

## National gallery

On the steps of Singapore's City Hall the Japanese surrendered to the British in 1945 and, 20 years later, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, declared Singapore's independence. In 2013, the building will make history again when it reopens as the city-state's first *National Art Gallery*, also occupying the adjacent old Supreme Court. The gallery is designed to be a hub for Southeast Asian art and it will include a children's gallery and rooftop plaza. It'll be about the same size as Paris's Musée d'Orsay and it's hoped it will make Singapore a premier cultural destination. *Kwok Kian Chow* (pictured right) is the new director. — **KH**



# Arts

## Overview

On the fringe of one of the world's busiest container ports is a second-floor nondescript factory reached only by a chunky freight lift. Inside people are gathered in a hangar-like white space to see the latest works from New York-based artist and filmmaker *Julian Schnabel*. It's an indication of how far Singapore has come in the past decade. "I used to come here in the 1990s and I'd get out as fast as I could. There was nothing going on," says Howard Rutkowski, a partner in *Fortune Cookie*, which put on the show. "Now there's a lot more happening here. It's becoming more of an international city."

Part of that is due to the government, which is pumping millions of dollars into the arts to revitalise the city's international image. It's investing heavily in education, from primary schools to degree level, and museums are being expanded. "There is a growing recognition that arts and culture play an important role in promoting a sense of identity and belonging among Singaporeans," says Kwok Kian Chow, director of the new National Art Gallery. "People are increasingly looking for a higher quality of life, and many aspire to live and work in a city that has a rich array of arts and cultural offerings." Auction houses have set up shop on the island and as the art market at home has expanded, Singapore's artists have become better known internationally. The country started participating in the Venice Biennale in 2001 and this year video installation artist *Ming Wong* won a Special Mention.

Such recognition has, in turn, helped fuel interest at home. A visit to an art gallery or museum, rather than the mall, is proving popular. "It's a joy to see families coming on the weekends and bringing the kids," says Dionne Ng, manager of *Valentine Willie Fine Art*. "It shows that art is no longer this strange thing to be kept at arm's length." — **KH**

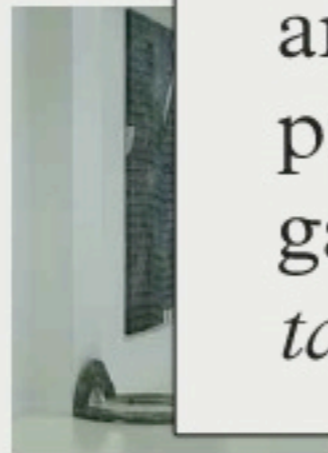
## Top five Galleries

- 1 Art Forum:** Born in Shanghai and now living in Singapore, Marjorie Chu is the founder of Art Forum. She likes to champion young talent. [artforum.com.sg](http://artforum.com.sg)
- 2 Valentine Willie Fine Art:** Valentine Willie opened his Singapore space in April 2008 and staged 11 shows in nine months. He went into the gallery business after retiring from law and now curates exhibitions across the region. [vofa.net](http://vofa.net)
- 3 Fortune Cookie Projects:** Conceived as a bridge between East and West, Fortune Cookie aims to bring major international artists to Asia and introduce Asia's artists to the West. [fortunecookieprojects.com](http://fortunecookieprojects.com)
- 4 Taksu:** Taksu's Suherwan Abu opened his Singapore gallery in suburban Holland Village in 2005. The gallery represents both international and regional artists and runs a residency programme at its sister gallery in Kuala Lumpur. [taksu.com](http://taksu.com)
- 5 Tyler Print Institute:** Part gallery, part museum, the Institute (*below*) opened in 2002 to build on the legacy of American printmaker Ken Tyler. A vibrant residency programme (including New Delhi's Thukral and Tagra) and varied exhibitions have put it at the forefront of the Singapore art scene. — **KH**



## Top five Artists

- 1 Milenko Prvacki:** Prvacki came to Singapore from Yugoslavia in 1992 with a small suitcase and two years later he exhibited at Lasalle, Singapore's top art school. Now he's Lasalle's dean of fine arts. Prvacki's work (*below*) can be found in private collections worldwide.
- 2 Ian Woo:** Woo was born in Singapore in 1967 and studied art in Singapore, the UK and Australia. He's something of a rarity in Singapore having stuck with painting when most artists of his generation prefer multimedia.
- 3 Heman Chong:** Born in Malaysia, Chong moved to Singapore as a child and studied in London. A curator and artist, Chong not only provides a platform for international artists in Singapore but also curates this year's Venice Biennale – the first for Singaporean work focuses on memory and he lives and works in Berlin and Singapore.
- 5 Henri Chen:** Kezhan's abstract ink and wash have helped introduce traditional Chinese painting. Inspiration and nature and he has established an international reputation for his work.



## Bookshop

Judging from the success of Karen Wai and Kenny Leck's *Books Actually* shop launched nearly four years ago, their new outlet *Polymath & Crust*, open since June, will command an equally loyal customer following. Both outlets are decidedly non-commercial; obscure, local and classic fiction titles at Books Actually, non-fiction, including philosophy and natural history, at Polymath & Crust. The couple (*pictured below*) are tapping into a new reading and publishing culture emerging in Singapore. Leck says "closet readers and writers" are coming out in force now that publishing is getting easier and a new generation of readers are demanding more locally crafted writing. "I think there is a hunger among kids between 15 and 18 who are asking for more Singapore-written works because those will resonate more with them," Leck explains.

Both believe they have a responsibility to support the writing and arts community in Singapore and try to do so by giving space at the shops to art exhibitions and book readings as well as bringing out local titles through their small publishing business *Math Paper Press*. "Other publishers do publish poetry and essays but I think there is more out there that deserves a voice. We hope to provide a platform for them," Wai says. — **LL**



## Record shop

The speciality at *Straits Records* is straight-edged culture (or sXe in specialist parlance), a very niche subgenre of aggressive hardcore and punk music. An audiophile's Aladdin's cave, the store stocks obscure titles in various formats from around the world, T-shirts and books. Founder Ridhwan Ghany (*pictured right*), a 34-year-old vegan, stages ad-hoc shows of indie acts, film screenings and art shows on rooftops, in car park basements, and even by road-sides. — **DW**  
*Straits Records*, 766 North Bridge Road, Singapore, [myspace.com/straitsrecords](http://myspace.com/straitsrecords)



# Media

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Singapore and media have not always sat in print. High profile run-ins with major news brands have been PR challenges for brand at slowly the country is wising up in most areas. Landscape is dominated by media corporations – controlled *MediaCorp* and private firms, including *One Press Holdings* and Australia's magazine *CP*, but the city-state's media players believe change is taking place. Daniel Yun, who launched production studio *Raintree Pictures* as part of MediaCorp in 1998, says Singapore's film industry is now set: "We're not in the driving seat yet but we're at the wheel. You must dare to dream of the ultimate – the Oscar. The only thing that doesn't make it is that you keep working at it", he says. Singapore government is all for big dreams. The country will receive an S\$230m cash injection over the next five years through the government-supported Singapore Film Commission in addition to the S\$500m already committed to the development of the interactive media sector. Developers such as Japanese *Koei* and Italy's *Ubisoft* have already set up shop and 15 international studios, including *Discovery* and *HBO Asia*, all have offices here. Singapore is a fantastic place to have a base and reach out to other markets," says Ken Lim, founder of independent *Hype Records* and the man entrusted with Singapore's new national anthem in 2005. "Right now we're going through a discovery process. We're trying to bring together different cultures and the skills that we have. It's a unique time to do that," he adds. — **LL**