

Singaporeans, young and old, are giggling to themselves in a darkened room. They are watching a karaoke video at the Singapore Biennale made by Boo Junfeng, which presents a fictional but historically loaded scenario. The local artist imagines a Singapore that is still part of Malaysia, showing contented, doe-eyed citizens singing along to "Happy and Free", a song commissioned in 1963 by Singapore's Ministry of Culture to mark the union of Singapore with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia.

But the pithy wall text outlines what really happened, bluntly stating that "for Singapore, the period of political merger with Malaysia... turned out to be a tumultuous union, marked by ideological differences". Older Singaporeans may well wince at this rupture that led to the formation in 1965 of the independent city-state known for its high standard of living and for its draconian social controls. The teenagers laugh and ponder, probably because the comic video mirrors propaganda (or "nation-building") films produced by the ruling authorities.

The curatorial framework for the fourth edition of the biennale, which features works by 82 artists across nine sites, is a departure from the 21st-century model. In place of the usual illustrious artistic director, this biennale boasts 27 curators, eight from the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Other southeast Asian scholars, such as Faizal Sidik of the National Visual Arts Gallery of Malaysia, helped mould the exhibition, subtitled *If the World Changed*.

Tan Siuli, SAM's assistant director of programmes, said: "Many of the 27 curators are practising artists, and they often offered quite different perspectives on what they considered vital art and art practices coming out of southeast Asia. This really gave the biennale a unique texture." Casting the net across the region has paid off with some exceptional off-the-radar works on view.

"Cosmology of Life" (2013), by Indonesian artist Toni Kanwa, is a staggering feat of craftsmanship, encompassing 1,000 minuscule sculpted wooden figures. Vietnamese artist Nguyen Trinh Thi's intense video projection on wooden cut-outs, "Unsubtitled" (2010), shows artists quietly rising above a government clampdown simply by eating their favourite foods. And Ulrich Lau's multi-channel video installation "The End of Art Report" (2013) comprises three fictional news broadcasts signalling the demise of culture, with news of the impending closure of three Singapore galleries.

The works by Junfeng and Lau reflect an unexpected and surprising degree of introspection and self-reflection at odds with western preconceptions about Singapore as a secluded and autocratic state. These impressions have been shaped by infrequent, but heavy-handed, examples of state censorship that have unsettled the developing artistic community. In 2011, for instance, an installation by British artist Simon Fujiwara featuring gay pornographic images was withdrawn from the biennale.

But Singapore seems to be slowly inching towards self-awareness. Tan, a candid and clever curator, suggests I read *Article*, a journal published by the International Association of Art Critics Singapore, which is distributed at biennale sites. The punchy, heavily critical content is an eye-opener.

Ong Puay Khim, a local independent curator, writes, for instance, that the biennale is a "piecemeal showcase of contemporary art from various southeast Asian cities... there was no curatorial direction." But, crucially, Ong observes that the government has, in recent years, become actively engaged with the international art world.

The publication in 2000 by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts of a key strategy



New state of the art?

With its biennale under way, *Gareth Harris* tours the art scene in Singapore, a vibrant city-state still carving out its niche in southeast Asia's cultural landscape

Curator Louis Ho and artist Sarah Choo, 23-year-old winner of Singapore's ICON de Martell Cordon Bleu photography prize; below, '100 Surnames in Tofu' by Chen Qiulin - both at Art Stage Singapore 2014

document, "Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore", sparked an ambitious internationalisation programme. Singapore looked outwards, inaugurating its own pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001 and launching, with breakneck Singaporean efficiency, the city-state's first biennale in 2006.

"Governments in the region have begun to recognise the benefits that arts and culture can bring, both in terms of direct economic gain as well as branding, which is seen as enhancing the wider economy. Singapore has

embraced this type of branding in a significant way," writes Eugene Tan in *Art Cities of the Future: 21st-century Avant-Gardes* (2013).

Eugene Tan is the director of the \$419m, 60,000 sq metre National Art Gallery due to open next year in the city hall and former supreme court buildings. With ambitions, says Tan, for it to become the main authority on southeast Asian art through its exhibition programme and art holdings, from the 19th century to today, its potential significance as a powerhouse institution cannot be overstated.

In a significant move, the National Art Gallery now comes under a new umbrella of organisations granted more autonomy by the government. This new grouping also includes the Singapore Art Museum. "We've yet to discover how the different VAC [Visual Arts Cluster] entities will come together and the [third member], Singapore Tyler Print Institute, has a commercial arm, so we'll need to see how that works out," Tan said.

The fact, meanwhile, that non-profit organisations, such as the Grey Projects workspace in the hipster suburb of Tiong Bahru, are coming through says a lot about the health of the cultural climate. But the best barometer of any art scene is the presence of art colleges, and Singapore has three reputable establishments, including the Lasalle College of the Arts, and the School of Art, Design and Media (SADM). It is telling that a taxi driver beamed with pride on mentioning his son's undergraduate status



at SADM, something that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago.

There is one cultural experiment raising eyebrows, though: the government's plans to open an offshoot of the Parisian private museum Pinacothèque at the historic Fort Canning Centre site next year. The for-profit museum is run by academic Marc Restellini, who has spent several years working on a catalogue raisonné of works by Amedeo Modigliani.

The Pinacothèque de Paris will bring Old Masters and modern art exhibitions to Singapore, with government officials hoping that Restellini can repeat the success of his Paris gallery (*The Dutch Golden Age* exhibition there in 2009 drew 700,000 visitors).

Drawing influential, headline-hitting art world figures from overseas is a canny government strategy designed to boost the commercial and critical standing of Singapore as an art centre. The ebullient Hong Kong-based dealer Pearl Lam opened a new gallery in the Gillman Barracks arts district last week. She is the latest of about 10 foreign gallerists to have opened venues at the elegant 1930s colonial base.

"[The government's] Economic Development Board has encouraged me to put on one design show

'Governments in the region have begun to recognise the benefits that arts and culture can bring'

annually," said Lam, whose inaugural show explores contemporary abstract art in Asia and the west. Other gallerists based here are evangelical about this burgeoning southeast Asian hub. "Collectors, curators and artists from Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand come regularly to exhibit and buy," said Matthias Arndt, a Berlin-based dealer who opened a space in Gillman Barracks last year.

But at Art Stage Singapore last week, opinion on the floor at the 158-dealer art fair was divided about the scale of the local market, and whether its growth was sustainable, especially when compared with Hong Kong, a rival market hub and auction house mecca.

Numerous Malaysian and Filipino collectors, as well as leading Chinese art world figures such as Wang Wei, the founder of the private Long Museum in Shanghai, browsed the aisles, taking in 35 local galleries. Even film-maker George Lucas popped in (the *Star Wars* supreme was in town to unveil Lucasfilm's new regional headquarters).

But the question of who is scrutinising both the art produced, and local commercial and public cultural bodies, always pops up in developing art centres. "During the art fair and the biennale in combination, Singapore gives the appearance of a regional hub for the arts but the fact is there's a critical vacuum," said Bharti Lalwani, an independent art critic. "However, there is so much potential here."

"The government's top-down approach can be an advantage for artists, and the seeds have long been sown in the form of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore and the [new] Centre for Contemporary Art - not for an emerging art market hub but for Singapore to become an intersecting point for critical discourse in southeast Asia."

Singapore, with its robust infrastructure, is already flexing its muscles; one day, it could be the real heavyweight of the southeast Asian art world.

The Singapore Biennale runs until February 16, singaporebiennale.org