

# A newly emerging metropolis of arts and culture

The authorities have ploughed plenty of investment into venues designed to put Singapore on the global arts map but there are still limits on artists' self-expression

**Tan Tarn How**

Singapore today is a vibrant city, replete with a wide variety of entertainment choices and, for the more serious-minded, lively artistic activities. Though not yet quite the 'Global City of the Arts' that is the government's official ambition, it can without hubris claim to be the most exciting metropolis for arts and culture in South-East Asia, and perhaps even further afield than that.

What impresses is both the large number of events and their sheer diversity, from big Broadway productions like *Mamma Mia!* to blockbuster exhibitions of Colombian painter Fernando Botero and masks from Sanxingdui, China's ancient archaeological site. These are held in the big venues like the Esplanade theatre mega-complex, the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum.

At the other end of the spectrum are the small, edgy events, from the provocative biennial *Future of Imagination* perform-



Art galleries and museums are flourishing

ance art series to short film screenings held in out-of-the-way venues like Sculpture Square (a former church), the Substation (a former power substation) and the innovative Post-Museum (once a run-down store in 'Little India'). There is a full range of other events in the middle, from produc-

tions of Brecht to local political plays, from mini-festivals of Chinese, Malay and Indian arts to forum theatre performances on multicultural issues in the 'heartlands' – the public housing communities where 80 per cent of the population live.

Barely two decades ago, Singaporeans used to refer to their country self-derogatorily, but accurately, as a "cultural desert". Behind the transformation has been an influx of money, most of it from government after it had decided to transform Singapore into a 'Renaissance City' – an attractive place for expatriates not just to work (which it already was), but also to play. While the government said it was enacting this plan because it was good for the soul of the people, the economic rationale was foremost in its mind.

In 2002, the S\$600 million Esplanade opened as a multi-hall waterfront development – showing off its spiked dome and ▶

Asian Civilisations Museum



VIEWPOINT

**T Sasitharan, Director, Theatre Training and Research Programme**

We in Singapore love the West; it marks the bounds of our ambition. It is, for better or worse, the limit of the geography of our imagination. We love the West so much we turn against it. We love to hate it, love to beat it, love to better it so as to better be it. In this vein we love how much we are unlike our neighbours – a shining, gleaming outpost of clarified Westernness, better governed, better planned and just plain better off.

We love the difference. Since the 1990s, with the state’s entry into the sphere of artistic production, art has become the badge of this difference. As in the West, in the words of Theodor Adorno: “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore [in Singapore], not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.” Especially its right to exist. Art is the stigmata of Singapore’s arrival as bona fide simulacrum of the West. It was crucified, symbolic value extricated and mobilised for the national cause.

The state justifies art. We love art.

▶ iconic design, rather similar to the favourite local fruit, the durian. This is the most resplendent of the government’s investment in arts and culture. In addition, some S\$300 million will be pumped in to turning the City Hall and Supreme Court (the seat of the British colonial government) into the National Art Gallery by 2013.

All this new spending would “contribute to building Singapore as a regional and international hub for the arts”, the government has said.

Besides funding for buildings and other infrastructure, the government also supports artists, arts groups, events and training. Under the Renaissance City Plan III (the arts and cultural master plan for 2008 to 2015), S\$23 million a year has been set aside for such purposes. Government support has led to a mushrooming of groups and individual artists. The performing arts have done particularly well, with theatre groups regularly invited overseas. And there is also an active contemporary art scene.

But tensions exist between artists and the bureaucracy. One complaint is that by the time the money trickles down to them, artists see only a fraction of the funds set aside for infrastructure. The government is also criticised for being more interested in the commercialised production of culture



Singapore Art Museum

than arts for arts’ sake, which artists argue is the wellspring of creativity. Artists and intellectuals, including theatre director T Sasitharan, bemoan that the establishment, which they suspect of not being particularly cultured, lack an artistic compass, and look only to imitate the West. Some,

## Film: documentaries and low budgets

After the busy pre-independence period the film industry fell by the wayside. New film-makers are now emerging with experimental approaches to their work

**Ben Slater**

As a film-producing country, Singapore has long been seen as the wealthy underachiever among larger, less affluent South-East Asian neighbours. In Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, moribund studio systems churn out genre flicks to entertain large populations, whilst younger, iconoclastic film-makers armed with digital technology hit the international film festival circuit with increasing confidence.

Singapore can’t quite follow this model. Its once-thriving Malay film studios were abandoned in the mid-1960s, followed by decades of inertia. Cinema, it seems, was not a priority

for the government, either as propaganda or for commerce. Things picked up in the 1990s, and a survey of the contemporary ‘industry’ reveals a few directors and production companies aiming to make commercial products (extremely ‘local’ Chinese comedies) for a relatively tiny market. Meanwhile an eclectic bunch of writer-directors, forming a loose film community, struggle to figure out what a ‘Singapore Film’ actually is, and how that might appeal to audiences at home and abroad.

