

Singapore career opportunities for Australian arts professionals

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As international art attention turns to Singapore for this week's Art Stage Singapore, we meet the Australians who are shaping the country's cultural boom.



Image: Belinda Fox, Steady, from her 2015 exhibition [Balancing the World Singapore](http://belindafox.com.au/works/balancing-the-world-singapore) (<http://belindafox.com.au/works/balancing-the-world-singapore>) (detail)

With the opening of its [new National Gallery of Singapore](http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/visual-arts/naima-morelli/new-singapore-national-gallery-repositions-se-asian-art-249887) (<http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/visual-arts/naima-morelli/new-singapore-national-gallery-repositions-se-asian-art-249887>) and hosting of Southeast Asia's premier fair, Art Stage Singapore, one of ArtsHub's [exhibitions worth travelling for](http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/bits-and-blogs/visual-arts/gina-fairley/exhibitions-worth-traveling-for-in-2016-250199) (<http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/bits-and-blogs/visual-arts/gina-fairley/exhibitions-worth-traveling-for-in-2016-250199>) in 2016, Singapore is developing as a regional cultural hub.

Australians are playing a pivotal role in the development of the Singaporean art scene on multiple levels: institutional, artistic and commercial.

Australians are well placed to contribute to Singapore's growing arts scene. The Australian art system is neither as established as the European, nor as young as Southeast Asia's. We are a country that increasingly looks to Asia and acknowledges the influence of Asian Australians, yet we have an education system that is closer to Europe.

Some of these imports come with Asian heritage, which makes them particularly sensitive to the cultural and ethnic issues embedded in Singaporean society. Others simply understand they are part of a process that is about developing capacity, not imposing an Australian way of doing things on another country.



Bala Starr, Photo: Eddie Teo

Bala Starr

Director, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. LASALLE College of the Arts

Bala Starr got her start at Gertrude Contemporary in Melbourne and was most recently senior curator at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. She is now the director of the [Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore](#).

[\(http://www.lasalle.edu.sg/institute-of-contemporary-arts-sg/\)](http://www.lasalle.edu.sg/institute-of-contemporary-arts-sg/) The institute introduces emerging to the art scene and develops relationships between the local and the international art worlds.

She notes that the major differences between the art scenes in the two countries are not only cultural, but also in timing: 'Melbourne has a strong infrastructure of public galleries and institutions which dramatically expanded roughly years ago. This investment in capital and infrastructure really transformed the scene.' She observes that Singapore, previously lacking art infrastructures, is going through the same phase today.

The time gap is also visible in the influence it might have been Ricky Swallow. The Singapore equivalent today is Ang Song-Ming. Here and there, this was unusual, remarkable. It had a big impact on how emerging artists started conceiving a career in the arts.'

Being able to compare the Australian system to the younger Singapore art scene allows Starr to make better choices: 'In Australia there is a very sophisticated sense of the function of a museum or an exhibition. But because of the strength of the Australian art scene, artists are often left at arm's length from the institution.' To her, this results in bigger, more spectacular, but not necessarily more experimental exhibitions. 'I think that in Singapore there is an opportunity to do things differently. Artists are the key to what we do, and we need to bring them into conversation from the start, not only when the project is formed and we need 'five artists to fit a brief.'

With this approach, Starr is effectively promoting a viable model for institutions. She is optimistic about Singaporeans understanding the potential. "In its very early days, the National Gallery Singapore provides an unusual opportunity because it is the first such large institution in Southeast Asia. It is very likely to seek a broad mandate in the wider region in a way that perhaps we have not seen with Australian cultural institutions.'

The mark she is leaving on the Singapore art scene is both human and intellectual. 'I think it's always going to be about people,' she observes, highlighting the importance of starting with your own team. 'The kind of training and development that we are involved in means that those individuals can then go on to train others in their own communities. Of course we also need to mediate with the wider audience and articulate the value of these projects to the general public'

Starr notes how in an increasingly fast-paced world, curators have less and less time to ask questions and think about their practice: 'Small things are meaningful. Above all, dedicating time - when we know we are all busy - to a conversation with an artist from which there is no tangible outcome. It's simply about hearing and learning about that artist. The fact that the rest of the team sees me and Melanie, the ICA curator, doing this sends a message that art is a value. Art is our value.'



Ben Hampe
Co-founder, Chan Hampe Galleries

Australian Ben Hampe joined forces with Singaporean Angeline Chan in 2010 to found the first space to invest almost exclusively in Singapore artists. In a few short years [Chan Hampe Galleries \(http://www.chanhampegalleries.com/\)](http://www.chanhampegalleries.com/) has become a reference point for the local art scene.

