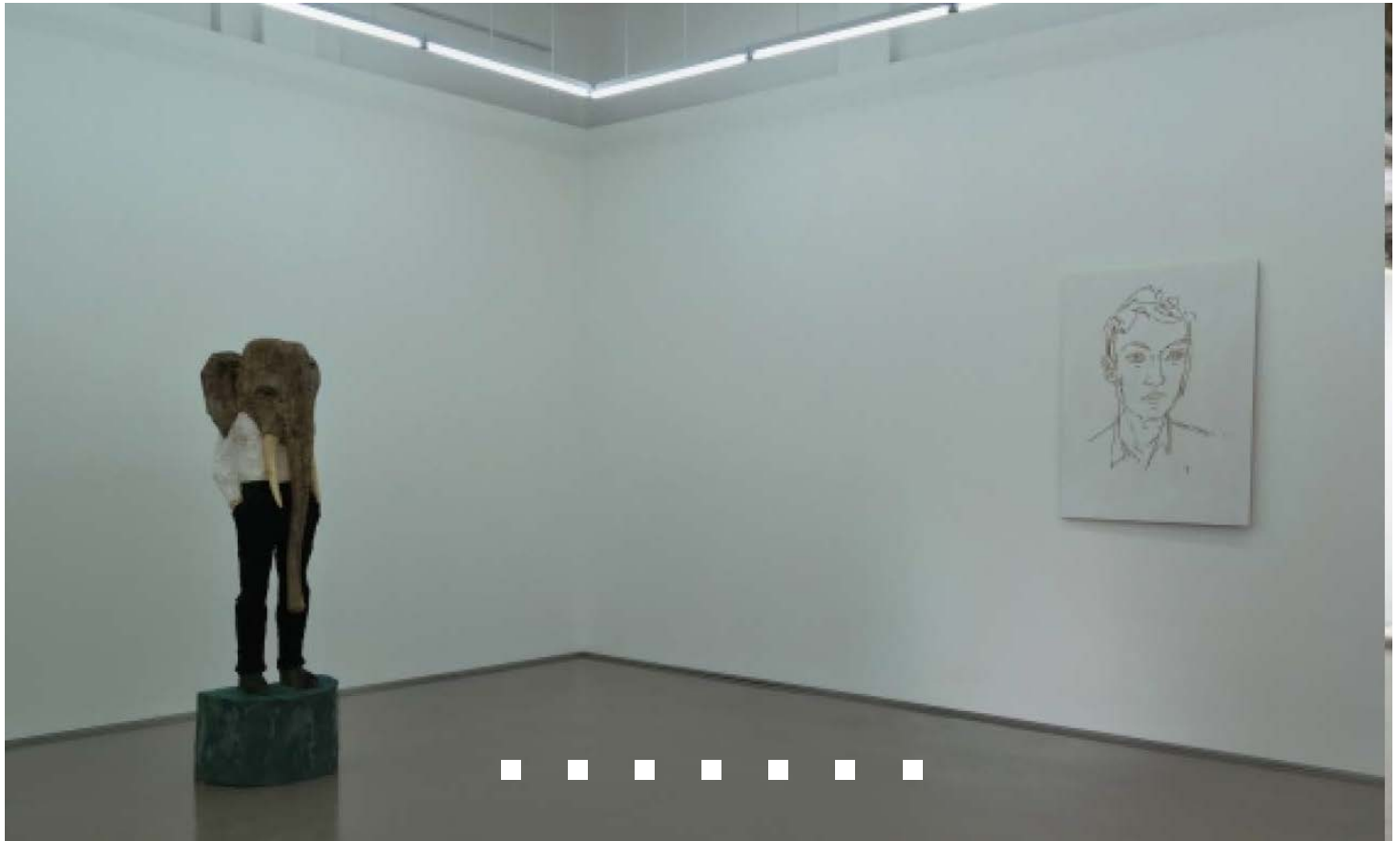


AMCompass Interview Series: Matthias Arndt of ARNDT Gallery



Matthias Arndt has come to believe in "Art Clusters" such as Gillman Barracks.

The Singapore art scene has shown rapid growth; international galleries have moved to Singapore, many of them locating in Gillman Barracks, despite its high rental fees. As Southeast Asian art increasingly comes under the spotlight in the international art world, Singapore is expanding as a new art market, with well-known international galleries making their appearance there. The ARNDT Gallery, established in 1994 in former East-Berlin, has also expanded its operations to Gillman Barracks in Singapore. Gallery owner, Matthias Arndt, who completed an apprenticeship in the banking industry before switching his career to the art field, has over 25 years in the art business, including experience at documenta IX, under the artistic direction of Jan Hoet. Arndt, who is considered one of the leading art experts in Berlin, is now establishing himself as one of the leading gallerists in Singapore, and is introducing critical international artists to Singapore. We conducted an interview, via email, to explore his insights.

