

PUBLISHED AUGUST 25, 2012

ARTS

Art central

Come Sept 15, Gillman Barracks opens as Singapore's - and the region's - new destination for contemporary art. Helmi Yusof and Debbie Yong size it up.



- PHOTO: EDB

ON a verdant plot of land off Alexandra Road, there are 14 colonial-era barracks within walking distance of each other. Called Gillman Barracks, this is the stretch of Singapore that's poised to become a regional epicentre of contemporary art. Lofty pipe dream? Not at all. The government has already pumped close to \$10 million to develop it. Thirteen contemporary art galleries - including some big names - will take up residence in these barracks in less than a month. And three F&B outlets with varying concepts are raring to serve art lovers.

If you visit the area now, you won't see much. The buildings are freshly-painted but vacant. Pedestrian paths have just been smoothed over. Parts of the road are still dug-out. Mud, paint cans and bulldozers are everywhere.

But the breeze blows gently through this stretch of Malan Road and Lock Road, and the stroll from one building to another is a hot but inviting one, surrounded as they are by gorgeous natural greenery that's existed long before Raffles.

Indeed, one can just imagine the chi chi art collectors, armed with elegant umbrellas, spending a whole day here hopping from one gallery to the next.

In line with the government's plans to develop Singapore into an important regional art destination, the Economic Development Board (EDB), JTC Corp and National Arts Council have jointly developed the area to yield 9,000 sq m of space for lease. Of this, 80 per cent will be occupied by the galleries. Come Sept 15, the welcome mat will roll out for art lovers as 13 galleries boasting world-class art open their doors for business.

Among them, Yayoi Kusama's dotty dotted works are set to draw crowds at Ota Fine Arts. American shutterbug Annie Leibovitz's evocative photographs will adorn the walls of Sundaram Tagore Gallery. Indonesian Agus Suwage's politically-charged paintings take pride of place at Equator Art Projects. And the Philippines' Luis Lorenzana's eye-catching Pop Surrealist candy-art will light up Silverlens.

Besides the 13, two more galleries will open in 2013 when Gillman Barracks becomes fully operational. One of them is by Japan's uber-artist Takashi Murakami - he of the cheery cartoons that have leapt from expensive paintings to coveted Louis Vuitton bags. The other is by Pearl Lam, the flamboyant Hong Kong gallerist with

several ventures in Hong Kong and China.

Apart from the top-shelf art, some of the individual galleries have big plans to draw the chi chi crowd. Sundaram Tagore of Sundaram Tagore Galleries has four other spaces - two in New York and one each in Los Angeles and Hong Kong. He says: "We are a gallery devoted to intercultural dialogue. We use art as a vehicle to bring people together. In our other galleries, we hold book launches, poetry reading, film screenings, dance performance and lectures, and we plan to import those cultural events to our Singapore space."

Though some gallerists wished the Singapore government had consulted them more during the development process, most say that spacious barracks are ideal for displaying art. David Teh, director of Future Perfect gallery, says: "We are happy with the old building, and the developers did a good job of restoring them. We built proper walls and they are 3.7m high." Many galleries in Singapore are constrained by low walls.

The three F&B outlets include Masons, the development's largest restaurant. It will serve European cuisine with a French influence and Singaporean twist. Owner Rob Coldman raves: "There's something magical about Gillman, one of the few places left in Singapore that is still unspoilt. Some of the greenery have been here longer than most of the buildings and they haven't been knocked down to make way for HDB flats.

"At night, there's a quietness here. Thought it's quite central - some 15 mins from Marina Bay - it serves as a private oasis in the middle of a bustling city."

The Sept 15 opening will also feature 15 notable Singaporean and international artists whose works will be shown in an exhibition sprawled over indoor and outdoor spaces.

Besides the galleries, Gillman Barracks will also house the not-for-profit Yellow River Arts Centre and the new Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Singapore which offers international artist residencies, research and exhibition programmes.

Lorenzo Rudolf, founder of Singapore's largest art fair Art Stage, firmly supports the Gillman Barracks project even if it threatens to take away some business from the annual art fair. He says: "Singapore must establish itself more and more on an international level as a viable place for an art market. These new galleries are enlarging the cake and attracting more and more people to come here. That can only be a good thing for the art scene and the artists."

helmi@sph.com.sg

debyong@sph.com.sg