

INFORMED COLLECTOR AND BRILLIANT CURATOR

DATIN SHALINI GANENDRA

INTRODUCES SOCIAL EDITOR ANA GARCÍA DE BARAÑANO TO THE CONCEPT OF LIVING WITH ART THROUGH HER AMAZING HOUSE AND INNOVATIVE GALLERY

'I was fortunate to come from a family that treated the appreciation of art as an integral part of our upbringing. It was very natural and not elitist. Art was fun'



As an art lover and expert, Datin Shalini Ganendra fills her home with pieces of art. "They reflect a lifetime of art collecting and interest," she tells us. A firm believer in the green way of living, she incorporated the principles of reuse, local materials, natural ventilation solar and indigenous landscaping in her house. Right: The entertainment areas, dining and living rooms, are separated from the main building, which faces a lovely courtyard with an infinity pool





'A piece must be beautiful, well-crafted and the best of what I can afford'

Shalini Ganendra is a woman of great taste. She loves the beauty of simplicity, the power of authenticity and the richness of diversity.

A fine art consultant, gallery owner and former Wall Street lawyer, Datin Shalini was born in Sri Lanka. After living and studying in the UK and US, she moved to Malaysia in 1993 with her Malaysian husband, whom she told us she met on the first day of her first year at Cambridge University in the UK.

Despite not having been born in Malaysia, she feels very much at home here, and has indeed created a lovely one for herself and her family. The uniqueness of Datin Shalini's home in Petaling Jaya is precisely what makes it incredibly appealing. The entertainment areas, which consist of the dining and living rooms, are separated from the main building, which faces a lovely courtyard with an infinity pool.

High ceilings hold stunning paintings and textiles, tables display various treasures sheltered in glass boxes, and interesting sculptures occupy the rooms. Fabulous carpets and well-chosen fabrics fill the house with colour, and lovely pieces of furniture made of recycled wood from Indonesia complement the more modern pieces.

Guided by her belief in 'Living with Art', she established an art gallery in her home in 1998, and called it Shalini Ganendra Fine Art (SGFA).

SGFA was the first gallery to exhibit contemporary Malaysian art during Asia Week in New York in 2008 and 2009. Since then, the gallery has created a number of non-profit public programmes that embrace cross-cultural dialogues, effectively presenting Malaysia to global audiences.

Due to increasing public interest in SGFA's initiatives, Shalini took up an external space in the form of a bungalow down the road from her own home. Hence, SGFA's Gallery Residence was born in January 2011 as an independent exhibition and cultural space specialising in Malaysian contemporary art and design, with emphasis on a local and global outreach.

As an art lover and expert, Datin Shalini has vast experience in advising art organisations and individual collectors in building, maintaining and appraising museum-quality collections. She also represents clients at auctions and private sales.

She has served on juries and judging panels for numerous awards, including the Smithsonian Institution's Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF) Awards and the Commonwealth Arts and Crafts Awards, and has published a number of articles on contemporary art and design, and different art movements.

"Art should not be viewed as an intimidating thing," says Datin Shalini. "Not everyone has to be a high-end collector, and

Datin Shalini has done a tremendous job decorating the house. High ceilings hold stunning paintings, tables display various treasures and interesting sculptures occupy the rooms. For her own private collection, Datin Shalini tells us that she focuses on modern art and furniture, antiques and a few contemporary pieces



every collector definitely has to start somewhere."

Tell us about the pieces of art that decorate your home.

They reflect a lifetime of [art] collecting and interest. We have pieces that have been gifted by family, like antique textiles and modern paintings, Anglo-Indian boxes and modern furniture pieces. Design objects, such as the Scandinavian and Murano glass, which were collected primarily from vintage shops or markets. The artworks represent an eclectic range of modern and contemporary pieces.

What kind of pieces do you buy for your own private collection?

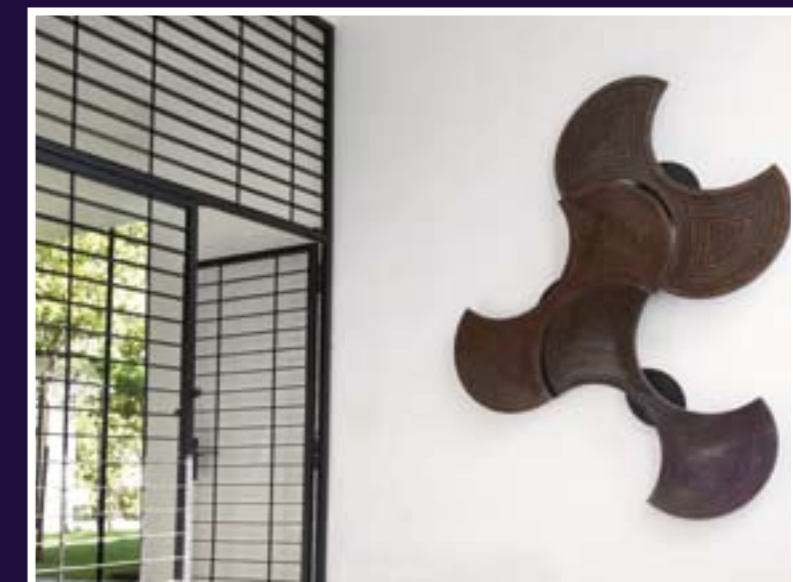
Has your personal taste in art evolved with time?

