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Singapore signs 20-year lease on Venice Biennale pavilion

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Singapore has taken a 20-year lease on space at the Venice Biennale, making a long-term commitment to the international arts festival after skipping the last edition to review its participation.

The announcement was made on May 6 by Mr Sam Tan, Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth, at the opening of the Singapore Pavilion in Venice. This year, the pavilion showcases the maritime-inspired multimedia installation *Sea State* by Charles Lim until Nov 22 and cost over \$1 million to set up.

The cost of the long-term lease was not revealed. At the launch, Mr Tan addressed about 120 visitors and guests including gallerists and artists: "This is Singapore's seventh time at the Venice Biennale and we are here to stay."

In a press statement, he said the long-term lease on the pavilion would give Singapore artists opportunities to develop their capabilities and reach out to new international audiences.

The Venice Biennale, held every two years, is a top-tier, career-making international arts festival, eagerly anticipated by curators and collectors worldwide.

Singapore has signed a lease for a 250 sq m space on the first storey (one level above ground) of the 16th century Sale d'Armi building at the Arsenale, a historic complex of shipyards and military barracks that is one of the main locations of the Venice Biennale. The other is the neighbouring public gardens of Giardini.

The newly restored space at the Sale d'Armi, near the only escalator in the complex, was opened up for use from 2013 and will be used by Singapore for nine more editions of the art biennale.

Mr Paul Tan, deputy chief executive of the arts council, told The Straits Times, said: "Having a long-term lease in the Arsenale in Venice will enable future editions of Singapore artists and curators to view the space for themselves. They will be able to imagine the creative possibilities for their works, and use the space to play to their strengths."

He declined to reveal the cost of the lease but said putting up the 2015 Singapore Pavilion cost over \$1 million, including honoraria for artist and curator, transport, marketing and publicity.

He added that the council will explore with other agencies in Singapore the idea of also using the space during the Architecture Biennale held in Venice in even years.

Singapore has taken part in every edition of the art Biennale since 2001, except for 2013, when the National Arts Council reviewed its long-term international strategy and whether "our talents are ready for such large scale works" according to Mr Paul Tan.

He said he hoped a successful showing at the Biennale would interest a global audience in art from Singapore as well as in new developments such as the National Gallery opening in November

Singapore's Biennale showcase Sea State is the culmination of about 10 years of maritime-inspired works by the artist, Lim, who is a former national sailor and the first Singaporean to win an award at the Venice Film Festival.

That was for his 2011 short film All The Lines Flow Out, an examination of waterways in Singapore which premiered at the 68th Venice Film Festival.

Sea State looks at the impact of reclamation and expansion works in Singapore and includes maps, charts, video installations and a 5-m tall aluminium buoy encrusted with barnacles, similar to the navigational marker which once marked an island off the coast of Singapore, Pulau Sajahat. It no longer appears on maps. Sea State will be exhibited next year at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore.

Lim, 42, thinks the long-term lease on the Singapore Pavilion will give artists like him much-needed control over how their work is exhibited for international viewing.

Versions of Sea State have been exhibited at biennales in Osaka (2007) and Shanghai (2008) as well as Manifesta 7, the 2008 European Biennale of Contemporary Art. He says: "As an artist you work under many curators and you don't have that kind of control. Some curators come in, they don't know so much about art from South-east Asia, for example."

Singapore artist Jane Lee, 50, says having a presence at the Venice Biennale is a great opportunity which will put artists on their mettle. She has a painting on display at the arts festival for the first time, in a group showing called Frontiers Reimagined, curated by contemporary art gallery Sundaram Tagore Gallery, which has spaces in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore.

She told The Straits Times on the phone: "All artists hope to be part of the Venice Biennale. The exposure is very important, people coming from all over the world and the standards are very high.

"It comes down to the point: 'How good are we? Are we able to compete?' I have to do my part and produce really good artwork. For myself, I think I still have to work harder to be there."

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For more updates on Sea State and Singapore at the Venice Biennale go to [Facebook.com/SGArtWeek](https://www.facebook.com/SGArtWeek)