



*Swimming with Sweaty
Palms by Jason Lim*

Singaporean artists have only registered a tiny blip on the radar of

collectors. **Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop** finds out why

Looking for a champion



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY: UTTERLY ART EXHIBITION SPACE

Art schools provide the fundamentals of drawing and material handling, but increasingly, emphasis is given to conceptual art, installation art, performance and new media

IN MANY WAYS THE OPENING OF THE ESPLANADE FIVE years ago was a watershed for Singapore's cultural arts scene. Besides offering a range of inspirational performances from international groups year round, it has also provided more space for local artists to present their work. But if the local performing arts scene has slowly begun to grow locally and internationally, visual art has remained the poor cousin in this artistic expansion.

While contemporary artists from around Southeast Asia have their work shown at art galleries at home and abroad, few Singaporean artists get much gallery space at home, let alone in the region. As a result, they remain largely overlooked by collectors.

This under-representation is also evident at auctions, where only a handful of Singaporean contemporary artists (such as Jimmy Ong, David Chan and Francis Ng) have been sold, and the value of their work tends to lag behind their peers' from Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Professionals attribute the lack of attention to a combination of factors. First and foremost, the Singapore market is extremely small with few talented artists and even fewer appreciative collectors.

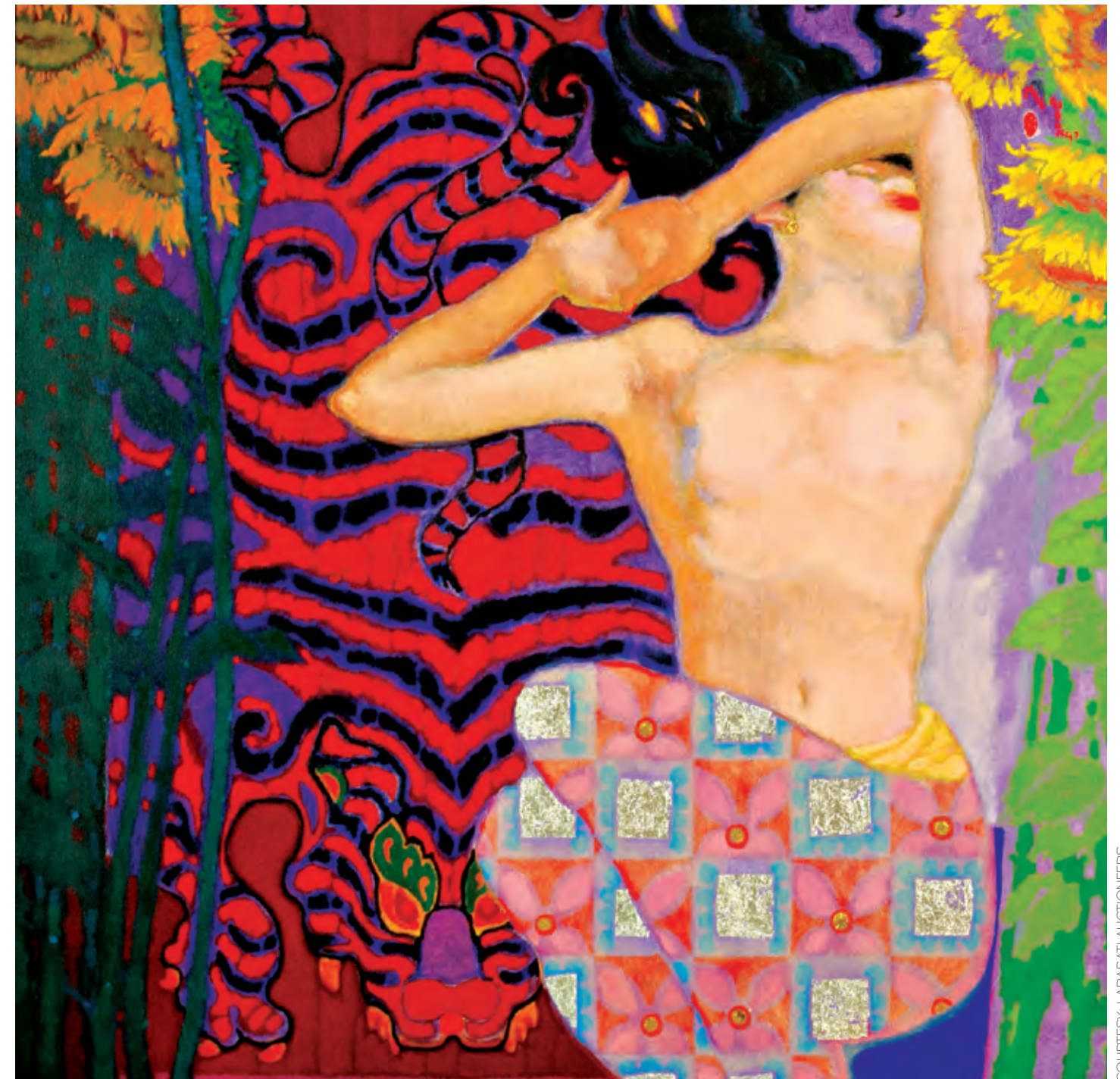
"Singapore's artists are working in a very competitive market in the region and I'm not just talking about China — Southeast Asia is producing very interesting artists with a great deal of aesthetic dynamism," notes Ahmad Mashadi, head of the National University of Singapore Museum. He adds, "Singapore does not produce the range and number of artists you will find in Yogyakarta, Bandung or Bali."

