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# Heroines Behind Galleries (IX): Stephanie Fong of FOST Gallery, Singapore

To Stephanie Fong, founder and director of FOST Gallery in Singapore, the job of a gallerist is not just about selling the art, but rather providing an experience.

With an uncontainable passion for culture, as well as an eye for the evolving trends worldwide, Stephanie has become a point of reference in the Lion City's art scene.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGE: Courtesy of Fost Gallery



Portrait of Stephanie Fong. Courtesy of Fost Gallery.

"There is no perfect place, you have to just make the best of wherever you are." Stephanie Fong slightly smiles and pauses for a second, glancing at the greenery surrounding the Gillman Barracks, the contemporary arts cluster in Singapore. "And be happy in the process," she adds.

Sitting across the table from the gallerist, I think that truths and principles for decisions in life are simple at their core, but to really make them yours, you have to embody them in your everyday life. This is why I cherish the wisdom of this woman grounded in her experience as a Singaporean gallerist for over 10 years.

Effortlessly fashionable in her designer golden skirt and green top, Stephanie has been able to show up as determined and savvy in her life and work. However, she never gave up her caring, heart-driven edge, which really made the difference when it came to establish long-term relationships with artists.

Her biggest inspiration has been Marian Goodman, the legendary New York dealer who founded her first gallery in Manhattan in 1977: "As a fellow gallerist – and what's more a female gallerist in this world of macho-ego-male gallerists – I have absolute respect for her. She brought European artists to America when no one was really interested. And now for the last couple of years she has been focusing on performance art and video work, and she's ninety years old. Isn't that amazing?"



Portrait of Marian Goodman. Photo by Thomas Struth. Courtesy of artnet.

Stephanie grew up surrounded by art, film and literature as a kid, in a family that highly valued culture. "My mum is a self-taught artist, she taught me perspective. Drawing as a child was something to keep me occupied. And I was going to foreign film festivals at a very young age, even if I couldn't read the subtitles because, well... I was so small could barely read!"

While she was trained as a lawyer, she never actually practiced, deciding to go straight into brand consulting, which was something fairly new in Singapore at the time. Stephanie felt that this helped her honing certain skills, like project management: "In hindsight I realize that's a quite useful skill in the current role that I have, because I have to manage creative people who don't always think in

a linear, logical way," she noted. "Sometimes I'm caught between the client and the creative and I have to mediate. My previous job taught me patience."

Everything changed for her when she moved to London to attain her Master's in Fine Art at Sotheby's Institute. "London was the ideal environment to learn about art, because it didn't draw only academics, but was also a market place. I came into contact with the contemporary and modern art, the museums and the auction houses, the art history courses... back then Singapore didn't have anything like that."

She describes the experience as eye opening: "To see the possibility and the range and amount of talent was incredible. When I came back it was a bit of a shock of my system." Determined to bring home what she learned overseas, in 2004 she started building a gallery with an intense program of 12 shows a year, operating in an art scene that was still very tiny.

"I was very new to the scene, not many people knew me, but even then selecting the right artists was crucial to me." At the time very few spaces in Singapore were doing a program, and most of them were operating like shops: "So I started the galleries modelling what they were doing in London, thinking that intense rhythm of shows was the way to go. Then I realise that I really wanted to contribute to the scene and this programming wasn't feasible, both for the gallery and for the audience; there was too much going on."

She notes that while it is good to take inspiration from elsewhere, you can't just plug and play: "You still need to see if the local context can absorb it. Certain principles can be applied and others cannot. But you have just to be sensitive to where we are right now, and sometimes it is a timing thing; perhaps it's the right decision but not the right timing."

