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Art Stage gets thumbs-up

The inaugural art fair won critics and fans over with its focus and variety

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New York-based artist Raghava K.K.'s art works were displayed on the iPad (above) and Malaysian gallery 12's booth charmed with its old-fashioned provision shop feel (below). -- ST PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN, NG SOR LUAN

An exceptional start.

That is the general verdict for Singapore's mega contemporary art fair Art Stage Singapore. The fair, which was held at the Marina Bay Sands Expo & Convention Centre, opened last Wednesday night and ended on Sunday.

Over four days, it drew 32,000 visitors, which fell short of its estimated target of 50,000 visitors.

But fair director Lorenzo Rudolf, 50, told Life! over the telephone: 'I am happy with the visitor numbers. I am sure the numbers will increase greatly in the future. Considering that this is a launch event, we have had a new team in place. I am more than pleased with the result.'

The fair drew a mixed bag of visitors, from the hoi polloi in their jeans and flip-flops to the creme de la creme out in their Pradas and Louis Vuittons.



The fair grounds were clearly a meeting ground of different aesthetics and sensibilities with an international crowd of artists, collectors and arts lovers.

Several top artists who showed up in person included famed American photographer David LaChapelle and Japanese pop art dynamo Takashi Murakami.

Key collectors such as Indonesia's Deddy Kusuma, India's Lekha and Anupam Poddar, and Miami's Don and Mera Rubell were also in attendance.

While official sales results were not available by press time, several galleries Life! spoke to did well at the fair.

Gallery de Sarthe Fine Art sold all 18 photographs by LaChapelle, priced between US\$50,000 (S\$64,560) and US\$180,000.

Delighted gallery owner Pascal de Sarthe, 53, said: 'Participating was a big gamble for us. We heard from a lot of big galleries and they dismissed this fair. We are very happy we did not listen to what everyone else was saying about the fair.'

Several top-ticket buyers chose to remain anonymous, such as a Japanese art collector who spent US\$2.2 million on a set of three Murakami paintings.

French Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, which sold the works, also sold more than 50 of the artist's prints, with prices ranging from US\$1,600 to US\$1,800.

Among other big ticket items, two original works by legendary Spanish master Pablo Picasso are said to be on reserve by interested buyers.

Asia Art Center, which represented Taiwanese artist Li Chen, sold three of his massive wooden sculptures, priced between US\$120,000 and US\$160,000, to an American foundation.

Singapore and Singapore-based galleries also did well.

Local gallery Fost, participating in a fair for the first time, sold three works by Singaporean artists and brothers Chun Kai Qun and Chun Kai Feng priced between \$4,800 and \$5,300.

Richard Koh Fine Art brought in eight paintings by Thai artist Natee Utarit and sold all. Mr Koh, 46, said of the fair: 'It is a very good debut. It has surprised visitors with its range. It is also a good platform for locals to see what else is available in the field of contemporary art.'

Singaporean collector Michael Tay, 35, agreed: 'The quality was incredible. There were so many doubting Thomases at the beginning so kudos to Lorenzo and his team for pulling this off.'

'It has set the benchmark for art fairs in the region. What I also liked is that it was not just about selling art, they celebrated the artists as well.'

The fair included a series of talks and discussions on contemporary art, some of which had only standing room. There were several fringe and parallel events such as Collectors' Stage at the Singapore Art Museum and SO Contemporary at the Lasalle College of the Arts as well as parties and sit-down dinners for VIP guests.

Mr Michael Schultz, 59, gallery owner of Galerie Michael Schultz from Germany, called the fair 'absolutely great'.

The gallerist, who has participated in Art Hong Kong for the past three years, said: 'I believe this is better than Hong Kong. We have invested a lot of money there, but we get only clients from Europe. Here, we have met good collectors from South-east Asia, which I think is the best market for the future.'

The fair's distinct Asian focus and platforms for promoting South-east Asian contemporary art also got the thumbs-up.

The works of eight outstanding local artists such as Donna Ong and Ming Wong, who use everyday life as inspiration, were featured in the Singapore Platform at the fair.

More than 120 galleries from around the world took part in the event, which was supported by the Economic Development Board (EDB), Singapore Tourism Board, National Heritage Board and the National Arts Council.

Says Mr Rudolf: 'I am very thrilled with the support we have got from all our partners, particularly the Government. It shows they have a clear strategy in place to grow the arts in Singapore.'

He said Asia will continue to remain the focus for the next edition.

This is good news for collectors and art lovers.

Columnist and collector Karim Raslan, 48, said: 'Some real thought has gone into this fair. I have seen some exceptionally curated museum quality pieces.'

'People keep talking about the competition from Hong Kong but I feel there is room for both fairs in Asia. Art

Stage has made an exceptional start. The challenge will be sustaining this level.'

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ART STAGE'S HIGHS

• Art on an iPad

Indian artist Raghava K.K.'s five interactive art works on the hip gadget had their background colour changed according to the weather and locations, and had a nice tropical feel in Singapore.

• Dressed-up booths

Galleries such as Malaysian gallery 12 went all out to dress their booths. It turned its space into an old-fashioned provision store with interesting works, such as one hidden in a cake box.

• Starting young

Some schoolchildren were spotted viewing the art quietly, taking copious notes, attending talks and asking questions. A good start to arts education.

LOWS

• Confusing stances

Art should make statements but Indian gallery Maskara's posturing left us confused.

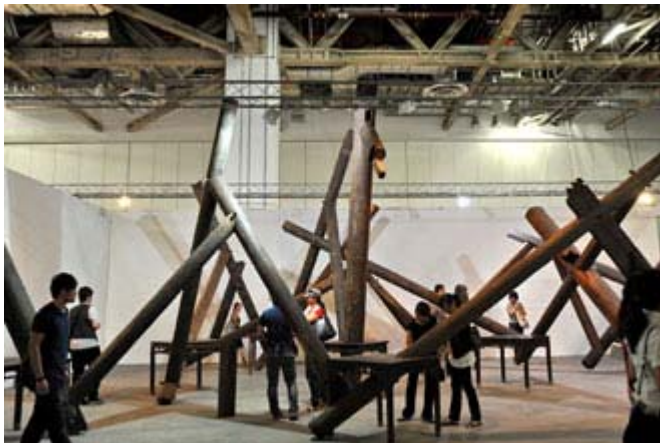
First, artist T. Venkanna, declaring he wanted to connect 'his humanity with yours', sat naked for two days, drawing a stream of visitors.

Then the show stopped - gallery owner Abhay Maskara said it was advised to but then later said 'the artist is taking a break'.

Last Sunday, in the fair's last minutes, it sent an e-mail statement: 'The gap of two days was prompted by the desire of the artist. He was sensitive to the observation that in the first phase of the performance, a minority of the people shied away.'

Venkanna returned, fully clothed, for the last day. Maybe it was not the audience that was confused about the art but the artist who was confused about his intent.

• Poor set-up



Controversial artist Ai Weiwei, who made headlines when he was put under house arrest by the Chinese government last November, lent a significant installation titled Through (above), which was tucked in a corner and let down by poor lighting.

• Useless maps

The one at the fair had some things in the wrong places and was no help. People using it were seen struggling to get their bearings.