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MAKING A STATEMENT



Goh Beng Kwan's mixed media on canvas work titled Geomancy.



Donna Ong's installation, inspired by storybook descriptions of gardens.

Singapore art is being shown in three venues in Beijing as part of the Singapore Season showcase of the Republic's art and culture. **HONG XINYI** finds out how the artists are trying to impress in a city that has a vibrant art scene.

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Dark horse

Outside favourite Anne Enright won this year's Man Booker Prize for *The Gathering*, a dark tale about a troubled family. Bookstores here are scrambling to order her books.

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Titled Andy's Prank-Gold, the stainless steel sculpture is by Vincent Leow.



Local artists and designers are hoping to make an impression in the Chinese capital's lively arts scene with their work



Hong Xinyi
IN BEIJING

WITH less than 24 hours to go before the official launch of the Hybridity-Singapore exhibition last week, the seven Singapore designers involved in this Singapore Season event were engaged in quite a bit of organised chaos.

In one corner of Beijing's Loft 3 gallery, visual artist Donna Ong scrutinises her installation of a garden fabricated from household objects like toilet brushes and loofahs, methodically arranging butterfly hairclips among the plastic toms.

In another, fashion designer Ashley Isham is helping sculptor Jessie Lim arrange her pieces in between meticulously steaming the creases from his three couture gowns.

The show is part of the ongoing Singapore Season, a showcase of Singapore art and culture in Beijing and Shanghai.

Organised by 14 government agencies, it kicked off in Beijing last week with a gala dinner, followed by a slew of art exhibitions, business forums, a Singapore film festival and a performance by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. More Singaporeans are expected to make a splash when the event moves to Shanghai later this month.

The atmosphere at Loft 3 verges on frazzled, but is tempered by the implacable serenity of architect Tan Kay Ngee, who organised the exhibition together with Singaporean advertising guru Lim Sau Hoong.

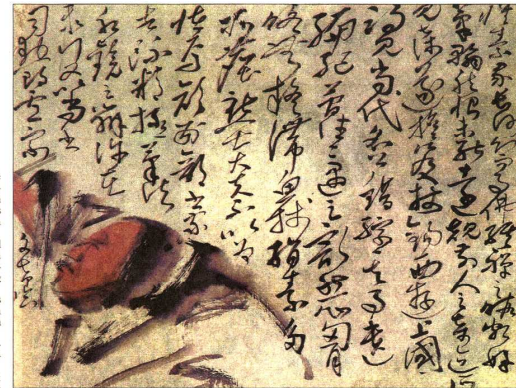
His calm demeanour, however, belies his considerable hopes for this project.

"We want this exhibition to be a punch in the face, to make a statement," says Tan, 51. "If you don't live up to their standards, you will be brushed aside, because there's so much art here."

"Here" refers to one of the most vibrant enclaves in the bustling Chinese capital – the 798 Art District, where Loft 3 is located.

In the 1950s, with the help of the former East Germany, military and industrial factories were erected in this neighbourhood in the functional Bauhaus style. By the 1980s, most of these factories had fallen into disuse.

Then in 1995, Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts was temporarily relocated to this neighbourhood and artists like sculptor Sui Jianguo and photographer Xu Yong began to move here in droves to take advantage of the cheap rents and large spaces.



PHOTOS: MICA

SINGAPORE SHOWCASE: Chen Wen Hsi's *Huaisi Practising Calligraphy* (left), Donna Ong's installation (above) created out of household objects and Vincent Leow's man-dog hybrid sculpture (far left) based on his dog Andy.

BEIJING BECKONS

By 2003, the area had become home to a growing number of cafes, clubs, bookstores, studios and galleries. Many of the artists have chosen to retain the old Cultural Revolution slogans painted on the factory walls, and large characters exclaiming sentiments like "Chairman Mao is the red, red sun in our hearts" imbue a touch of historical poignancy and ironic kitsch to many arts spaces here.

Tan says: "We didn't want this design exhibition to be in the lobby of a posh hotel. We want to be associated with this group of ground-breaking contemporary artists who show here, and be seen as a group of inventive and gutsy designers who dare to take risks and experiment."

From jewellery designer Shing's punk-inflected pieces of oxidised silver to toy art firm Play Imaginative's cheeky vinyl figures, Hybridity is a competent, if understated, exercise in demonstrating the often reflectively whimsical tendencies of this group of designers.

Also part of the Singapore Season's visual arts events is a showcase of multidisciplinary artist Vincent Leow's paintings and sculptures at the Xin

Beijing Art Gallery and an exhibition of the works of Chen Wen Hsi, Goh Beng Kwan and Wong Keen at the National Art Museum of China (Namoc).

It's an approach for visual arts that tries to cover all the bases, tapping into the bohemian chic of 798 District, the more upmarket sophistication of the Xin Beijing gallery and the institutional credibility of Namoc.

And there seems to be no better time than now for Singapore artists to make their presence felt in Beijing.

For one thing, the Singapore approach feeds into what has become increasingly commonplace in all three venues: the growing presence of foreign art practitioners, dealers and institutions.

For instance, 798's inception as a cultural hot spot owes much to the establishment by American Robert Bernell of the Timezone 8 bookshop, which sells Chinese and English art books, and the Beijing Tokyo Art Projects gallery set up by Tabata Yukihiro from Japan's Tokyo Gallery, which displays contemporary Japanese art.