Secondly, many new, young contemporary artists favour conceptual art, installation work and video art, all of which are less marketable. This is partly a reflection of what is being taught in Singapore's art schools.

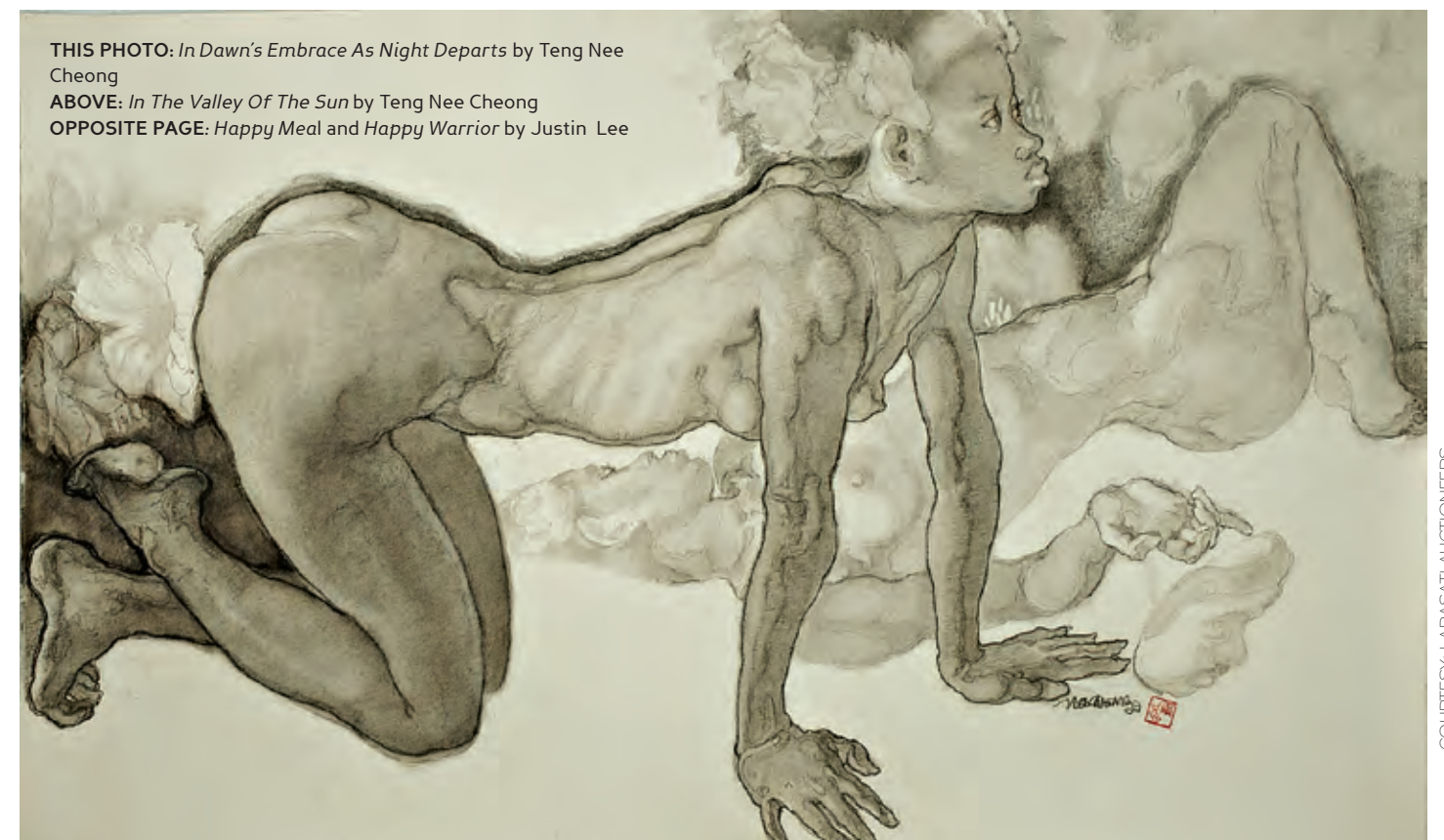
"Art schools provide the fundamentals of drawing and material handling, but increasingly, emphasis is given to conceptual art, installation art, performance and new media which can be regarded as dominant features in today's professional practice," Mashadi points out. "Given the current Singaporean market's general inability to absorb such practices into the gallery system, artistic practice is not translated into trading and sales of artworks," he adds.

