite the struggles the art market faces, experts are upbeat that its foundation is healthy and the sector will thrive with time and increased connectedness

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Huang Lijie Arts Correspondent ✉ (mailto:lijie@sph.com.sg)

With the recent closure of a commercial art museum and the exit of several art galleries and art fairs from Singapore over the last two years, a persistent cloud of gloom seems to hang over the art market here.

The Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris, plagued by poor attendance and financial challenges, bowed out last month, less than a year after it opened.

The Gillman Barracks art gallery cluster saw the departure of two tenants earlier this year, following an exodus in April last year - when nearly a third of the 17 galleries then chose not to renew their leases, citing poor sales and visitor numbers.

Two art fairs, Singapore Art Fair and Milan Image Art & Design Fair Singapore, have also been missing from the scene after high-profile debuts in 2014.

Art industry observers whom The Straits Times interviewed, including academics, gallerists and fair organisers, say the spate of closings points to growing pains in a still-developing art market, but they are mostly optimistic that the market will take off in time, if efforts to grow the visual arts scene continue.

The economic value of the visual arts industry has, in fact, increased over a 10-year period. Its total nominal value-added rose from \$340.3 million in 2003 to \$528.7 million in 2013, according to the latest data from the Singapore Cultural Statistics 2015.

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ART EXPERT MATTHIAS ARNDT, who has a gallery in Gillman Barracks



This overall growth, however, belies the struggle of galleries, such as Silverlens from the Philippines, which left Gillman Barracks last year. The gallery's director, Dr Isa Lorenzo, 41, says the art cluster, which opened in 2012 with 13 galleries, "was a case of too much, too soon".

"The weakness was that there wasn't much of an audience. We were aware there was a lack of a ready audience, but we didn't realise the full extent of it," she says.

Malaysia-based gallerist Richard Koh, 51, who closed his eponymous gallery at Artspace@Helutrans in Tanjong Pagar Distripark last year, echoes the sentiment that Singapore has a "very small" art market, given its modest pool of collectors.

Yet it is this budding art market that drew the Affordable Art Fair to set up shop in Singapore in 2010. Its mission, says the fair's regional managing director for Asia, Mrs Camilla Hewitson, 37, is to provide a platform that serves as a "starting point" for art buyers and artists.

She says: "That Singapore is a young market is a benefit to us because it gives us the opportunity to convert people into art lovers."

The fair has grown from an annual event to a biannual one and its sales since 2010 have totalled about \$30.6 million.

Mr Douwe Cramer, 55, show director of the Singapore Contemporary art fair, which launched this year, is equally upbeat about the potential for fairs such as his - even though the country's art market is in the developing stage - because the country ranks among the richest in the world and is a major centre for private wealth management.

Professor Ooi Can Seng, 50, of the Copenhagen Business School, who specialises in international business and

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MS BALA STARR, director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore



culture industries, says a strong financial market augurs well for the art market.

He says: "It is not by accident that cities such as New York and London are big in the global art market, and Singapore is in a good position to be a global art market player because it is also a global financial market."

What the art market here needs is time to develop fully.

Art expert Matthias Arndt, 48, who has a gallery in Gillman Barracks, says: "Singapore is only 50 years old. Art and culture need time to develop and the art market in Singapore is still developing.

"We are seeing growing pains, but we have to build on what we have successfully created and, with the dedication of the galleries, fairs, art institutions and art associations, and the support of collectors, I believe we can achieve great success."

Not all businesses in the art market, however, have the wherewithal to stay for the long haul.

Ms Ute Meta Bauer, 56, founding director of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, which anchors the art cluster at Gillman Barracks, says some of the galleries which were in the area told her they would like to return, but in a different capacity, perhaps as pop-up galleries.

She is confident, however, that Singapore's art ecosystem, which has a "healthy foundation", will allow the art market that is part of the ecology of artists, galleries, museums, collectors and audience to grow.

She says: "We now have National Gallery Singapore, free access to museums, a bigger group of society that sees art as interesting and a solid group of collectors here and in the region."

It is for this reason that Silverlens continues to be involved in the Singapore art scene. It held a nine-day pop-up exhibition featuring Filipino artist Gabriel Barredo at Artspace@Helutrans in November to coincide with the opening of National Gallery Singapore, which drew artists, curators and art lovers from all over the world.

Similarly, Mr Koh's gallery in Malaysia continues to take part in art fairs here because he is able to meet and sell to regional collectors at these events.

Indeed, many art industry observers, such as Ms Bala Starr, 50, director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore at the Lasalle College of the Arts, believe Singapore's strength as an art market is influenced by its place in the wider art world.

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Ms Kow Ree Na, 39, director of the lifestyle programme office at the Economic Development Board, one of the developers of Gillman Barracks, says the vision for the enclave has always been for it "to be Asia's visual arts precinct for the exhibition and discussion of international and South-east Asian art".

Since its launch, more than 350 exhibitions have shown at Gillman Barracks, including regional premieres for artists outside of Asia.

As for the exit of galleries from the precinct, Ms Kow says: "As with any cluster of businesses, tenants may come and go for different reasons, but we expect to maintain the consistency and quality of Gillman Barracks' offerings with a strong visual arts core."

Two new tenants, Australian art gallery Sullivan+Strumpf and home-grown design retailer Supermama, will join the cluster next month, raising the number of art galleries to 11 and the occupancy rate for long-term tenants in Gillman Barracks to 92 per cent. The remaining space is set aside for ad hoc events, exhibitions and programmes.

Mr Lorenzo Rudolf, 56, founder and president of art fair Art Stage Singapore, likewise believes that Singapore's success as an art market is connected to the wider region, particularly the art markets in South-east Asia.

He says: "Singapore is an important hub for the region and for it to succeed as an art market, it must open up to the other markets in South-east Asia."

In line with this belief, Art Stage Singapore is launching an edition in Jakarta in August so that it will be able to "tap an art market that is the most active and influential in the region", he adds.

Yet it takes more than business savvy for Singapore's art market to prosper, say art industry observers. It is equally important, if not more so, for the visual arts landscape, which the marketplace is a part of, to flourish.

This involves, for example, nurturing an art audience, says Silverlens' Dr Lorenzo. Museums with strong programmes and exhibitions can help realise this, but she emphasises that just as "artists and their art cannot be grown in a laboratory, neither can an art audience".

She adds that there needs to be "an innate sense of visual aesthetics" that is cultivated through art education at the elementary levels as well as at home.

For Ms Bauer, critical writing and open dialogue about the visual arts are vital to fuelling interest and expanding the scene.

She says: "If you go to art fairs in Hong Kong, here and New York - why do they each have an array of talks and they are full of listeners? There is an increasing interest in art and that feeds into the market; although its impact cannot be reduced to the market, it's really the ecology."

Echoing a need to cultivate the arts scene rather than solely nurture a marketplace, Mr Kok Heng Leun, 50, Nominated Member of Parliament and artistic director of theatre company Drama Box, says: "The marketplace, like fairs, can move from place to place, from city to city, but the cultural assets remain with us.

"In a small market like Singapore, it is important to ensure that there is space for development and research, which will build up artists here and our cultural and artistic assets for our future."

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