Q1. It seems that your participation in Art Stage Singapore was highly successful. The work, "Man with white

shirt and black trousers“, by Stephan Balkenhol was prominent in the main corridor at the fair, while your exhibition at Gillman Barracks was also well received. Could you share your experience of participation at the fair, and what was emphasized most in your preparation for the fair?

This was the second time we have participated in Art Stage, and I also visited the earlier editions. However, the success of an art fair is never guaranteed: we brought some major works, such as the Balkenhol Bronze, the Entang Wiharso “Gate to the VIP Lounge”, the “Raining Bed“ by Wiharso, plus another monumental painting by him. We wanted to make a statement at this year’s edition of Art Stage, and we also wanted to show our commitment to Singapore. Feedback and sales have been very positive – our costs have largely been covered by sales from the booth.

Q2. What were the situations or events that made you feel that it was the right decision to open a gallery in Singapore?

First, as I have travelled to and from Singapore, in the course of my global operations, I have found it functional and convenient; an airport with excellent international connections is crucial to such a decision.

Second, exhibitions that we have brought to Singapore from our international programme have been such a success, like our ZERO exhibition in 2013, and the first exhibition in Southeast Asia of the internationally renowned German sculptor, Stephan Balkenhol.

Third, we have been able to introduce new artists from Southeast Asia through our Singapore–space: The Filipino artist, Rodel Tapaya, for instance, had his first major solo exhibition outside of the Philippines at ARNDT Singapore in spring 2013 – and we also held the survey exhibition “SIP! Indonesian Art Today” in Gillman Barracks in May 2013.

Q3. You must have faced a lot of challenges on entering a new market. What has been the toughest challenge of operating a gallery in Singapore?

Actually, creating a market for our ambitious programme in Berlin in the 1990s was an even bigger challenge. With over 25 years in the art market I have learned that we need to build a market around our programme, and that means first educating the audience, being patient, and convincing them through our service and expertise. I knew it would take time to build a strong home market in Singapore. There is one big difference between doing business in Europe and in Singapore and Asia. New buyers in Southeast Asia negotiate harder, and then still might change their minds later, but we have adapted our terms accordingly, and are now seldom caught out by surprises of that kind.

Q4. How did your experience in working for documenta, a not-for-profit art sector, influence your commercial gallery operation and management?

My internships and assistant positions in museums in France, and at documenta IX with Jan Hoet (born 1936, passed away on February 27, 2014 in Gent, Belgium) were crucial in teaching me to see and evaluate art: Jan Hoet had a very intuitive approach, and his conception for documenta IX in 1992 remains the best and most impressive show that I have ever seen. Jan Hoet motivated and encouraged most of the participating artists to deliver the best work of their careers to date. In my own gallery work I have tried to do the same for the artists that I work with: to give them all the confidence and support they need, to journey with them, and to accompany them to the next level in the market and in their careers.

Q5. Could you explain the relationship between your Berlin gallery and the Singapore branch? How do you

operate these two galleries, and what is the role of the Singapore branch?

Berlin and Singapore are two separate business entities, each has its own staff team, but there is one common strategy: To bring the best art from Southeast Asia and the Pacific to Berlin, and therefore to Europe and the west; and vice versa, to bring major international artists, and also once-off projects with artists whom we do not represent, to Singapore. In addition, we hope to build a strong Southeast Asian programme in Singapore.

What I am specifically working on with the Singapore branch is to further develop the “artists’ management” and “art advisory” sectors.

Q6. It seems that the Singapore art scene has been developing so fast. This January, we were able to visit Gillman Barracks, CCA and Art Stage Singapore. Could you share your understanding of the Singapore art scene?

Singapore is the regional hub for Southeast Asia: Much effort has gone into making Singapore this hub, both for the art market and for creative production in general. Since witnessing the success of Berlin as a gallery hub and creative workshop for Europe and the western world, I have come to believe in “Art Clusters”, such as Gillman Barracks. But its success will depend on whether the current curiosity and awareness will translate into a commitment by many individuals, both private individuals and corporations, to collect and support the visual arts in Singapore. Eventually, the situation needs to grow organically, and needs to be carried on and energized by individuals outside of governments and administrations. The success of Singapore will certainly depend on the commitment of its Southeast Asian neighbours, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The infrastructure in Singapore, and therefore the potential it offers to the Visual Arts, is unique in Southeast Asia.

Q7. It is interesting to learn that many art and cultural projects, such as Gillman Barracks and the National Art Gallery, are currently being promoted by state agencies. Art Stage Singapore also has received significant support from the government. Would you share your opinion on these government-lead projects?

An art landscape is only as good as the quality and the engagement of the entire body of protagonists involved. In Berlin, the artists, galleries and art-initiatives have succeeded despite (and maybe because of) the absence of support from the public administration, and we were dependent on the success of our own operations in finding international support and redirecting this attention to Berlin. The quality, ambition and “organic growth” of an art landscape cannot be planned or created by state agencies. But the commitment and support of the Singaporean authorities can enhance the growth and prosperity of the Singaporean art scene.