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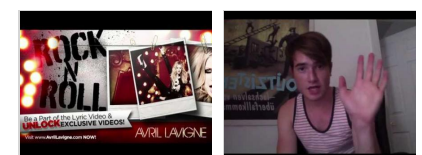
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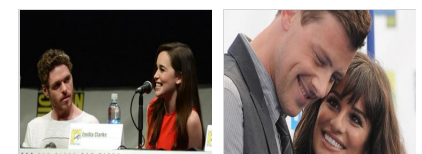
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Europe solo debut for Singapore artist



Artist Donna Ong's installation at Art Stage. -- PHOTO: PRIMO MARELLA GALLERY

By Deepika Shetty
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Visitors at annual art fair Art Stage Singapore last month did a double-take when they encountered work by homegrown artist Donna Ong. It was not just her installation that gave pause, but also the fact that it featured in a display by an Italian gallery.

Primo Marella, a Milan-based gallery, has been presenting art from South-east Asia since 2007 and now has its sights on Singaporean artists, whose work can fetch anywhere between €5,000 and €35,000 (S\$8,390 and S\$58,742) in Italy.

And so, at Art Stage Singapore, its owner, Mr Primo Marella, did not pick any big names from the West, opting to use his booth to showcase Ong's work.

Now, he is featuring the work of another Singapore artist, 22-year-old painter Ruben Pang, in a solo show at Lugano in Switzerland.

The choice of Europe for Pang's international solo debut comes amid buzz already building there for the artist. He made his international debut last November in a group show in Milan, Italy, put on by Primo Marella gallery and called Deep S.E.A - Contemporary Art From South East Asia. Three of Pang's paintings sold even before the exhibition opened.

In an e-mail interview with Life!, Mr Marella says Italian demand for both Ong and Pang's art is fuelled by the artists' "contemporary style" and "captivating artworks".

Both artists were part of the gallery's November group show. The exhibition was two years in the making and presented 50 artworks by 11 artists from eight South-east Asian countries.

Despite the presence of regional heavyweights such as Filipino Ronald Ventura and Indonesian artist Entang Wiharso, both Ong and Pang made their mark with their installations and paintings, getting attention from critics and collectors.

Mr Marella notes that the artists have a distinct style which is not bound by geography. Their "global narrative" works well as the gallery goes all out to "introduce their works to new audiences", as he puts it.

Pang's solo show consists of three sculptures - the first time he has exhibited the genre - together with nine new paintings.

He describes the paintings as "an attempt to bring a saturated light/digital visual effects/dream sequences/glitches into oil paint".

He reworked the show's anchor work, titled Impossible, many times, adding layer after layer. "The composition was only finalised in December though I started work on it in May," he says. "Impossible was just a working title I used because it was the hardest painting to resolve, but it stuck."

He calls his European outing "an amazing experience", one that allows him to introduce his abstract paintings - made using oil on aluminium instead of canvas, and with his hands rather than brushes - to new audiences.

Gallery manager Elena Micheletti, 37, claims that Primo is the first gallery in Italy to focus on contemporary art from South-east Asia. The focus arose after Mr Marella travelled extensively in 2007 across South-east Asia, visiting Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and parts of Indochina.

Last year, he saw Pang's work during a visit to the Singapore Art Museum's contemporary wing, 8Q, and followed this up by calling at the artist's home studio, where he was taken with "his meticulous, scientist-like approach to art, including the use of aluminium instead of a canvas".

His gallery was among the first Italian ones to open a venue in the 798 Art District in Beijing but as Ms Micheletti notes: "We started by exploring Chinese art in the late 1990s, when the art world was obsessively West-centric. Now everybody is talking about China and we have shifted our surveys and focus to South-east Asia.

"From both an economic and cultural point of view, today South-east Asia is among the most promising regions in terms of the diversity of art you can find there."

Ruben Pang's solo show, Aetheric Portraiture, is now on at Primo Marella's gallery Primae Noctis in Lugano, Switzerland.

This article first appeared in The Straits Times on 12 February, 2013.

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