



Photographs by Lim Yaohui

STATE OF GRACE

26 years after Singapore set out a plan to make itself a 'gracious' cultural capital, it has a glitzy art scene — but has it confused the state of the art with the art of the state?



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The Prudential Eye Awards for emerging Asian artists did not lack for entertainment — however unintentional. Guests swept up the red carpet for the pre-ceremony reception at Singapore's Art Science Museum, and the paparazzi either flash-flash-flashed or — glancing at me — lowered their cameras reproachfully. They were really there for TOP, a Korean pop sensation like Justin Bieber only with impeccable manners; his star power was intended to draw the attention of the region (or at least the region's hormonal teenagers) to the ceremony. TOP was attending to accept a bizarre award given to the whole nation of South Korea for its contribution to visual culture, which was presumably devised to warrant his presence.

Inside the museum, guests milled around the work of the nominated artists, although milling

doesn't quite suggest how careful we had to be. Hannah Bertram, an Australian nominated in the Installation Artist category, creates art out of dust — not metaphorical dust, the flotsam and jetsam of cultures and societies, but actual dust — and so her work is fragile, vulnerable to a sneeze or a smudge. She collects the dust with a pan and brush or miniature hoover from the streets of wherever she's making the work, then sieves it through stencils. For this show, she had spent four days making a dust carpet, a Persian rug with a vibrant pattern of birds and flowers.

The awards were the idea of David and Serenella Ciclitira, art collectors turned art entrepreneurs. They have been staging exhibitions of Asian art of varying quality at the Saatchi Gallery for several years now, each one with work drawn from a different country, and latterly have parlayed this into an

art fair (Start, happening at the Saatchi in September) and this awards ceremony, all sponsored by Prudential. Their sponsorship is hardly insubstantial: at the party, Barry Stowe, CEO of Prudential in Asia, said it was in the 'low millions' of dollars.

For the ceremony itself, we swanked out of the Art Science Museum and into one of the Marina Bay Sands' two auditoria; *Cats* was on in the other. The tone of the evening was, I think, meant to be Oscar-slick, but because of technology glitches and personality clashes it came to seem more like a satire on the Oscars. One host was a lively, ruffled figure, the other a newsreader who smiled as if her life depended on it, and their incompatibility made them seem like they were running separate shows. Too many of the presenters of awards — largely suits from Prudential — talked over videos of the nominees or announced the winners before the clips. The overall winners were the bonkers Japanese collective Chim↑Pom, who receive a show at the Saatchi Gallery.

What was most interesting about the distinctly mixed quality of the nominees was the way their works pointed out the different degrees of censorship they operated under in their home countries. Amir Hossein Zanjani could show his paintings of soldiers' faces back in Iran, but nothing with anti-government slogans or any nudity.

The same goes in Turkey. Ahmet Dogu Ipek's intricate drawings of fantastical cityscapes, with buildings piling on top of one another, are too subtly critical of the Turkish government's destructive urban policies for them to recognise, but he told me (with his girlfriend translating) that they had clamped down on anything more overtly political: 'We have so much censorship... Turkey is becoming much more closed and reserved.' Gallerists self-censor, and work can be taken away from exhibitions by government enforcers.

Singapore, it turns out, is not a million miles away from Turkey.

THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

The arts in Singapore have seen a quarter-century-long bonanza, kickstarted by a 1989 report in which it aspired for its citizens to become gracious — not the first word you'd associate with Singapore, nor top of the late Lee Kuan Yew's priorities. Having noted the country's lack of funds, knowledge, qualified professionals, publicity, facilities and educational opportunities for arts — lack of everything, in short — the report said a 'culturally vibrant society' had to be developed, where cultural vibrancy involved people who were 'well-informed, creative, sensitive and gracious'. Hundreds of millions of dollars were assigned and a deadline was set: there had to be grace by 1999.

In 2000, grace being apparently still some way off, there was a new aspiration: Singapore would be a 'Renaissance city' and its citizens Renaissance individuals with 'an open, analytical and creative mind...

able to bring a distinct value-added advantage to each activity that he engages in', every person a Leonardo of the Lion City. (Note the economic tone of the ambition.) And by some measures the past 25 years have seen great cultural success: in 1989, there were 212 visual arts exhibitions; this peaked at 999 in 2010 before falling back to 559 in 2013.