Our collection is distinct from the art that the gallery represents, to ensure that there is no conflict of interest. For our own collection, we focus on modern art and furniture, antiques and a few contemporary pieces.

A piece must be beautiful, well-crafted and the best of what I can afford. My personal taste has evolved somewhat because I have far more access and knowledge, but my philosophy has stayed the same: to be an informed collector.

How did you develop your love of art?

I was fortunate to come





'The road less travelled has been gratifying in so many ways'

from a family that treated the appreciation of art as an integral part of our upbringing. It was very natural and not elitist. Art was fun. Collecting [art] was an adventure. Visiting artists and museums were a treat. Arty discussions were welcomed.

How was the transition from being a prominent financial lawyer to dedicating your life to the unpredictable world of art and design?

I loved practising corporate law – dynamic clients, complicated financial structures, huge values and long hours! When I started the gallery, I was fully aware of the commercial challenges, and was prepared for the long journey [that would come] before any sort of reward, [be it] personal or financial.

The road less travelled has been gratifying in so many ways. SGFA has participated in the unprecedented growth in the local art market; we have successfully drawn positive attention to Malaysia through our programmes, and created an outreach to make art more accessible. We welcome everyone with interest and curiosity. This outreach has been the most exciting aspect of SGFA's growth.

What is the Gallery Residence?

It is an exhibition and studio space, and, of course, a residential venue for guest artists.

The building has won several awards.

The space is one of the first six projects to secure a Green Building certification in Malaysia, and soon after completion, received a Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia (PAM) Award for architectural excellence in 2011. Architect Dato Ken Yeang had an energy-efficient design in mind; hence the building has been conceived as an environmentally-friendly green space, resulting in the first space of its kind in the region.

In lieu of air-conditioning, the whole building is cooled by an innovative wind chimney that draws air down into the spaces, circulating it throughout and providing very fresh and cool air. The garden has rainwater collection points and bioswales that reuse rainwater for the plants and grass. Also, the building was constructed with local materials, thus minimising its carbon footprint.

You are a firm believer in the 'green way of living'.

Very much so. Our lifestyle has always aimed to adhere to minimising waste and over-consumption, creating an efficient living environment. Our house, for example, incorporated the principles of reuse, local materials, natural ventilation – although we do have air-conditioning – solar and indigenous landscaping.

How have you incorporated the concept of 'living with art' into the Gallery Residence?

Remember that SGFA was conceived as a gallery that promoted 'living with art' and it started in a home, the ultimate living space! The Gallery Residence maintains the residential feel, but is a dedicated platform for promoting art, design and culture.

What can we see at SGFA's Gallery Residence?

We represent paintings, sculptures, bronzes, ceramics, photographs, textiles, glass... We find that there are pockets of collectors of every kind, and obviously some of them collect the best pieces of everything.

What are the current programmes that SGFA's Gallery Residence is undertaking?

Vision Culture Lectures (VCL), endorsed by the UNESCO Observatory Multidisciplinary Research in Arts, is an educational cultural programme that brings international curators and art personalities to Malaysia to



Datin Shalini believes that knowledge is power when it comes to collecting art. "My personal taste has evolved somewhat because I have far more access and knowledge, but my philosophy has stayed the same: to be an informed collector," she says. Below right: Datin Shalini with Social Editor Ana Garcia de Barañano

speak at free events at the Gallery. VCL has hosted award-winning artists, designers and curators from international museums, most of whom are visiting Malaysia for the first time because of the programme.