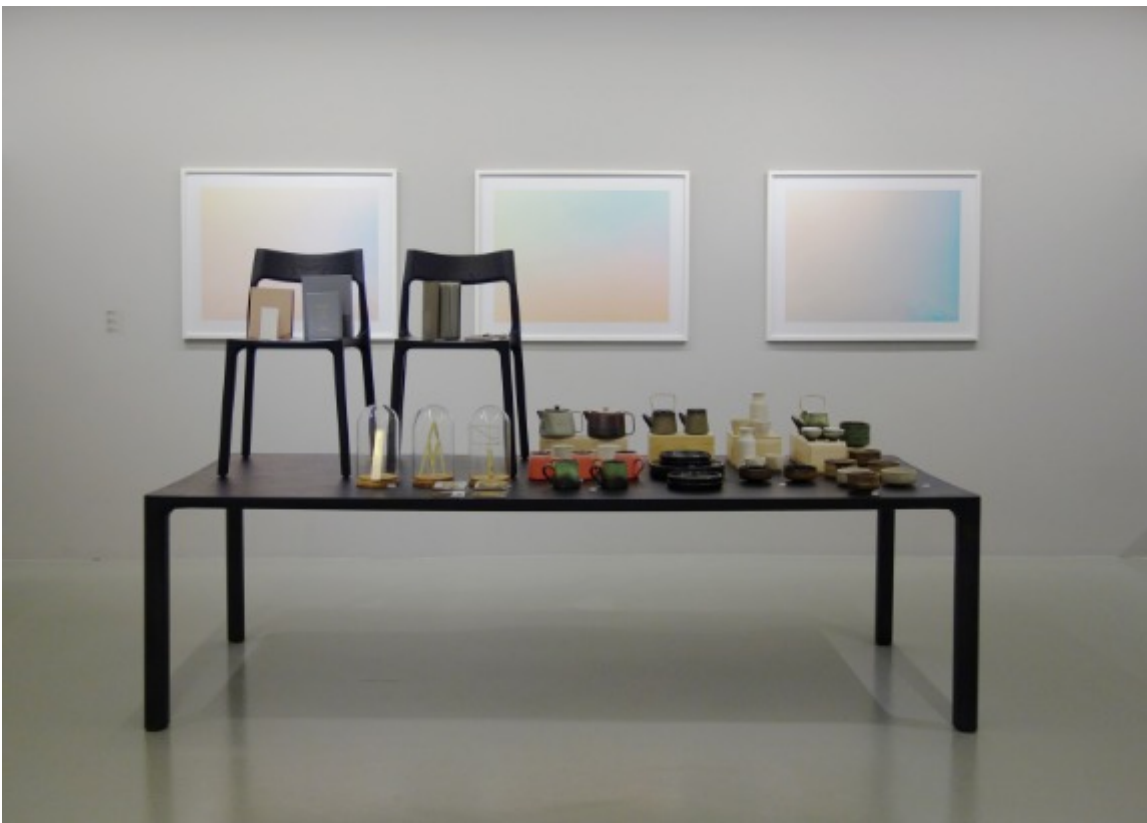


FOST Gallery in 2012

Looking back at the early stage of FOST Gallery, Stephanie recognizes that starting out carries excitement and possibility, but keep going is a different business altogether. I ask her how she navigates the ever-changing landscape of the contemporary art world: "I got a strong stomach," she laughs. "I think you just need to grit your teeth and just hang on. I have seen big players come and they have gone. Having a deep pocket is of course helpful, but you need to have the guts for it. Because it's not easy and you get tired very quickly."

Her biggest challenge right now is planning for the next ten years and trying to see how to stay relevant: "It's not just the shows, but also where do I see the gallery. That's what's on my mind right now, to understand what's the place of the gallery model in this changing landscape."

At the moment FOST Gallery is running a very particular experimental exhibition called "The Foster Emporium" (running until 25 March 2018), which transformed the space in a temporary retail store, selling limited edition items made by the gallery's artists at an affordable price. Stephanie looked at this experiment as a platform for her to talk about pressing issues.



Installation View of The Foster Emporium 2018. Courtesy of Fost Gallery.

"Last year I really reflected on the role of the gallery," she explained. "I feel that globally we are transitioning in different perspective. Information and products are so accessible from the internet and you can sit in front of a computer screen and get pretty much anything. Then what's the point of having a physical art space?"

Stephanie found the answer outside the art scene, looking at brands like Victoria Beckham. The fashion label never had a physical store until she opened one in London a few years ago; "A beautiful 560 m2 three-storey Georgian building on Dover Street, and she spent a lot of money on it, knowing that she would make a loss. She would never sell enough stock from that shop to cover her costs. But the whole point was providing the experience of buying something from that particular store. So on the retail front it's becoming experiential. And you see it in museums, you see it in galleries, we are not just selling art, we're providing an experience."

Another reason to create "The Foster Emporium" related to the presence of the gallery in Gillman Barracks. "It's a beautiful place, but it's still fairly inaccessible, and I don't mean only in terms of physical distance from the city, but in being very intimidating. She noticed that many people coming to visit the gallery are the art loving crowd, but not the art collecting crowd, so they generally don't have the means to afford something at Gillman.



"When you feel you can possibly own something that connection is much deeper than when you just look at something. With the Foster Emporium we tried to connect with people on a transactional basis. They were not my usual clients, but just people who like beautiful things."

The definition of buyer over collector is also one she would pick to define herself. Her taste in collecting generally correspond to what she exhibits in the gallery, but it is not identical, since she shared her house with her husband: "I can't buy something he hates. He's into art as well, though he is not trained in it he has a very open mind. So he's very supportive."

A piece she owns that she is particularly fond of is called "The demolition of St Andrews" by Jimmy Ong: "I represent the artist. His work is quite special to me because growing up he was one of the few local artists that I knew of, and I love his black and white charcoal work and his drawings. The piece we got is an interesting one because it's a transition between two series and it has a number of narrative layers to it."



Stephanie Fong at Jimmy Ong's exhibition with Mr and Mrs Sabapathy

Stephanie's involvement in the arts engages her on many different levels. While contemporary art is her business, as an art viewer she has never lost the emotional innocence and the ability to be moved by good work. She mentions to me the 2016 exhibition of Amar Kanwar's at the CCA called "The Sovereign Forest": "The exhibition design was beautiful. But I didn't expect it to be so

touching. I don't normally cry, but as I was going through the exhibit tears were running in my eyes."

She has recently visited the artist's studio in India with CoBo Social's collectors tour, finding him a quiet person realizing powerful and poetic work: "He's one of those people who's an amazing artist and an amazing human being. That show at CCA makes you realize you are so small in the large scheme of things, that your problems often are really nothing."

Witnessing such passion, I decide to ask Stephanie the question: "Why are you doing this?" She laughed and replied almost immediately: "I think at the core of it it's what I'm meant to do. Now looking back at my journey, it all made sense, even though I hadn't really planned it that way. Maybe it has been all about faith."

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**Naima Morelli** is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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