Singapore's bid to become Asia's newest art hub

By DARRYL JINGWEN WEE
Special to The Japan Times

SINGAPORE — Three Tokyo-based Japanese contemporary art galleries — Tomio Koyama Gallery, Mizuma Gallery and Ota Fine Arts — inaugurated new spaces at Singapore's Gillman Barracks at an opening party on Sept. 14, joining 10 other galleries from the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, Korea, China, Germany, Italy, the United States and Singapore.

Many internationally renowned artists and curators were in attendance, including Yoshitomo Nara, David Elliott and Hou Hanru. January 2013 will see an additional two galleries open — Takashi Murakami's Kaikai Kiki Gallery, and Shanghai and Hong Kong-based Pearl Lam. At full capacity, however, there will be a total of 19 commercial galleries at Gillman Barracks, and two non-profit spaces — the Center for Contemporary Art and the international office of the Yellow River Arts Center, a new, privately funded art museum located in Yinchuan, China.

Gillman Barracks occupies a sprawling 6.4 hectare suburban site, located in lush green surroundings just a 10-minute walk from the nearest subway station, which used to house a British military battalion during Singapore’s colonial days. This new arts district features several detached, brick buildings of various sizes with high ceilings interspersed with restaurants and bars. Extensively refurbished to the tune of some S$10 million (¥634 million) by Singapore’s Jurong Town Corporation, with joint support from the city-state’s National Art Council (NAC) and Economic Development Board (EDB), Gillman Barracks is seen by many as the latest in a string of government-funded initiatives to reinvent Singapore as an Asian hub and market for contemporary art.
Offerings on opening night were diverse and eclectic. Ota Fine Arts organized a solo show by veteran artist Yayoi Kusama, who is currently riding a global wave of popularity with recent retrospectives at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, Paris' Pompidou Center, and London's Tate Modern. Berlin's Michael Janssen Gallery devoted most of its space to graffiti-inspired street art from Indonesia and a riotous, visually chaotic film by New York-based Luis Gispert and LA-based photographer Jeffrey Reed, while Indonesia's Equator Art Projects explored the question of how much the legacy of Marcel Duchamp has influenced contemporary Southeast Asian artists. In addition, various talks on emerging ecologies of art and art histories in Asia were held over the opening weekend, providing visitors with an opportunity to ponder the wider significance of Singapore's ambitious new arts district in a regional context.

Although several galleries seemed eager to be seen as a platform and showcase for artists from their respective countries, others sought to demonstrate a more borderless, international approach that does not confine itself to art of a particular nationality. Known primarily for their "neo-nihonga" (new Japanese-style) artists, including Makoto Aida and Akira Yamaguchi, Mizuma Gallery chose instead to inaugurate its new space with a one-man exhibition devoted to Korean hyperrealist painter Hyung Koo Kang.

Antoine Perrin, gallery manager of Mizuma's new Singapore outpost, was quick to emphasize the cosmopolitan nature of the new gallery.

"We have cultivated a base of collectors from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indonesia by participating in art fairs in Hong Kong and Taipei," he said. "And our upcoming exhibition program will be devoted to roughly 50 percent Japanese and 50 percent Asian artists."

Yasuko Kaneko, director of Ota Fine Arts' new Singapore gallery, was optimistic about the potential of Gillman Barracks enabling primary market galleries to play a major role as incubators of the Asian art scene.

"In the past few years, we have been trying to reflect the regional character, originality and commonality of the Asian cultural sphere in our own program," she explained. "We have previously presented works by Korean, Chinese, Bangladeshi and Iranian artists at our Tokyo gallery, and will continue to scout out new talent all throughout Asia in the future."

In addition to the lure of a new market, several galleries were also attracted to set up shop by the recent growth in Singapore's art-related infrastructure, including professional art-handling services and fine-art storage facilities. Tomio Koyama, who gave over his new Gillman space to a group show of works by Yoshitomo Nara, Hiroshi Sugito and Masahiko Kuwahara, was motivated by the "chance to build a bigger market in Asia, and the integrity of Singapore's art facilities, such as museums, art fairs and planned artist-in-residence programs."

A Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), which will host artist residencies, organize conferences, carry out academic research and offer Singapore's first Master of Arts program in art history in conjunction with the School of Art at Nanyang Technological University, will also open here in the second half of 2013.

Eugene Tan, a former director of the Institute of Contemporary Art Singapore and Sotheby's Institute of Art in Singapore, who joined the EDB in 2010 to oversee the new initiative, observed at a press conference that Gillman Barracks represents something new in the Asian context: a government-supported mix of non-profits, galleries and art halls in a single location.

David Elliott, former director of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, also drew comparisons with a similar project currently under construction in Hong Kong on the premises of the city's former Central Police Station, which, he said would serve as "a model for the fusion of cultural heritage and the contemporary". Elliott, who is currently serving as an advisor to this mix of arts facilities scheduled to open to the public in downtown Hong Kong in 2014, wryly added that both Gillman Barracks and Central Police Station seem ultimately destined to become hybrid, one-stop destinations for "enjoyment, leisure and delight."

Gillman Barracks, Main Building, 9 Lock Road, Singapore 108937. Open Tue.-Sat. 11a.m.-8 p.m., Sun. 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Closed Mon. www.gillmanbarracks.com.