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## Swiss art dealer on taking a gamble and moving to Singapore

By Jane A Peterson

Swiss art dealer Frédéric de Senarclens uprooted his gallery in Geneva and moved it to Singapore in 2008. At the time, government officials were promising to make Singapore an arts hub for Asia. “We said we would conquer the city and make our business a success,” he says. “We came with drive.”

De Senarclens, 42, opened Art Plural Gallery with his wife Carole three years later. It is located in the emerging arts and heritage district. “There are a lot of opportunities in Asia,” says de Senarclens, noting the number of new galleries and art fairs that have opened in the past five years. “Singapore’s actually become a destination for art.”

The art deco building is huge with a distinctive Manhattan feel: 12,000 sq ft across four floors – all dedicated to modern and contemporary art, such as the work of Chinese artist Qiu Jie, known for his “political pop” style.

This spring Art Plural exhibited work by Indian art duo Thukral & Tagra, including a series of surreal paintings telling the story of Punjabis moving to America. The paintings remind de Senarclens of his own journey to Singapore. “The Punjabis arrive in New York and find it’s really difficult even though their friends at home still think they’re living in paradise,” he says. “A lot of our friends in Switzerland say, ‘Your life is fabulous’. But they don’t realise it comes with a cost.”

Starting out posed a bigger challenge than expected. The couple rented a 6,000 sq ft house in Singapore’s fashionable Emerald Hill district to sell art from their home, a method that works well in Europe. But it didn’t work in Singapore. “People don’t want to come to your home.



Frédéric de Senarclens outside his home in Singapore

Asians want to come to a gallery to see that you are established. That’s when they begin to trust you.”

Opening the gallery meant quadrupling sales to make ends meet. “It was a huge risk,” de Senarclens admits. Still, he says it is going well now, with sales better than expected. His solo exhibitions include prominent artists such as Ian Davenport, Pablo Reinoso and Chun Kwang Young. He also participates in regional art fairs, including Art Taipei in November.

Most of de Senarclens’ clients live in New York, Europe, Hong Kong, Malaysia, India and Australia. Some visit the gallery when travelling through Singapore. Others find it through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Artnet. “The internet response has been a big surprise – up to 25 per cent of our clients buy pieces they see online and we ship to them.”

Some 35 per cent of clients are local – Chinese or Indian Singaporeans. De Senarclens began courting them as soon as he arrived in Singapore, attending as many receptions as he could. He found his height – 6ft 5in – proved to be an advantage. “Here, I feel like a tall tree. You walk into a room and people notice.”



Singapore is now a hub for arts

The Singapore Tourism Board has been supportive, introducing him to new contacts. “They have always been interested in our business, asking us, ‘What can we do for you?’ It’s a sharp contrast to Europe. In Geneva you get nothing.”

De Senarclens and his wife are grateful they chose to live in Emerald Hill, a quiet family neighbourhood of “shophouse-style” Peranakan homes in pastel colours. Their sons, aged four and six, attend Chatsworth International School, a short

walk across the road.

However, rents here are high. “The cost of living in Singapore is expensive,” says de Senarclens. “Some landlords ask too much. They try their luck, hoping to find a newcomer who doesn’t know the price is inflated.”

The couple employ a live-in Filipina helper, which is common in Singapore. She takes care of household chores and childcare needs.

“It’s a big plus compared with life in Europe,” says de Senarclens, though he regrets being less involved in the daily household routine. “You lose something. You spend less time with your kids. We struggle to find the right balance.”

Sundays are family days. The family bought a car two years ago and joined the Singapore Polo Club. They often drive to Sentosa island and to East Coast restaurants for dinner at the seaside. Sometimes they head to Malaysia for the weekend.

The children enjoy these trips, but de Senarclens still longs for his European lifestyle: Sunday lunch with parents, visiting his sister in Berlin, driving to the south of France for the weekend. He feels he has lost ground with friends and family in Europe. “I grew up in a region with forests and horses,” he says. “I can’t offer that to my kids. They get something else.”

De Senarclens gives it a label: exposure to different cultures. “It’s really a plus,” he says. The couple speak to their children in French, school lessons are taught in English, and Mandarin is also a subject. “Maybe I want them to study in Switzerland later to give them what I am not giving them now – to make sure they still have Swiss culture in their blood.”

As for the Singaporean culture, de Senarclens notes the country is very young with a budding interest in the arts (a new national art gallery is due to open in 2015). “The culture keeps evolving. Nothing in the society is really established. Nothing is carved in stone.”

De Senarclens plans to keep his Singapore gallery for the long term, though he is considering opening another gallery in Asia, and possibly one in Europe. He knows that would take him out of his comfort zone once again. “To move without the support of a big company takes courage,” he says. “It’s something a lot of people dream about, but most are not prepared to take the risk. You have to readapt or you fail. It’s a gamble.”

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## Buying guide

### Pros

- Light traffic, efficient public transport, and good airport facilities
- Lots of 24-hour shopping options, including a Swiss butchers
- Singapore’s income tax rate is capped at 20 per cent, which is roughly half the rate in Geneva

### Cons

- The cost of living is high; cars are three times more expensive in Singapore compared with Geneva
- To buy a house, expats require “permanent” residency, granted for five years, though

apartments are available immediately

### What you can buy for . . .

**£500,000** A small apartment in a prime district

**£1m** A two-bedroom older condominium in Emerald Hill

**£6m** A four-bedroom renovated “shophouse” in Emerald Hill

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