There is now enough busyness (and business) on the scene to warrant January's Singapore Art Week, which contained the Prudential Eye Awards and other prizes, talks and openings by the score, as well as truly one of the worst art fairs I have ever visited. But as money pours into the city's cultural scene, the tension between the art Singapore is most proficient in — the art of statecraft — and the art it wants to encourage is laying bare awkward truths.

CREATIVE ARMY

At some distance from the Art Science Museum are the Gillman Barracks, where British soldiers were maintained in the colonial era. Set into a hillside which is as green and fertile as Singapore's business district is glassy and barren, with a quick march you can visit seventeen Contemporary art galleries in the restored barracks.

The afternoon I was visiting, there were several openings in train, one of which seemed to have within it the promise of controversy, or at least of uncommon licence for Singapore. In the largest building on the site, three storeys behind spacious verandas, is the respected Berlin-based gallery Arndt, which was showing new pieces by Gilbert & George, creators of bright photo-based artworks with political, religious, sexual and scatological imagery and themes — four things Singaporean artists know to steer clear of. If their work were anywhere near as profane as normal, Matthias Arndt might have a problem on his hands.

These 'Utopian Pictures' looked like their traditional stained-glass-window works, both in construction and in colour. They had familiar elements drawn from their East London neighbourhood including a double-decker bus, a postbox, posters, stickers found on lampposts and doors. The messages of the stickers and posters were particularly pointed: 'No urinating', 'Wanted: male and female escorts', 'This area has been designated as a good behaviour zone'. One picture had the slogan 'Fight back!' repeated in different colours, and around its border was the phrase 'Fuck homophobia!'

I asked Gilbert & George if they had made these works with Singapore in mind. Gilbert replied that they never thought about the city where their work was going to be shown, and I believe him. But in a city where civic behaviour has been regulated to minute levels — that notorious chewing-gum ban — and where some homosexual acts are still illegal, Gilbert & George certainly seemed to be cocking a snook.

Matthias Arndt, who described the work as 'beautiful, colourful, challenging and therefore also >>>

ABOVE:
GLAMOUR AT THE
PRUDENTIAL EYE
AWARDS FOR
EMERGING ASIAN
ARTISTS

RIGHT: GILBERT & GEORGE'S 'FIGHT BACK!' ESCHEWS SUBTLETY. OPPOSITE: RYAN GANDER'S STPI EXHIBITION 'PORTRAIT OF A BLIND ARTIST OBSCURED BY FLOWERS'; THE STPI TEAM HARD AT WORK



Courtesy Arndt and the artists

» liberating, did not seem unduly worried. Duly worried — maybe. He said the culture ministry had made enquiries about the show and that he was aware of the law against causing religious offence, but he wasn't expecting anything to happen.

This law against offending religions is one reason freedom of speech — and thus of art — in Singapore is somewhat confined. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (1990) says the government can stop any religious groups performing political acts, 'exciting disaffection against' it or causing religious conflict. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned from meeting in part because they object to mandatory military service and indeed profess allegiance not to the state but to God.

To return to the title of Gilbert & George's show. The word 'utopia', as you will surely know, was coined by Thomas More to describe an ideal society: 'good-place' it means. But it is also a pun: in ancient Greek, a similar-sounding word does not mean 'good-place' but 'no-place'.

PERMISSION IMPOSSIBLE

There are, unsurprisingly in Singapore, guidelines, rules, laws about art. The Public Entertainments and Meetings Act requires anyone wanting to put on 'arts entertainment' (a play, an exhibition, a display of 'representations of real or mythical creatures') in

an 'approved place' to obtain first a licence, with or without restrictions, from the liberal-sounding Arts Entertainment Licensing Officer; if you don't have a licence, you are fined or arrested. One chapter in the act is titled 'PROHIBITION'.

The grounds for suspending or cancelling a licence all seem reasonable: they include fears that the event 'has been the cause or is likely to be the cause of a breach of the peace; has been or is likely to be wholly or in part of an indecent, immoral, offensive, subversive or improper nature... or is contrary to public interest'. You may well see the same terms in laws around the world, but the Singaporean government has quite clear ideas about what it finds provocative.

Gilbert & George's gallerist glanced at one such topic — religion — but talking to others on that humid afternoon at Gillman Barracks, it was clear that this was not the only area where (self-)censorship exists. Another gallerist there told me: 'There are things you can't do, and things you have to do under the radar — anything political or homosexual.' An artist described a public art work commissioned from him for which he proposed two men kissing;

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One has to be careful about assuming there is heavy censorship coming from the government. There is more self-censorship



Photograph courtesy Ryan Gander/STPI



after intervention, this was replaced by one woman, her lips only touching each other.

