

# Design Disposition

Text / Sarah Mineko Ichioka

From the striking Gallery Residence in an otherwise-nondescript suburban cul-de-sac, one determined woman is orchestrating a campaign to put Kuala Lumpur on the international art map.

Shalini Ganendra jokes that she has a 'genetic predisposition for design'. Born into a family of Sri Lankan collectors, living with works of art and supporting the artists who create them comes naturally to her. But whether by birthright or vocation, the advisor and cultural entrepreneur has become one of Malaysia's most passionate advocates for contemporary art, supporting artists, educating audiences and advising collectors through a portfolio of diverse initiatives.

Ganendra is openly driven by curiosity and discovery, and this manifests in her work. 'She's a progressive visionary and innovator, exemplified in her range of shows and her emphasis on multidisciplinary art forms, cross-cultural exchange, championing of local and regional work, and the wide breadth with which her gallery engages with art,' enthuses Karen Tan, whose property development company Pocket Projects recently collaborated with Ganendra.

Having read law at Cambridge before working as a corporate finance lawyer in New York, Ganendra's career took a sharp turn towards the cultural when her family relocated to Kuala Lumpur in the mid-1990s. Building on her experience as a private collector, Ganendra established a gallery and arts advisory service in 1998 and, looking to raise the profile and impact of this work, she commissioned a new building from green architecture expert Ken Yeang.

The 630-square-metre, two-storey Gallery Residence opened in 2011, arranged around a turfed interior courtyard. Its untreated concrete envelope incorporates several key elements meant to improve its environmental performance,

including natural ventilation and the first application of a downdraft flue in the tropics.

On the ground floor are the exhibition space, the office and an artist's studio, while the upper floor hosts residential quarters for visiting curators, artists and interns, as well as additional gallery space. Here, the exhibition spaces take on a domestic aspect, with an attractive arrangement of furniture, design objects, wall-hung art and floral arrangements, premised on Ganendra's approach of 'living with art, living with design'.

Aiming to cultivate what she calls 'cross-cultural encounters' between nationalities, generations and disciplines, Ganendra shows a 50:50 split of local to international works. These take on a full diversity of forms, from traditional textiles to furniture, ceramics and jewellery alongside photography, painting and sculpture.

Ganendra takes evident pleasure in the way Kuala Lumpur's cultural ecosystem has evolved in sophistication over the past two decades. She was a lead initiator of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur, now in its second year, which coordinates outreach and programming efforts among the city's emerging arts institutions. She's also set to exert influence as a recent recruit to the Tate's South Asian Acquisition Committee.

Through her initiatives, many free public programmes are subsidised by Ganendra's advisory work for private collectors with an eye for investment value. She tracks artists over several years before approaching them, seeking staying power and maturity of practice. She says she prefers artists who combine ambition with discipline, and as a fundamental principle, seeks 'good value with room for appreciation' — perhaps an apt metaphor for Kuala Lumpur's art scene itself.



Gallerist Shalini Ganendra inside Gallery Residence, her Kuala Lumpur art space designed by green architecture expert Ken Yeang. Ganendra promotes local art and what she calls 'cross-cultural encounters' between nationalities, generations and disciplines. Image courtesy of Shalini Ganendra Fine Art