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Secrets on show

How to survive Singapore's surprisingly crowded art gallery scene

Mayo Martin

mayo@mediacorp.com.sg

ART galleries. They're a dime a dozen these days. Like Starbucks — just way more common.

In fact, there are more art galleries in tiny Singapore than there are local Starbucks outlets (64, according to its website) and McDonald's restaurants (about 110) combined.

According to the National Arts Council, there were 150 visual arts companies (a great number of which include commercial art galleries) 10 years ago. By 2008, there were 273 galleries — 40 of which, amazingly, entered the scene that same year.

For collectors and art lovers, it's a virtual visual feast. And for many of these galleries, it's time to have their day in the sun — beginning with Saturday's ART Singapore art fair, continuing with next month's inaugural Affordable Art Fair (Singapore), before exploding big-time in January with Art Stage Singapore.

That's all dandy, but how are our local galleries standing out in this ever-shrinking space? How does one survive the sheer competition? Five different galleries spill their secrets.

#1: Keep things new and interesting

It has held cheeky auctions, convinced its neighbours in Niven Road to participate in a street-wide exhibition, and it's current show is all about Singapore's national campaign posters.

Evil Empire is definitely not your run-of-the-mill art gallery (owner Alan Oei prefers to call it a "project space"). And that's exactly why it stands out. "Galleries here are mostly about selling art. For us, art is more like a conversation with the world at large. It's a way of looking at, and thinking about, our lives," said Oei.



Is this a house or a gallery? Evil Empire's shophouse space serves as a gallery space — and more.



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Alan Oei, owner of Evil Empire

The unpredictable nature of its art events has earned it its motley but loyal audience made up of anyone from students and labourers to families and a handful of collectors — "people who are up for new things", said Oei.

Consultancy work, grants and "goodwill" has kept the new art space afloat with only 20 to 30 per cent of its revenue coming directly from its gallery events. They sell anything from \$150 editioned prints to oil paintings that go for up to \$15,000, to badges and T-shirts.

Quipped Oei: "Maybe you can think of us as a \$1.99 budget shop. A poor, poor man's version of the Tate Modern. They do really academic art-historical shows sandwiched between spectacular, silly crowd-pleasers, but the point is they enlarge people's experience of art."

#2: Go to where the people are

Opera Gallery's reputation as the Goliath of the local art scene is based in great part on the most basic trick of the trade: Location, location, location.

From one flagship gallery in Singapore in 1994, it has evolved into a gallery network that spans 11 cities, including London, Paris and New York. "Artists need the basis of international networks in order to be displayed and supported worldwide," said Stephane Le Pelletier, director, Asia-Pacific. This broad reach has enabled them to exhibit some of the biggest names you'll ever see in a Singapore gallery, from the masters to the current hotshots (its ongoing blockbuster show Art Beyond Limits features Young British Artist Marc Quinn, Damien Hirst and Julian Opie).

To attract a clientele willing to pay for

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works that can reach the five-digit range (in euros and pounds, too, mind you), they know exactly where to go in Singapore — the mall.

“The mall culture of Singapore ... has proven to work for us,” said Le Pelletier. “Being in the Ion Orchard, we reach out to many locals and foreigners who spend time here.”

Next up is a second gallery in Marina Bay Sands. Like we said, location, location, location.

#3: Show off your local artists — around the world

Newbie Chan Hampe Galleries is one of the rare local galleries that aim to support local and local-based artists on a global platform. “It’s difficult but we’re very upfront about what we want to achieve,” said Australian co-owner/director Benjamin Hampe.

The galleries are an offshoot of co-founder Angie Chan’s Fill-Your-Walls, a three-year-old commercial gallery-cum-outreach space in Tanjong Pagar, which also focused on supporting local talent. Fill-Your-Walls is now an online presence, with Chan Hampe Galleries taking over the commercial aspect.

Right now there are two galleries. The Tanjong Pagar branch focuses on “emerging, mid-career artists” and targets



Utterly Art's no-frills approach of selling art.

young collectors and tourists with works that range from \$500 to around \$5,000. The newer space in Raffles Hotel is set to showcase “high-profile Singapore artists” and is expected to attract “serious art collectors, investors and institutions” with price tags that range from \$500 to over \$50,000.

Hampe, who is also an art consultant, said they will be tapping into his and Chan’s extensive gallery and institutional networks in Australia, China and London, among other places. “Our eventual focus is to actually promote investments into Singaporean artists through foreign buyers,” he said.

#4: Go back to basics

Next year, Utterly Art will have been in the business of selling art for 10 years. They’ve had 259 exhibitions to date and, as co-owner Pwee Keng Hock proudly claimed: “You can count on one hand the number of shows where we didn’t sell anything.”

The secret to their success is quite

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Osage Gallery Singapore's group show from Myanmar.

simple, really: Stick to selling quality art at a good price — and just keep on showing.

Having an exhibition every two weeks — a pace practically unmatched in the gallery scene here — ensures that there will always be a reason for clients to visit them. “It’s working very hard, basically,” he said.

Their cache of artists includes Singaporeans as well as those from the region, particularly The Philippines. Paintings have a general price range of \$1,000 to \$6,000 (with the occasional five-digit-figure ones).

While glitz and hype has surrounded the gallery system today, Utterly Art has taken a very back-to-basics, no frills approach. They don’t even serve wine at their receptions.

“You automatically omit all the freeloaders,” laughed Pwee. “For genuine clients, frills don’t matter that much. What they really want is good artwork and a good price. And we can provide that easily.”

#5: Keep your image clear

When Osage Gallery Singapore closed the doors of its gallery in Mount Sophia in the middle of this year, some wondered if it had succumbed to the dog-eat-dog world of the art market and had closed shop. Had its type of contemporary art work — a lot of installations, video works — simply not clicked with the local market?

According to Lee Weng Choy, former Substation co-artistic director and current director of projects, research and publication at Osage Art Foundation, it was simply a matter of re-strategising after their lease had run out.

Apparently, there had been two types of exhibitions: The commercial ones, such as the solo shows by Jane Lee; and those under the Osage Art Foundation, a non-profit wing, such as its last group show on Myanmar artists.

“The gallery has done shows that it shouldn’t really be doing because they are not profitable,” said Lee. This rebranding of sorts is especially important for a gallery with a reputation for exhibiting unconventional, experimental works in a conservative collector base like Singapore.

Lee added that they are now exploring other possible spaces once Osage, which has other spaces in Shanghai and Hong Kong, makes its “comeback” in Singapore, possibly under an umbrella identity that will house the two sectors more distinctly.