

Red-hot visual arts scene

Gallery owners are buoyed with great expectations after an encouraging year in the art-buying scene here in 2011, reports CHEAH UI-HOON

A GALLERY owner described this year as "stellar" and indeed, the consensus is that this superlative isn't an exaggeration when rating Singapore's art scene in 2011.

"It's been a bumper year for us," enthuses Benjamin Hampe, co-owner of Chan Hampe Gallery which opened its Raffles Hotel gallery in late 2010. "I believe the arts market in Singapore is pumping!"

Emi Eu, director of Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), notes that the arts scene has been invigorated and there's also more genuine interest in art now, especially among those in their 30s, an important demographic.

Singapore's visual arts scene certainly moved to another level this year, driven by a confluence of different factors, industry players say. Everything from art fairs to museum exhibitions such as the current Musee D'Orsay exhibition at the National Museum, new galleries showcasing foreign artists and Singapore's own artists gaining recognition abroad had a part to play in a red-hot visual art scene.

Like its name suggests, Art Stage Singapore set the ball rolling for the art scene's growing international profile when it debuted in January this year. The second Affordable Art Fair had a glowing report of sales, and this year also saw new galleries by overseas-based owners setting up shop here - like Art Plural Art Gallery and Ikkan Art International - signifying a maturing of the market.

"This year has been great for us," says Frederic De Senarclens, who opened Art Plural Gallery in June. "We've been in Singapore for a couple of years now and we've seen dramatic changes in the art scene. Art Stage Singapore contributed a lot to that, but it's also that the ball had been rolling for a few years now, and it's finally gathering speed."

Ikkan Sanada, a private art dealer who used to be based in New



PHOTOS: ART STAGE SINGAPORE/IKKAN GALLERY

Revvng up: *Ikkan Gallery* will exhibit *Cities On The Move 4* by *Thais Rirkrit Tiravanija* and *Navin Rawanchaikul* (above) at *Art Stage Singapore* which will be held at *Marina Bay Sands Exhibition and Convention Centre* from *Jan 12 to 15, 2012*

York, also expressed surprise at how, in less than six months, he had gained so much recognition and encouragement locally. "When I opened my gallery, virtually nobody knew of me or my gallery here. But so many people have since visited. It's been much more than I anticipated. In addition to that, many of my Japanese colleagues showed strong interest in the art scene of Singapore and the region and some of them have been seriously considering expanding their business into Singapore," he notes.

An expanding list of galleries isn't unwelcome by veteran gallery owners here. "More players mean more information, more variety and more awareness for collectors and potential art collectors alike," says Jennifer Soen, owner of the former Sunjin Gallery, now renamed F.A.T. Gallery. "This is good for art galleries in general. Armed with new information from talks about art investment and how to spot good art, new collectors are now more willing to pay high prices as well."

The secondary resale market in Singapore has also emerged, along-

side the primary market, she notes, given that auction houses are now more willing to take in young artists so that collectors have an avenue if they want to resell their art works.

Ms Soen, who used to run Sunjin Galleries at Chip Bee Gardens for the last seven years, just moved her gallery to the CBD area recently. She notes that buyers' patterns have changed: "People don't come to you as much these days, we have to go to them. Art is no more a destination place, and now that we've positioned ourselves in the CBD area, we're getting new quality clients," she highlights.

There are a lot more collectors in their 30s, and more international clients, she notes. "Given that the stock market is erratic and property prices have gone up so high, art is more tangible and more accessible," she adds.

Indeed, even though the first art "industrial" area was formed in Tanjong Pagar Distripark, one can now find art spaces all the way to Woodlands, says Veronica Howe, chief art consultant at One East Asia.

"The opening of new galleries is a good sign, as it shows the confi-

dence of art dealers and/or artists. And this also reflects how wealth has shifted more to Asia, and Singapore in particular," she says, adding however that for a better quality in galleries, there should be some form of guidelines set by an arts association for the opening or running of an art space.

"For example, when we wanted to host an art exhibit in London this year, our portfolio had to be approved by the London Arts Dealers Association. We were surprised but very impressed with how it was so professionally conducted," she elaborates.

The growth in the art scene didn't just happen overnight, points out STPI's Ms Eu. "Many people have been working towards a day like this, and it's all coming together. Of course, it has very much to do with the financial markets being stagnant in the United States and Europe as well."

Ms Eu's personal view is that the art scene is like a puzzle taking shape, with pieces of substantial content as well. And she also points out that Singapore galleries are now more encouraging of Singapore artists, with artists like Heman Chong and Ming Wong also gaining recognition overseas. Both artists were recently in the prestigious Performa new visual arts performance biennial in New York.

In terms of actual transactions, however, industry observers note that Singapore still isn't on a par even with Hong Kong. "But there's a vibe now and it's building," says Ms Eu succinctly.

Chan Hampe Galleries' Mr Hampe agrees. "Hong Kong is king of the art market at the moment, and I don't see that changing any time soon, but if something like Art Stage Singapore can stimulate the market and make Singapore the centre for the South-east Asian market, then it's good," he adds.

With that, he'd like to see a lot more private and corporate collecting in Singapore. "The Government has done a wonderful job in the last few years to stimulate the culture, but they can't do this perpetually. The private sector needs to become advocates of art," he concludes.