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Bridging the art of the region

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Art Stage Singapore, in its fifth edition, has settled comfortably into its role as a marketplace and educational platform for regional art.

IN ITS fifth edition this year, Art Stage Singapore is becoming a solid bridge between South-east Asian and other Asian artists and their collectors, while educating the world at large about this region's art.

As art fair founder and director Lorenzo Rudolph notes: "That's the biggest advantage of cosmopolitan and multi-cultural Singapore. So we need to take advantage of this situation."

As the South-east Asian and Asian markets are still so new to one another, the fair still has to work on educating and creating awareness about each country's art - hence the museum-like settings showcasing works in special themes. This year's fair has five special exhibitions: Russia, Modern, Video Stage, Malaysia, and Korea.

In his opening speech this week, Mr Rudolph briefly recounted the fair's past four years, and even hinted at feng shui help after the shaky second edition. "We didn't have a feng shui master specify things in detail, but like all fairs in Asia, we did speak to a few. We have to learn from our mistakes," he said after his speech.

The wrong move, he adds, was having a spectacular 50m-long painting at the entrance in the 2012 fair. It was impressive, but it was fascinating and sad to see the local reaction to it. There was "no flow", and "we felt it market-wise", he admits.

So far, Art Stage Singapore has opened well - with a vibrant, well-attended preview on Wednesday which drew some 7,000 visitors.

In a fair where one can find any kind of art under the sun, this year's gallerists brought in a slew of works showcasing classic, high-quality painting expertise. "It's a case of going back to basics," says Chris Churcher of Redsea Gallery, which is showcasing Russian artist Anna Berezovskaya's fairy-tale-like oil-on-canvas paintings. "Classic paintings can stand the test of time, and will remain when the trends move on."

It's the first time for the gallery, based in Dempsey Village, in Art Stage. "We have the right artist, with the right paintings," he explains simply, when asked why he chose to take part this year. Berezovskaya had two sell-out solo shows before, at Redsea, and another solo is coming up in May. Her works range in price from S\$16,000 to S\$150,000.

Chinese and Japanese

Galerie Paris-Beijing brought in photographic works, sculptures and installations to the Fair before, but chose Chinese painter Zhu Xinyu's 220x270cm oil-on-canvas as their centrepiece this year. "Because this is a really good piece, and because the 35-year-old artist is really talented," notes Kenny Jo, the director. "So far, we've had a few queries about the price now," he says of the S\$46,000 work. "He uses traditional techniques, but his pieces are more conceptual than realised at first glance."

Japan's Gallery Shinseido also chose to showcase one painter, Tokuro Sakamoto, who makes super realistic yet stylised paintings of clouds and the cityscape at night. "We chose Sakamoto because we brought him before to Singapore about seven years ago. We do feel that the Singapore market might like him," says gallery president Akihiko Hatanaka.

"Sakamoto's technique is quite traditional but to me, he's a contemporary artist and he's doing new Japanese painting. I think the painting skills of Japanese artists are of high standard, and I want to showcase this," he adds. This is also the gallery's first outing at Art Stage Singapore. Sakamoto's acrylic on fine Japanese paper is priced from S\$1,400.

Over at Art Plural Gallery, two artists in solo shows both experiment with ink but in contemporary ways. Chinese artist Nan Qi, for example, still uses ink and rice paper, but paints his subjects in a restrained pop-style manner. "People tend to look for artists with strong skills," says Art Plural's Carole de Senarclens. "Technique cannot lie and you can be doing something interesting, but you can't master it without a good dose of skills, hard work and creativity." Nan Qi's works are priced from S\$12,000.

"High-quality painting will always be an enduring trend," she adds.

Malaysian figurative art

Painting is also emphasised by 16 Malaysian artists in their special exhibition, Being Human. The focus is on figurative painting, says Bayu Otomo Radjikin, one of the founding members of The F Klub, an art collective.

The "F" in their name stands for figurative. The collective is anchored by top Malaysian artists such as Ahmad Zakii Anwar and Jalaini Abu Hassan, but includes young artists Hisyamuddin Abdullah and Fadilah Karim. "We like to think that our works are defining figurative art in Malaysia today . . . that's our intention," says Bayu. A third of their works sold on Wednesday, mainly to Malaysian collectors.

For those who want an introduction to video art, however, Art Stage Singapore is a good place to check this out. It forms the main body of works showcased at the Russian platform and the Video Stage curated by Paul Greenaway, Chi-Wen Huang and Ute Meta Bauer. This year, the fair is anchored by 34 Singapore galleries, 10 from Malaysia and eight from the Philippines. The ticketed fair has more than 150 galleries from 29 countries represented, with 70 per cent from the Asia-Pacific region.

Art Stage Singapore runs until Sunday, Jan 25, at Marina Bay Sands. For more information, visit www.artstagesingapore.com

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