However, even those contemporary artists who have chosen more traditional media and techniques like painting and sculpture still find themselves confronted with problems when it comes to showing their work. There are plenty of galleries in Singapore, but they often opt to only show international artists because they feel that's what their collectors are more interested in.

Amanda Lai at Art Seasons Singapore says: "We try as much as possible to be supportive of Singaporean artists. Every year, we have at least one exhibition featuring Singaporean artists. This year, we will be exhibiting Phunk Studio as well as two-time UOB Painting of the Year winner, Kit Tan. However, due to market considerations, we can't have more shows or be as altruistic as we want to be. But we try to keep a good balance between our Chinese, Burmese and Singaporean artists."



COURTESY: LARASATI AUCTIONEERS



THIS PHOTO: *In Dawn's Embrace As Night Departs* by Teng Nee Cheong
 ABOVE: *In The Valley Of The Sun* by Teng Nee Cheong
 OPPOSITE PAGE: *Happy Meal* and *Happy Warrior* by Justin Lee

COURTESY: LARASATI AUCTIONEERS



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY: ART SEASONS SINGAPORE

ABOVE: *Quietly Reflecting On Seasons Past* and (right) *Pilgrimage* by Kit Tan. **PRECEEDING PAGE:** (From top left) *Modern Journeys* — *Flying West* by David Chan; *Beach Paradise* by Aaron Teo; and Victor Tan at work on one of his wire sculptures

But artists want more exposure. They argue that if collectors are not shown the local artwork, they will never get to know and appreciate it. Their complaint is not unjustified.

"Singaporean artists are suffering from a lack of publicity," admits Mok Kim Chuan, deputy director for Southeast Asian paintings at Sotheby's. "There are some interesting artists, but very few local galleries carry them as Singaporean artists have to compete for art space and exposure with other contemporary artists from the region, and collectors are just simply not aware of what's happening here in Singapore."

"There is no one dealer that actually champions the Singaporean artists' cause, no one who sells or promotes Singaporean art internationally," says artist Sandra Lee. "Most dealers prefer to bring in works from overseas because of the perceived better return. Even when dealers have international affiliations, the majority of the art flow is coming into Singapore and not going out."

The artists are trying to promote themselves but they need help, she adds. "In the Singapore context itself, there are a lot of showings of Singapore artists because we do organise our own shows, but internationally there is still awareness to be created."

Lai believes it is crucial for Singaporean artists to start exhibiting abroad in order to widen their collector base. "If they don't get enough exposure, collectors won't know about them and as a result they won't be picked up by the auction houses. It's a vicious circle," she points out.

Mashadi believes that for Singaporean artists to raise their profile with collectors, they must start "strategising" their position in the market. "This will involve working with galleries or agents as partners. But I do not see this necessarily as a conflict with artistic integrity, it is simply a question of strategy," he says.

David Chan is one of those rare Singaporean artists who have appeared at auctions and had several shows abroad, most recently

in the Soka Art Centre in Beijing as well as in Taiwan. He is now preparing for his third solo show, which he hopes to take to Europe, China and Taiwan in 2008.

Chan admits that "strategising" might be an ugly word that turns off many artists. He also notes that not every artist depends on art sales. "A good handful of artists are doing installation and multimedia artworks and they look for grants and sponsorship rather than the sales."