Homosexual subject matter provoked a notorious incident of art censorship in Singapore. Simon Fujiwara created a work during the 2011 Singapore Biennale about the suppression of gay literature under General Franco in Spain; it involved, according to *ArtAsiaPacific* magazine, 'contextually relevant gay pornographic magazines' which 'were removed from the installation without prior consultation'. As both homosexual activity and pornography are illegal in Singapore, there was little surprise here, other than that the authorities did not appreciate the irony of censoring a piece about censorship.

A piece of performance art on a gay theme in 1994, at the 5th Passage artists' collective, was seen as 'a critique of the police, the role of the press, and the law', says *ArtAsiaPacific*, and led, in short order, to the de facto banning of performance art for a decade: 'Funding ceased and there was the imposition of a prohibitively high cash deposit before any performance could occur.' 5th Passage itself was thrown out of its premises.

Iola Lenzi, a prominent Singaporean curator, says criticism perforce takes a quieter form now: 'There are Singapore artists producing works that question the official narrative. Some of it is subtle, but those of us who live here recognise its subtext.'

She cites some examples: 'Lee Wen, Amanda Heng and Tang Da Wu are from the older generation, and sharp. Younger Singapore artists making art with critical bite are Green Zeng and Tan Pin Pin, for example. But this is critical bite South-East Asia style, meaning quite discreet, via discourses on history and language for example. It is not literal.'

But where there is censorship, it is often self-inflicted for self-preservation, says Lenzi: 'In Singapore itself, one has to be careful about assuming there is consistent heavy censorship coming from the government. There is more self-censorship on the part of artists than coming from the top.' Art is neutered before it even leaves the artist's brain.

FREEDOM FIGHT

On the concrete steps up to a Gillman gallery, I was introduced to one of the figures Lenzi mentions, Lee Wen, a performance artist and that week a nominee for the new Joseph Balestier Award for the Freedom of Art. It was certainly a suitable award for Wen, given his decades-long battles with the government over his art, and he was not ashamed to say so: 'It's for people who fought for freedom. My citation [for the award] is based on the past, continuing performance even though it wasn't sanctioned by the National Arts Council.'

What happened to Wen was a 'proscription of funding': because the NAC didn't approve of his performances, he couldn't get any state money. Had he not found money from a foreign philanthropic foundation, he would have had to give up his art, and that money is already harder to get once the government has rejected you.

Wen is vehement about the 'invisible surveillance' Singaporean artists exist under, although he is not naive about the reasons why: the government is desperate to avoid any religious or racial violence such as happened in the riots of 1964 and 1969 (pre- and post-independence). This is presumably partly for its own sake, but also because it would make Singapore a less attractive business destination — compare last year's Occupy Hong Kong. Whenever he has spoken out to a compliant national newspaper with his criticisms, they haven't been printed.

'We are treated,' Lee Wen said to me on the steps by the gallery, 'like dirt — or dogs.'

Wen didn't win the award, but it's worth noting that the prize, named after America's first accredited diplomat in Singapore, was co-sponsored by the local US embassy. If you see in its emphasis on freedom a subtle rebuke to the government, you could be forgiven.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Interdiction exists alongside encouragement. While some parts of the Singaporean government are lukewarm on art-as-art, they are sharply keen on art-as-industry. This explains how Gillman Barracks came about and why it is an oddity in the art »



FROM TOP:
HANNAH BERTRAM
WORKS ON HER DUST
ART; 'UNTITLED' BY
PIETER VERMEERSCH;
'LOVE IS OVER'
PERFORMANCE BY
THE CHIM↑POM
COLLECTIVE;
'NESCIENTIA' BY
NATEE UTARIT

» scene. It was initiated, says Emi Eu, director of the Singapore Tyler Print Institute art gallery (STPI), by an economic arm of the government, not a cultural one. Eu is certain that international galleries must have been incentivised to come to what is in reality an out-of-the-way location; the whole development process was 'more contrived' than for her space. All this, combined with its tropical setting, gives it the air of a fantasy kingdom, one further degree away from reality than even the regular art world.