Censorship is a perennial bugbear. Other art forms negotiate licensing restrictions, but film-makers grapple with legislation

designed especially for them. The Political Films Act tackles ‘partisan’ content and its hazy definitions come into focus when the law is used to ban (and even erase) documentaries about opposition figures, most famously those by Martyn See, which can be easily watched online, but are almost impossible to screen publicly in Singapore. No less contentious are regulations on Chinese dialects, which are not as strict for film as they are for other media (some dialect is permitted in films, although nobody will say how much). This control on language places limits on authenticity.

A strain of housing estate miserabilism characterises much of Singaporean cinema since the 1990s, even the comedies: lower class characters trapped in claustrophobic flats, alienated from those around them,



VIEWPOINT

June Yap, independent curator and writer

Here in Singapore we are rather good at coming up with structures to organise, segment and classify. But the value of the arts is in its ability to deconstruct, re-imagine and question these boundaries and imposed limitations. We need a multitude of approaches, strategies, experiments, for different situations, expressions and ideas, and the refusal to prioritise one over the other, one at the expense of the other, to trade one dictatorship for another.

It is the differences that make the arts exciting, thought-provoking, unexpected and revealing of what we actually are capable of, for ourselves and for one another.



for instance, see insecurity on the part of policy-makers in the aspiration to be the 'New York of Asia'.

Censorship, despite the protestations of government that it is no longer an issue, continues to be a major issue. Works that deal with race, religion, homosexuality or politics face scrutiny, cuts and, worse still, a complete ban. Singapore wants to rock but, to borrow a newspaper headline, "Can a nanny state rock?" Because many artists are funded partly by the government, many acquiesce to censorship rather than raise a ruckus. If the hand that feeds you also muzzles you, should you bite it? The less compliant have seen their funding cut. But the government has become so skilful at censoring that very little of what happens is public knowledge.

A new bone of contention is artists' involvement in civil society. In a nation that has stymied the development of citizens' initiatives and political expression, artists



Sculpture near Cavenagh Bridge, in downtown Singapore

have moved in to try to find some space. Historically, there has always been work whose themes are social and political – and in the not-too-distant past artists regularly risked being jailed under draconian security laws. But the new direction is to engage in civil activism itself. As curator and writer June Yap says, "the value of the arts is in its ability to deconstruct, re-imagine and question these boundaries and imposed limitations". The government does not accept this. Pressure is being brought to bear on the groups that have ventured into these areas. One major group has been told to stop playing host to civil society events on pain of having its subsidised venue taken back. To artists, the nanny seems to have rather too thin a skin. ●

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left behind by capitalism, cracking up under social pressures, perplexed by sexuality, are pushed towards violence or other melodramatic gestures. This narrative model allows for an implicit critique of Singapore's 'success story' while showing a supposedly seamy 'dark side' to the island, but it's increasingly felt like an aesthetic and thematic dead-end. Recently some directors have moved things forward.

Tan Pin Pin's documentaries *Singapore Gaga* and *Invisible City* meditate upon the marginalised in Singapore's history, society and culture. Royston Tan blends surreal music video stylishness and Asian



'art house' tropes in the numerically-titled films *15*, *4:30* and *881*. With horror film, *The Maid*, and action thriller, *Kidnapper*, Kelvin Tong is attempting to establish a space for solid genre fare that might sell tickets beyond Singapore's shores. Ho

Tzu Nyen's debut, *HERE*, an allegorical mood-piece that partly reflects the director's rigorous cinephilia, heralds the arrival of several more formally adventurous low-budget works by younger film-makers.



All the names mentioned are Chinese, and although some directors have explored Singapore's racial diversity, the difficult issues around representing the mix of peoples and languages

(and their interactions) cannot be easily resolved. This difficulty relates back to the problem of assigning a coherent identity for 'Singapore Film' – which seems likely to remain somewhat ambiguous. Rather, new film-makers will bring fresh strategies to the screen, and that can only be a good thing.

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Top 10 movies in 2009\*

- 1 Avatar **S\$10.3m**
- 2 Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen **S\$7.9m**
- 3 2012 **S\$6.0m**
- 4 Harry Potter & The Half-Blood Prince **S\$4.7m**
- 5 Night at the Museum 2 **S\$4.1m**
- 6 Up **S\$3.8m**
- 7 Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs **S\$3.7m**
- 8 X-Men Origins: Wolverine **S\$3.4m**
- 9 G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra **S\$3.4m**
- 10 Alvin & the Chipmunks 2 **S\$3.1m**

\*All figures provided are in gross as at 31 Dec 2009  
Source: Singapore Film Commission

Cinema attendance

2009	21,971,138
2008	19,091,592
2007	17,956,000
2006	15,588,000
2005	15,083,900
2004	15,877,000
2003	14,644,000
2002	14,268,000
2001	13,563,000
2000	13,441,000

Source: Singapore Film Commission