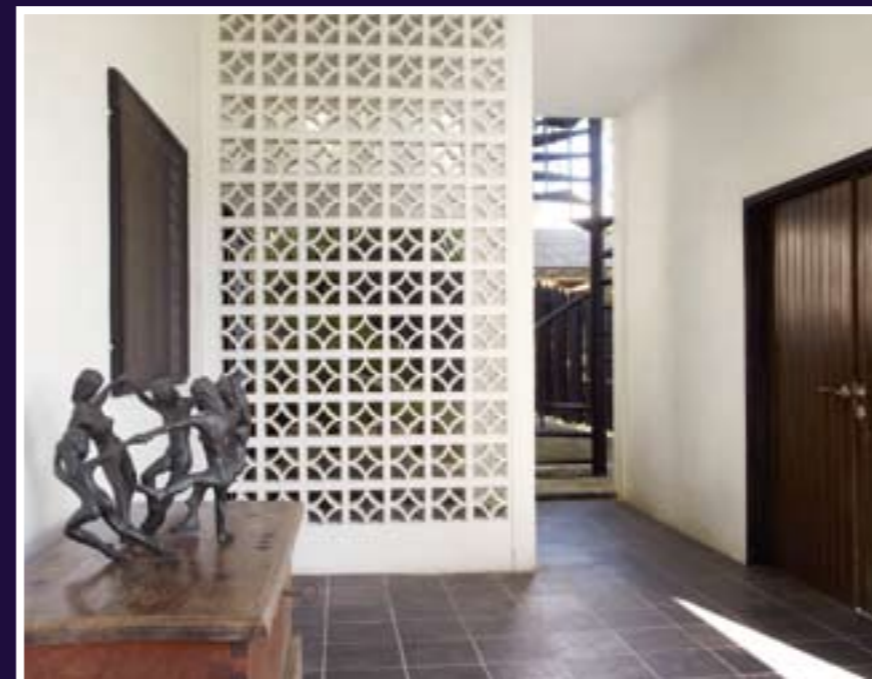
We also have the Artist Residency Programme, which is a platform for cross-cultural practices and artistic dialogues, whereby the guest artists are selected through a process of recommendation and open calls, and a programme that provides cultural exchanges amongst university students called Exploring East Residency.

Are there a lot of art collectors in Malaysia? What do Malaysian collectors look for?

There is a growing number of collectors, and a vast number of people who are really interested in art – whether in the form of visual art, design, architecture or textile.

SGFA's exhibitions and programmes suggest to collectors factors to consider when evaluating and buying art, so that speculation is reduced, along with the white elephants and wasted spending. Knowledge is power.

What, in your opinion, weighs more when it comes ▶





'Art should not be viewed as an intimidating thing'

Down the road from Datin Shalini's house is the SGFA's Gallery Residence – an independent exhibition space specialising in Malaysian contemporary art and design, and a residential venue for guest artists. The environmentally-friendly building was given the Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia Award for architectural excellence in 2011

to collecting art: the pleasure of owning a valuable piece or the enjoyment of the piece itself?

Isn't having both the best? That is exactly what SGFA aims to provide: a financially and culturally valuable piece.

Appreciation of a particular piece of art is very subjective. Do you think that collecting art is an investment option in the long term? How is the global financial crisis affecting the art market?

Art can be an investment option, with [the help of] credible advice supported by careful research, a good eye and focus. What the financial crisis has shown is that although some areas of the art market continue to flourish, buyers are looking for the best and are not speculating. They want to see real value, the best pieces by the best artists.

What advice would you give to budding collectors?

Education is very accessible now through the Internet. In Malaysia, you can get a lot of information from the conferences at SGFA and other art institutions, like the Petronas Gallery or the National Gallery of Malaysia. And, of course, if you travel abroad, your options are even wider.

Be a clever collector, and don't waste your money by following uninformed trends. Find an art advisor with knowledge and reliability. At SGFA's Gallery Residence, everybody is most welcome. Visit many exhibitions and develop your eye. Find out about the economics of the local market and regional trends, which a good advisor can share [with you]. Buy what you like and the best that you can afford, and that way, you can always enjoy the piece.

Is the phenomenon of globalisation changing the perception of Asian art in other parts of the world? Are Asian artists appreciated in Western countries?

Absolutely, and Southeast Asia is now in view. International collectors do prefer artists with track records and good representation. We are seeing Indian and Chinese artists gaining tremendous traction from major museum shows.

Southeast Asian art is riding the Asian wave. But there is still a lot of work to do.

What are your interests besides art?

[Laughs] Art takes up most of my time! But I have three children and a husband, and of course that is another full-time job! I love reading and swimming, which I do about four times a week. I like travelling as well. I can say that I am still in the process of discovery.

Do your trips always have an element of art?

Of course. When travelling overseas, it is a must to visit the museums and the art galleries. Although my kids appreciate art and enjoy those cultural tours as well, they are still kids so they prefer sports, food or entertainment. But don't get me wrong, I love all that too! **H**

INTERVIEW: ANA GARCÍA DE BARAÑANO
PHOTOS: SAMMIE TAN, SHOW UP PICTURES
ART DIRECTION: WONG CHAI YEN
MAKE-UP AND HAIR: WAIWAI TANG

