

Indonesia Focus at Art Stage Singapore 2013

Katrin Figge | January 27, 2013

Billed as Asia's premier international contemporary arts fair, Art Stage Singapore 2013, which kicked off on Thursday and runs through Sunday, is now in its third edition. This year's "We Are Asia" theme emphasizes the fair's aim to promote Asia's art market on the global stage, with a special focus on Southeast Asia.

Founded in 2010 by the former director of Art Basel, Lorenzo Rudolf, with the aim of supporting the Asian art industry, Art Stage Singapore features more than 120 galleries, with Asian art comprising up to 80 percent of the exhibited works.

New in this year's program is a series of educational events such as lectures and discussions. Art Stage+, a virtual art fair, gives art enthusiasts and collectors access to all the fair's artwork without having to be physically present.

Another novelty of the fair is its Indonesian Pavilion, which according to organizers is the largest international showcase of contemporary art from Indonesia to date. It represents another step in recognizing the global emergence of Indonesian art — often dubbed as the next big thing.

Among the 50 artists participating in the year's fair are names as familiar and renowned as Heri Dono and Tintin Wulia, though the fair is also highlighting newcomers who are just beginning to break onto the global scene.

Additionally, Yogyakarta's Gajah Gallery will be exhibiting its latest initiative, the Yogya Art Lab, at the Art Stage.

YAL is an experimental center for contemporary art production, where international artists are invited to collaborate with local talent in order to develop and bring forth new and innovative projects.

Over the past few months, American paper maker and artist Richard Hungerford teamed up with Indonesian artist Yunizar to create a series of mixed-media artwork that focuses on textural language and layers.

Yunizar first became interested in Hungerford's work in 2005. He hoped that Gajah Gallery would be able to initiate a collaboration with the Iowa-born artist, who has been working with paper since the late 1970s and has spent 10 years of his artistic career in Singapore.

After finally realizing his wish, Yunizar said that his experience working with Hungerford was a unique one.

"[We invented] new techniques in order to be able to make this kind of artwork. It's fresh and exciting," he said.

"What Richard and I have done is left the apparent textural beauty of the paper," Yunizar added, explaining their creative process.

"We have worked together using colors and pigments to bring out the richness of these textures and create a unified [piece] with my drawn forms. During this process, we have faced lots of technical issues, and there were communication issues as well, but as you can see from the work that has been produced that every problem can be eliminated by using the right method."

As for Hungerford himself, Indonesia has always been a "dream spot" for him, albeit initially not because of the art scene, but because of the famous surf spots found in the country.

When the opportunity arose to come here for work, though, Hungerford didn't hesitate.

"I figured the stars were aligning," he said.

The same can be said about his fruitful collaboration with Yunizar.

"I was just pondering the fortunate opportunity to be developing work for Yunizar as a life-long experience coming together with this one particular artist," Hungerford said.

"If I could, I would spend the next 20 years working with just Yunizar. He is the perfect match for many methods and materials, and an ideal partner to explore ideas of contemporary art [with]."

According to Hungerford, being involved in Art Stage Singapore is extremely important.

"YAL is just getting on its feet, and an opportunity to showcase the project with Yunizar at Art Stage lends credibility to establishing Indonesia's presence in the international art scene," he said.

“It sets a good impression for the future of YAL’s ability to produce art.”

However, the art fair has faced some criticism for some of its practices.

The main point of censure has been the fact that the fair will be taking a commission of 50 percent for each sale made — instead of merely hosting art dealers, the fair is acting like one itself.

But according to Lorenzo, such a high commission was based on his findings that between 2011 and 2012, participation of Indonesian art galleries in international art events declined as much as 50 percent, since many Indonesian artists are not represented by galleries.

Farah Wardani, an art critic and director of the Yogyakarta-based Indonesian Visual Art Archive, is also involved in this year’s Art Stage: IVAA opened a library and will host a series of talks at the event.

“All I know is that the controversy is based on two issues,” she said.

“The local Indonesian galleries felt a little uneasy with the Indonesian Pavilion, which went directly to the artists. And then, there are the art communities in Singapore protesting that the government has invested money in an art fair that has a non-Singaporean focus.”

Whether Singapore Art Stage should help Indonesian artists sell directly to collectors due to a lack of representation and a weak gallery infrastructure in their home country, and the fair taking the dealer’s commission, remains up for debate.

One thing is for sure: never before has Indonesian art been the focal point of an international art festival on such a grand scale.

“Controversy aside, on behalf of IVAA, I will say that it is still a good chance for Indonesian contemporary art to be put in the spotlight of an international-scale event,” Farah said.

With our program, we hope that people “will gain more knowledge and a deeper understanding of the Indonesian art scene and history, which we find very important,” she continued.