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Manila magic

The momentum grows unabated for Art Fair Philippines.

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by

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BY now, major art collectors have gotten used to squeezing into a small elevator to get to a carpark where Manila's biggest annual art event is taking place. Art Fair Philippines, now in its fifth year, has become the second stop of the Asian art-buying season that begins with Art Stage in Singapore in January and carries through to Art Basel Hong Kong in March.

No amount of dressing can hide the fact that you're in the carpark of shopping mall The Link in Ayala Centre. The thin columns, the painted parking lot lines, and the wheel-stop you accidentally kick while walking through the art bookstore remind you where you are. But what began as a louche, scrappy one-floor event in its first year has evolved into a classy four-floor affair with thoughtfully-designed booths and professional lighting. There's even a chic dining area on the rooftop where you can watch international star Christian Marclay's video work after you eat.

Multinational companies such as Julius Baer, CNN and Volkswagen have signed on as partners or sponsors. And more foreign galleries have joined the party, helping to double the total number of galleries from 24 in its first year to 46 this year.

Trickie C Lopa, who founded and organises the fair together with fellow art patrons Lisa Periquet and Dindin Araneta, says: "We owe the success to several factors. Our economy enjoyed robust growth in the last few years, and this has meant that the interest in art could be sustained. This allowed the galleries to raise the quality of their programmes and the artists to challenge themselves so that the work that they exhibited for each fair gets better and better."



Ms Lopa adds: "We chose to mount this event in a non-traditional venue - a carpark. It has contributed much to the fair's character, but it has also meant that crafting that space would demand our utmost attention. We take this very seriously."

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From the first floor of the fair to its fourth, names of Filipino heavyweights headline several booths. For the non-Filipino art lover already familiar with the Venturas and Cruzs, the fair offered through its commissioned public installations many hot new names such as Mark Valenzuela and Maria Joena Zoleta, as well as crucial historical figures lesser-known outside of the Philippines or the auction scene.

Ms Periquet explains: "We pick artists at different stages of their careers, and offer them a space for a special exhibition within the fair. In our large open central space on the 6th floor, we have a socio-realist installation by Jose Tence Ruiz, who was one of the artists for the Philippine representation in the 2015 Venice Biennale, the country's first after 40 years. Sculptor Agnes Arellano has created a temple-like space for her feminine alter-egos - life-size goddesses emanating a serene yet powerful presence. The trio of former activist-artists Elmer Borlongan,

Emmanuel Garibay and Mark Justiniani came together after many years of solo success to collaborate on a mural reflecting social and political issues."

Amid the stars, there is still space for talented young artists such as Karl Castro at Michael Janssen, Raffy Napay at The Drawing Room and Issay Rodriguez at Silverlens. Many participating galleries are able to promote lower-priced works by young artists because the cost of renting a booth here is much lower compared to many established fairs, including Art Stage Singapore.

And that's not all. If Singapore has its Singapore Art Week in January with nearly 100 art events, Manila has launched its own 10 Days Of Art, a series of events around the financial districts of Makati City and Bonifacio Global City involving galleries, museums, bars, restaurant and retail establishments. Meanwhile, partner hotels, The Raffles and Fairmont Makati, as well as the Holiday Inn & Suites Makati, report significant bookings during this period.

Most art observers agree that art-buying has slowed in the region, but that the Philippines is singular in its momentum. Matthias Arndt of the eponymous Arndt gallery and art agency says: "This country is definitely unique. The local support is incredibly strong. It doesn't rely on the government so much as the Filipinos themselves who love and support their artists, and buy the artworks just to watch the artists grow and develop their aesthetics.

"That doesn't happen anywhere else in the world - not even in Germany! Germans only support their artists after those artists become big in America."

Arndt gallery has participated in the fair since the second year, and typically sells a lot of works. Most of its big-ticket items, including works by Noberto Roldan, Jigger Cruz, Marina Cruz and Rodel Tapaya, were snapped up within the first few hours of the collector's preview.

"The only work I haven't sold is a big painting by Ronald Ventura. But that's very expensive, so, it might take some time to find a buyer," says Mr Arndt. Ventura is one of top three best-selling contemporary artists of South-east Asia.

But while the largely Filipino crowd is happy to drive sales of homegrown artists, a few foreign galleries bringing mostly non-Filipino work saw weak to moderate sales.

A gallerist who declined to be named says: "It seems to me that the Filipinos have not expanded their taste in art to works by artists from other countries. I suppose that will come with time. But for now, judging from the first-day sales alone, I'm not sure I'll come back next year."

- **Art Fair Philippines is now on till Sunday, Feb 19, at the carpark of shopping mall The Link, Ayala Center, Makati, Manila. For more information, please go to artfairphilippines.com**

Other things to catch in Manila

IF you're planning to go to Manila this weekend for the fair, here are a few things to catch in the city's 10 Days of Art celebration.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD)

Thailand's most lauded international filmmaker Weerasethakul has a survey of his works at the MCAD, with rarely-seen experimental short films and video installations, as well as photographs, drawings and sketches.

- The MCAD is located at the ground floor of Benilde School of Design and Arts Campus, Dominga, Malate, Manila

Ronald Ventura at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila

The graphic genius of the Philippines' biggest contemporary star Ventura runs wild at the Met, with a wide variety of works centred on the themes of play, imagination and transformation. The Met is also selling his new prints from a low starting price.

- The Met is at BSP Complex, Roxas Blvd, Malate, Manila

Arturo Luz, Mark Justiniani and Natee Utarit at the Ayala Museum

Not far from the fair ground itself is the Ayala Museum, which currently features three of the biggest names in South-east Asian art. National treasure Luz traces the development of his early figurative practice in the 1950s and 1960s. Justiniani debuts the largest work in his Infinity series to date. And Utarit satirises Western modernism and capitalism in recent paintings.

- The Ayala Museum is located at Avenue corner De La Rosa Street, Greenbelt Park, Makati

Talks at the fair

If you're staying at the fair, check out the talks taking place at the rooftop. Its roster of international speakers is impressive. They include Sarah Thornton (author of the best-seller *Seven Days in the Art World*), Ferran Barenbilt (director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona),

Tobias Berger (head of art for the Rehabilitation Project of the Central Police Station in Hong Kong), Ute Meta Bauer (founder of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore) and artist James Nares, whose video is being projected on a massive screen in Ayala Triangle Gardens.

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