

# 12Hours

## *of Local Art*

By Laura Schwartz

From historic oil paintings to modern audio-visual installations, there's no shortage of art in Singapore. However, the country is so cosmopolitan that it's easy to be swept away by exhibitions of big international artists, like Annie Leibovitz at the ArtScience Museum (2014) or Yayoi Kusama at the National Gallery (2017), which can overshadow the local art scene.

Lee Kuan Yew's famous dismissal of poetry as "a luxury we cannot afford" in the tumultuous 1960s extended to other forms of art as well. Fifty years later, Singapore is exceedingly stable and interest (and investment) in the arts is mushrooming. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Singapore Art Museum, the epicenter of the nation's contemporary art, which is currently undergoing a \$90 million dollar refurbishment. It's due to reopen in three years with some phenomenal hyper-modern architecture and plenty of optimism for the future of the nation's artistry.

While we eagerly await 2023, this interim is a great opportunity to explore the island's creative nooks and crannies, the smaller galleries and niche exhibits that you might not think to visit otherwise. Below is a 12-hour crash course introduction to Singapore's art scene, but you're more than welcome to spread the itinerary out over several days or weeks if you want to delve deeper.

This article will only focus on painting, sculpture and other visual arts, as I'll be covering local theater, film, literature and music later.



### 10AM-1PM

While hardly niche, the National Gallery is the obvious spot to start your day. Unsurprisingly, it devotes the bulk of its elegant space to Singaporean and Southeast Asian art. This is probably the most 'typical' art museum in the country, as it's home to a vast collection of paintings from the 19th century to the present, but in addition to the firm focus on historical pieces, the National Gallery is wealthy with major contemporary works. The current exhibition, *Suddenly Turning Visible*, illuminates the connections between art and architecture in Singapore, as well as the role institutions played in the development of art in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 80s.

Keep in mind that this is a large museum and exploring everything it has to offer could easily take up a whole day. I suggest visiting the website and honing in on the galleries that most excite you, so you can spend your time wisely.

## 🕒 1-4PM

Grab a bite to eat and hop in a taxi for the afternoon's adventure. Home to over 8,000 pieces of Asian art and artifacts, the NUS Museum is well-worth the trek to the Clementi campus of the National University of Singapore. This museum is a particular treat for those interested in more academic approaches to art or the complex context surrounding the creation of it. Exhibits range from modern Singaporean visual artists to multi-disciplinary surveys of topics such as the salvation and conservation of public murals. The museum also offers fascinating talks, workshops and curatorial tours that explore the relationship between heritage, history and art.

If you're more attracted to fresh pieces by present-day creators (or if you're looking to pick up a few unique pieces for your home), head to Gillman Barracks. Built in 1936 as a British military encampment, today the compound is an enclave of contemporary galleries, restaurants and art events. Each gallery has its own emphasis – FOST Gallery presents work by up-and-coming Singaporean artists, Ota Fine Arts showcases new and experimental Japanese art, Sundaram Tagore Gallery focuses on artwork that explores the cultural exchange between Western and non-Western styles, and so on.

## 🕒 4-7PM

Scattered throughout the island are myriad offbeat gems. Gajah Gallery on Keppel Road has been a staple of the local art scene since 1996. The Parkview Museum (currently setting up its new exhibition) has its own unexpected style. Supernormal on Kreta Ayer hosts workshops and experimental artwork, with a focus on performance and interaction. Whatever your taste, you're bound to find something.

I personally suggest spending the late afternoon in the Bras Basah / Rochor area, arguably the incubator of Singapore's future in the arts. The biggest player on the block is the Institute of Contemporary Arts, part of LASALLE College. Its five galleries showcase their students' remarkable final projects along with curated international pieces. Nearby are more obscure hubs that are also not to be missed. 222+51 is a jewel box of dance studios, music societies and two notable galleries: Art Trove and The Private Museum. Dedicated to fostering greater interest in the arts, The Private Museum brings often-unseen private collections to the public. A short walk away, communal art space DECK aims to nurture photography enthusiasts through exhibitions, talks and a biannual festival. They also have a little café if your feet need a break.

## 🕒 7-10PM

For those who prefer the marriage of aesthetics and function over more abstract artforms, the displays at The Red Dot Design Museum (open until 8pm) are sure to delight. Situated on the Marina Bay Waterfront Promenade, the museum describes itself as "the physical embodiment of the international Red Dot Design Award," an annual honor bestowed by a jury of experts upon innovative and elegant products. As expected, the shop is a treasure trove of modern design, offering objects that are practical, whimsical, wearable, simple, adorable and sometimes all of the above. Of note is the section of items produced by Singapore designers, which range from jewelry to lamps to card games. Their cozy restaurant also features distinctly Singaporean treats, both traditional and modern.

Finish off a busy day with a meditative moment with art collective teamLab's installation on the Dragonfly Lake at Gardens by the Bay, created in honor of Singapore's bicentennial.

If you haven't seen teamLab's permanent exhibition Future World at the ArtScience Museum, I highly recommend it. The nighttime display at Gardens by the Bay will give you a taste of their signature blend of immersion and wonder: floating on the water are dozens of large egg-shaped lights that change color when touched, and when one ovoid is touched, it creates a ripple effect, sending an entrancing wave of bright hues washing through the rest.



*Laura grew up in Tokyo, Singapore and New Jersey before majoring in Japanese Studies at Bard College, upper New York. Her fiction and non-fiction writing has appeared in The Shanghai Review, Thoughtful Dog Magazine and The Wall Street Journal. A voracious traveler, Laura has visited over 30 countries.*