Xin Beijing gallery, located in a conserved 600-year-old imperial granary and flanked by yuppie restaurants in the Namxincang neighbourhood, was set up last year and has held exhibitions of foreign artists like Belgian Wim Delvoye.

Ms Yu Tiao Tian, one of the gallery's members, says that Leow's "significant status" in the Singapore arts scene makes his work a good fit for the gallery's profile.

Photographer and Central Academy of Fine Arts teacher Yao Lu, 40, who attended the opening of Leow's exhibition, says: "I like the sculptures very much, they're not just playful but show a lot of imagination and are very interesting."

Ms Yu says: "We are planning to showcase more foreign contemporary artists, including a major one next year. There is a lot more information about foreign art that is easier to access, so people are becoming very interested."

Namoc, which is near Tiananmen Square, re-opened in 2003 after a year-long renovation with a new agenda to beef up its contemporary Chinese art collection and showcase more foreign artists. It has since held a series of exhibitions organised jointly with foreign institutions like Spain's Prado museum and the Guggenheim museum in the US.

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'If you don't live up to their standards, you will be brushed aside, because there's so much art here'

Exhibition organiser Tan Kay Ngee



PHOTOS: MICA

EXCHANGING IDEAS: Singapore Season participants (from left) Lim Sau Hoong, Shing, Ashley Isham, Darren Gan, Jessie Lim, Donna Ong and Tan Kay Ngee in Beijing. Below: Figurine from Play Imaginative, maker of designer toys.

All eyes on China

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Last week, it signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), signalling upcoming joint projects such as a showcase of up to 70 pieces of contemporary Chinese art at SAM next year.

As a 2005 China Daily article puts it: "The driving forces behind the metamorphosis of museums throughout China are the market, international institutions and globalisation... The rush of the world's top museums to get a foothold in the planet's fastest-growing economy is bolstering the growing competition among museums in China to match Chinese exhibitions with imported shows."

Furthermore, SAM's acting deputy director of the curation and collection department Low Sze Wee, 37, believes that younger curators at China museums like Namoc also have a growing awareness of the importance of China-born artists like Chen Wen Hsi.

He says: "This generation of artists left China after World War II and their works tend to be in the possession of the countries they eventually settled in."

"In the last 10 years or so, China has gradually realised that their contributions to the development of Chinese modern art cannot be neglected."

Singapore gallery owner and artist Chua Soo Bin, 76, whose own work will be showcased in Shanghai later this month as part of Singapore Season, believes that events like the Singapore Season can be a good start for establishing a more high-profile presence for Singapore artists in China.

He runs a workshop space for artists in Chengdu called the Red Grey Zone and has helped to facilitate exhibitions for Singapore artists in China.

He says: "Singapore is small, and not very attention-grabbing yet. But as long as it's good work, it will be noticed. In a few years' time, contemporary art from places like Vietnam and Korea will possibly become very hot as well, hopefully this will be a wave we can all ride."

For now, all eyes are on China, which is shaping up to be both a formidable source of new art as well as newly affluent art collectors.

A recent AFP story notes that earlier this month, a painting by artist Yue Minjun based on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests fetched more than £2.9 million (\$8.6 million) at a Sotheby's sale in London, a record for contemporary Chinese art at an auction and the latest of many million-dollar auction price tags for works of Chinese contemporary art.

Top Chinese art collector Uli Sigg, 61, says it is already clear that China buyers and investors are becoming an important presence in the China art market. "It is still questionable how much they will invest in foreign art works. But based on the extreme pricing of Chinese art right now, they may choose to put the same

amount of money on work by a more reputed foreign artist."

As artist Wong Keen puts it: "My impression of the China art scene is that it is aggressive and progressive. Next year will be much more interesting - with the Olympics, they will want to show that many interesting things are happening in Beijing."

Hybricity co-curator Lim, in her 40s, co-founder and chief executive of Singapore-based advertising agency 10am Communications and one of the foreign talents roped in to conceptualise the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, takes a broader view of the benefits of having a Singapore presence in China's art world.

"Right now, they don't see Singapore as a place where artists congregate," she says. "They don't know what we stand for. For the Singapore Season, we are painting ourselves as a multi-cultural place. Will that be attractive to them? I'm not sure. This is a start, we have to wait and see what ripple effects there are."

She adds: "But it's not just a matter of receiving recognition from others, but also exchanging ideas with artists in China."

"The Tang dynasty was the strongest dynasty in China's history, because it was a period that was very open to things from the rest of the world, and people's worldviews and attitudes expanded."

"It's always important to enrich yourself with knowledge and influences from others."

Artist Leow's China debut during the Singapore Season, for instance, has been a fruitful experience.

His exhibition, Andy's Pranks And Swimming Lessons, showcases 30 large canvases and seven sculptures, some of which feature the peculiar man-dog hybrid that is based on his dog Andy.

Leow, 46, who spent some time at the 798 Art District during his time in Beijing, says: "I think there is a really dynamic arts scene here, with a lot of exciting spaces and artists."

The vibrancy of the area seems particularly poignant for this co-founder of Plastique Kinetic Worms in Kerbau Road. The arts space is slated for closure next year due to lack of funding and audience support.

He adds: "There seems to be so much support in Beijing for artists to work and to market their work. I'm so envious."