The gallery made a point of being independent, thus not relying on government funding except for a few international projects. The policy also applies to many of their artists. 'Most of them don't rely on the government pay-check; they are commercially successful in their own right,' he says.

Brisbane born and bred, Hampe also sees similarities between Australia and Singapore: 'Singapore reminds me of the process that Brisbane went through in the early-to-mid '90s. This was a time of development for the local art system. It created a wonderful situation where there were a lot more jobs for artists, art industry professionals and a general excitement about culture from locals.' He has high hopes for the National Gallery of Singapore to garner similar audiences.

Hampe has Burmese heritage and has always felt he needed to move back to Asia. After doing some work in Beijing he was hired by Angeline Chan, who wanted to give her community gallery in Singapore a fresh start. 'I wrote a new business plan for the gallery and Angie liked it and we went into business together. That's how ChanHampe Galleries started.'

That was five years ago, before the art scene in Singapore boomed. 'A lot of people objected that there was no art in Singapore. They asked us how we were going to find the artists to represent and then how we were going to make

money. All the usual naysay. And of course at the beginning I couldn't promise that it would make money, but I could promise we would find the artists.'

Chan Hampe Galleries is located in the prestigious Raffles Hotel: 'It was a big commitment. From our first exhibition we sent out a message to the market of our belief in Singaporean art by opening up in a high profile area where people could easily come and view the work. I think that this really had an effect on the way locals started to view their own art and culture.'

The gallery has been riding the wave of interest in Singapore contemporary art ever since. In the years following the opening of the space in fact, the art scene started to grow exponentially. 'Back then, we were the only space that was consistently supporting Singaporean artists. Today we also have artists from elsewhere, like Myanmar and Australia, but the core is still Singapore.'

In the future, Hampe hopes to see the gallery continue doing what it does best: 'I'd like to see our artists become very important and their legacy to remain long after I'm gone. That would be the one thing that would have to happen for everything to be worthwhile. Is that a small ask?' he laughs.



Belinda Fox
Artist

Belinda Fox is a Melbourne-born and trained artist who now calls Singapore home. With gallery representation in Sydney, Melbourne, Hong Kong and Singapore, her work is praised by critics and sought after by collectors.

She has always been drawn to Asia, and her artwork has been influenced by her travels for many years. The opportunity to move to Singapore came when her husband started a job there.

Fox was impressed by how fresh the local art scene was: 'I feel that I arrived in Singapore at a good and exciting turning point.' She thinks that relocating to the Lion City has helped her gain momentum: 'Once I moved to Singapore, it was like the whole world opened up for me. My career grew wings and the limits of my ambitions were not confined only to Melbourne and Sydney. Living in the region allows me more travel opportunities and discoveries.'

Representation by local gallery Chan Hampe came almost immediately: 'I knew about Chan Hampe Galleries before I moved. I liked the work they showed, so once I had settled in, I visited the gallery and met up with Ben, the director. We got along instantly – he was already familiar with my work. He offered me a show straight up. It was pretty amazing! It doesn't usually work that way. I was lucky.'

She has developed a great relationship with the gallery: 'I feel Chan Hampe has a big future in Singapore, so I am glad to be part of their story so far.' With the gallery, she has participated in shows which have helped her to be taken seriously by the local art market, to access an international public and to meet top collectors. 'That's the best part of being based in Singapore, and it is satisfying to see your work being appreciated by such a diverse audience.'

Of course, it wasn't all roses: 'The costs of living and renting in Singapore are crazy high. Good quality and diverse art materials are hard to get. And sending art work back to Australia via courier is really expensive.' This makes life difficult if sales are not good. 'I went through some tough days in that first year and I'm lucky things have gone well lately to cover these extra costs. Most artists living in Singapore really struggle to have studio spaces because rent is so high.'

She learned that it takes time to meet people and for the local community to know you are genuine and serious. Furthermore, cultural differences are inevitable: 'There is no guarantee your work will connect with a new place. Time is the key – and slowly I am feeling more and more part of the art community.'

In terms of recommendations to emerging Australian artists planning to move to Singapore, she advises them not to make the choice lured solely by Singapore government incentives. 'Funding for expats is very difficult, if not impossible. Coming here you need to find your own opportunities and be resourceful.'

Belinda Fox's upcoming exhibition 'Balancing the world' runs from the 15th January - 14th February at Chan Hampe Galleries Singapore.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.