Eu's own kingdom, STPI, is a gallery working with artists to make art in editions and came from both private and public springs. Ken Tyler (the T of STPI) is a master printmaker who has worked with artists like Lichtenstein, Hockney, Rauschenberg and Johns, showing them the possibilities printmaking offered their practice. Pondering retirement, he wondered what to do with the substantial stock of his trade: machines which produced lithographs, other machines he had invented, the stones you carved prints on to, even the knowledge of how to make the best paper for artists. Tyler decided to gift his essentials to Singapore and a government official ensured there were funds to start STPI in 2002.

One of these essentials is the Elephant Printer, which I saw on a studio tour. It looks like a standard DIY workbench, about eight feet long, until you glance at what is sitting on top of it at its rear: a massive blue hydraulic press which looks as if it could crush a car. When in operation, printing an artwork, it can apply 500 tonnes of force. (Now I look this up, it seems 150 tonnes can crush a car, which gives art the edge.)

Eu praises Singapore's 'daring step' in supporting STPI and says its investment has paid off in making the whole art scene more professional: STPI's needs — better, faster and greater production, museum-quality framing, proper installations — have driven local improvements. 'I'm not saying that STPI was the main catalyst, but I think we could've been one of the main catalysts.'

She is also dubious about how censorious Singapore really is today: 'Contrary to many beliefs, I think the reputation of the Singapore government was really strict in the Seventies and Eighties, but we do have a lot of freedom.' In the light of *Charlie Hebdo*, Eu says, you can understand why the government wants to avoid anything promoting religious friction.

Next to the Elephant Printer at STPI is the etching room, complete with instructions stuck on to the door on the correct proportions of nitric acid to gum arabic (not something to get wrong), and across the floor is a room with piles of luxurious handmade paper and rainbow-shelves of paint. This is no insincere effort but an institution with every resource for proper art production, the authentic professionalism which is pointedly missing in other aspects of Singapore's art scene.

EXIT STAGE LEFT

You wouldn't call the Art Stage Singapore fair unprofessional, but you wouldn't call it inspiring either, and what it showed told a lot more than perhaps intended.

My favourite booth — favourite in the sense of getting most mileage from on Twitter — was Unix, a New York gallery showing among others an LA street artist called Desire Obtain Cherish. Like too many street artists, Desire Obtain Cherish thinks that mocking the baubles and tropes of modern life is enough to qualify as art.

Take, for example, his sculpture in the style of iPhone speech bubbles: 'Yeah, I keep up with #art' 'Really? Then you must be familiar with the famous new artist #yourkiddingright?' and so on. It was teeth-grindingly bad, as were his IV bags cast in metal with whichever designer logo on them you'd like. Some of these had already sold by the fair's opening afternoon.

There were a couple of serious galleries showing somewhat serious work — at White Cube, a Tracey Emin neon reading, quite astutely, 'This is Another Place'; at Galerie Perrotin, some beautiful Pieter Vermeersch paintings which explore the infinite gradations of tone between colours; Natee Utarit's Western-Asian icons at Richard Koh.

But the tough work — the offensive, conceptual, hard-to-love art — was nowhere to be seen. It was all Zombie Formalism, a new movement of abstract painting that's pleasing to look at but empty, or parodies of South-East Asian art. Most art fairs have a preponderance of loud, showy work; here it was rampant.

The problem Art Stage Singapore represents is that the work on sale was so decorative, so uninteresting, so far from the first rank, that it suggests the 25 years spent cultivating art-culture in Singapore have not caused the tastes of local collectors to become *any* more refined, or indeed well-informed, creative, sensitive or gracious.

Such were the aims the 1989 report set out. One of the aims in a successor document, the Renaissance City Report from 2000, is 'to provide cultural ballast in our nation-building efforts'. And there you have another motive: art not for art's sake but for nationalism's sake, just as for the economy's sake too.

Art is constantly worrying at the loose threads of the national tapestry. That's what art does. But Singapore has a government which wants to believe there *are* no loose threads in its society, nothing frayed or disordered, for anything loose threatens social stability and economic prosperity. And in those circumstances, with this fatal misunderstanding, mainstream art in Singapore is doomed to be pretty. Only on the margins, out of the glare, are artists and curators making art which challenges. The challenge for Singapore is to realise that this worrying at the threads doesn't unravel a nation but shows what it's really made of. *f*

First and third photographs by Lim Yaohui; second by Pieter Hugbrochts, courtesy Galerie Perrotin; fourth by Kishin Shinoyama