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## Veteran Hong Kong Curator Tobias Berger on Asia's Next-Generation Foundations

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### Veteran Hong Kong Curator Tobias Berger on Asia's Next-Generation Foundations

'At the end of the day, art and culture are about being daring,' he says, 'and these institutions have room for this.'



Tobias Berger, co-founder and curatorial director of Serakai Studio. Image courtesy Serakai Studio.

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The German-born, Hong Kong-based curator and artistic director Tobias Berger has witnessed—and contributed to—seismic changes in the Asia Pacific's art landscape over the past two decades, while holding senior roles at major public institutions like M+ and Tai Kwun in Hong Kong and the Nam June Paik Art Center in Yongin, South Korea, just outside Seoul.

After a long career in the public sector, Berger has pivoted to the private sector in recent months. He is currently co-founder and curatorial director of Serakai Studio, a cultural think tank from Serakai, a real estate firm founded by Benjamin Cha, who is a longtime art patron based in Hong Kong. Berger also works as a strategic advisor for the Singapore-based Tanoto Art Foundation, which is led by Belinda Tanoto, a collector and philanthropist based in the city-state.

We caught up with Berger ahead of the opening of Gold, Serakai Studio's new experimental salon space in the Hong Kong gallery hub of Wong Chuk Hang, which coincides with Art Basel Hong Kong later this month.



South Ho, *Into light*, featured in Gold's inaugural exhibition "Certainly." Image courtesy of artist and Blindspot Gallery.

**You have worked at major institutions—at M+, as its first curator of visual arts, and at Tai Kwun, as head of art. How was that different from your current roles at these new initiatives?**

Both Serakai Studio and Tanoto Art Foundation are driven by individuals who not only have the financial means to experiment on the cultural frontier, they are also extremely well-educated and well-informed about the contemporary art world. This means the decision-making processes at these organizations are much faster than that at public institutions. There is a greater willingness to experiment with new ideas and flexibility. For example, Serakai Studio is like a test lab for Serakai. A symposium or an exhibition by Tanoto Art Foundation is also about testing something small, before doing something big.

These new organizations are also more locally or regionally focused. Tanoto Art Foundation, for example, is very much about Southeast Asia. Whereas Serakai Studio establishes itself across Hong Kong, Tokyo, and [Bangkok](#), which aligns with the mother company's business portfolio.

**What does the creation of these two organizations say about the recent emergence of privately driven institutions in the region?**

These initiatives, together with projects and foundations that emerged in the region in recent years, such as [Dib Bangkok](#), Bangkok Kunsthalle, and [Khao Yao Art Forest](#), as well as the [Ayala Foundation](#), demonstrate an entrepreneurial way of operating cultural institutions, not in a money-making sense but identifying new ways and new solutions. You can be more critical and question the state of the world. At the end of the day, art and culture are about being daring, and these institutions have room for this.

At Serakai Studio, for example, we publish the annual journal *Cong*, where we discuss a range of cultural topics beyond contemporary art. *Gold*, which is opening this month, is a salon where we can do exhibitions and performances, and we do not just showcase contemporary art but also design, fashion, and other cultural productions. These exhibitions can be commercial and non-commercial.

## How is this wave of private institutions different from China's private museum boom over a decade ago?

First, contemporary art in China was introduced by the commercial market, which was very different from the development of art in the Western world and most other countries, including Japan and South Korea, where you have contemporary art museums, nonprofit institutions, and spaces for people to see and create contemporary art. China did not have that. A lot of private museums were built as property vehicles. Contemporary art became a speculative commodity in China, and the art market became an investment market. This did not happen in other parts of Asia, where people did not need art to make money.

Today, China's private museum scene is entering a new and more interesting phase as these new institutions are backed by companies rather than private individuals, for example He Art Museum, which is backed by the family behind household appliance manufacturer Midea Group, and the upcoming museums backed by tech giants [JD.com](#) and [Tencent](#).



Installation view of "Rituals of Perception," the inaugural exhibition of Tanoto Art Foundation in Singapore opened in January. Image courtesy Tanoto Art Foundation.

## How do you think this new breed of institution across Asia Pacific will further transform the region's landscape in the near future?

Prior to my current roles, all my previous jobs were about filling a very specific gap in the local art ecology. In the case of Hong Kong, we didn't have a curator-led nonprofit space, and my role at Para Site was to transform it from an artist-run space to a curator-led space; we did not have a world-class museum like M+ and a contemporary art kunsthalle like Tai Kwun Contemporary.

Now that the pyramid of institutions, museums, and nonprofit spaces has been built over the past 10 years, we have a free hand to do what we want to do at Serakai Studio. We do not need to fill a gap anymore and we can focus on what's new, what's next, and what's important in the future.

While both JD Museum and Tencent's museum-in-the-making are going to be tech-focused, considering where they are coming from, all of these new private institutions care very much about their local environment and maintain a strong connection to the local art production, or even hyper local at times, focusing on city-based productions such as Bangkok or Singapore. And as for Singapore, there are a lot more gaps in the market because the cultural ecology there is largely government-run. Tanoto Art Foundation, as a non-governmental initiative, can add greater depth to the existing infrastructure.

**What are the major changes of the world's perception of Asia's art landscape you have noticed?**

The world has become more globalized and has understood, especially the Western world, that amazing artworks can come from all over the world. The centers of the art world are not only in Paris, London, and New York anymore. There are excellent works and events happening in Seoul, in Tokyo, or in Beijing, just to name a few Asian centers. While some outstanding Asian artists are gaining more international exposure, such as Lee Bul, Heague Yang, Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara, and Yayoi Kusama, who is now featured in a solo show [at the [Museum Ludwig](#)] in Cologne, they are still seen as "exotic," whereas here in Asia, we do not see Western artworks as "exotic" but part of a global discourse.

There has also been a boom of inter-Asian network. When I was still in Seoul, London and Paris were artistically closer than Shanghai and Beijing, which was only a short flight away. It was more of a bilateral connection between one Asian city and a Western city. Today, we are looking at a multilateral network among different Asian cities, from Bangkok to Hong Kong and Tokyo. I hope people can see that Asia is a much more multifaceted region than they did in the old times.

*Gold opens on March 20 with a group exhibition, "Certainly," on view through May 3.*



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