"In the end, is it a conflict of integrity?" he asks. "Yes, to some extent, because we have to endure the storm of judgments that come with exposure." But he sees no alternative. Artists have to promote themselves.

"Do you need to strategise? Yes," he says, "I do believe that certain plans have to be followed to become known to a wider audience overseas. But it's really a tight-rope balancing act. My only advice is, be prepared to fall and get hurt in the process, it's a tough road, but hey, it's worth it!"

The National Arts Council is doing its bit. It is helping Singaporean artists get international exposure through participation in various biennales such as the exhibitions at Venice, Sao Paulo and Shanghai. It is also supporting participants at art fairs like Art Basel, Frieze Art Fair in London and the Arco in Madrid. The NAC has also helped artists gain residencies at institutions in Berlin, New York and Amsterdam.

"These are fairly new developments. Hopefully with these kinds of concerted efforts, things will start to happen for our artists. It won't happen overnight, but we're already seeing more international interest," says Lee Suan Hiang, CEO of NAC.

Mashadi is hopeful too. "If Singaporean artists continue to perform strongly in the international scene, particularly through the biennale circuits, we can certainly hope that these engagements may translate into forms of commercial successes," he says. ■

SEVEN ARTISTS **TO WATCH**



COURTESY: ART SEASONS SINGAPORE

DAVID CHAN (b 1979)

The ironies and dilemmas of genetic breeding and technology are some of the themes which attract the young artist who prefers to use animals rather than humans in his bold pop-colour canvases to express his concerns. "I like to use animals as metaphors for human behaviour. I find animals help make the point more innocently and naively. With a human you have an immediate reaction of like or dislike which might influence your overall perception, but animals engender much more neutral reactions, so the message comes across more strongly," Chan explains.

JASON LIM (b 1966)

Currently showing at the 52nd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, the ceramics sculptor and performance artist creates intriguing works of art that are often influenced by nature. Lim's installations are striking for their evocative beauty. Exploring textural and patterned ceramic forms, the artist also likes to "draw" on the clay surfaces of some of his smaller works, again echoing nature's forms. Abandoning the utilitarian functions often associated with ceramics, the sculptor deliberately creates unstable shapes and forms.

KIT TAN JUAT LEE (b 1953)

The artist describes her style as predominantly "Chinese Singaporean" with a touch of the current "East Meets West" ideology. Her finely-detailed brush work often represents very personal memories and emotions as she seeks to create a beautiful, flawless dream.



AARON TEO (b 1982)

Influenced by photography and illustration, this artist likes to reflect society's daily concerns (like the concept of beauty and sexiness as related by men's magazines) in his art using striking pop colours. He catches the eye also by using a glazing technique rather than flat colours in his latest work.

JUSTIN LEE (b 1963)

One of the international winners of the Montblanc Young Artist World Patronage Project 2007, Justin Lee uses visuals from East and West, mixing them with text to deliver his reflections on today's consumer society. The pop artist likes to use humour to oppose old and new, past and present. Using his trademark Chinese paper cutting motif, particularly the Chinese character for "double happiness", Lee reworks modern icons with his half-half theory. "I'm fascinated by the idea of juxtaposing two different icons and trying to blend them together. It's my way of reflecting on who we are, what we're doing and why the Eastern lifestyle has been influenced by the West," Lee explains.



COURTESY: SONIA KOLESNIKOV-JESSOP

VICTOR TAN (b 1969)

The visually-impaired artist (above) uses stainless steel wire like a pen to create intricate sculptures of human and animal forms. The sculptor often leaves the figures seemingly incomplete, like a sketched drawing, yet full of expression and poetry. His soulful, contemporary sculptures can be seen in several major public spaces around Singapore such as the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore Botanical Gardens.

TENG NEE CHEONG (b 1951)

Bold in colour and composition, the artist's paintings evoke the genteel atmosphere of lazy afternoons in Bali. Mainly painting human forms in exotic settings, Teng uses motifs like tiger skins, stylised flowers or textile patterns as a background to the otherwise flat rendering of sleeping bodies.

GALLERIES FOR SINGAPORE ART

Artfolio Gallery, Singapore

www.artfolio.com.sg

Art Seasons, Singapore

www.artseasonsgallery.com

Asian Art Options, Singapore

www.asianartoptions.com

Eagle's Eye Art Gallery, Singapore

www.eagles-eye.com.sg

Gajah Gallery, Singapore

www.gajahgallery.com

Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur

www.vwfa.net