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Cultural Entrepreneurship in Emerging Markets: Shalini Ganendra Fine Art

News

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Usman W. Chohan has an MBA from Desautels (2014) in Strategy and Leadership. In 2015, he collaborated with Datin Shalini Ganendra's gallery and cultural center, Shalini Ganendra Fine Art (SGFA), headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He has previously served as a consultant at the World Bank Institute, and as the Special Situations Analyst of Global Equities at Natcan Investment Management.



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There is a marked trend among graduates of prestigious MBA programs, such as those at the Desautels Faculty of Management, to seek out careers outside the traditional and archetypical ambits of management, such as finance and management

consulting [1]. Such graduates seek gratification in non-normative careers that often prioritize ineffable non-monetary benefits that approximate 'a sense of personal fulfillment', 'a sense of meaning', 'the chance to pioneer a new field', and 'pursue a passion'. For such graduates, as they seek out passions that bypass the conventionality of traditional career streams, it is important to observe the career trajectories of those who set a non-normative precedent. Datin Shalini Ganendra, Director of [Shalini Ganendra Fine Art Gallery](http://www.shaliniganendra.com/) (<http://www.shaliniganendra.com/>) (SGFA) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, embodies one such remarkable career trajectory: from a main stream Wall Street lawyer to the Director of an emerging region art gallery.

From the Corporate Law Firm to the Art Gallery

Born in Sri Lanka, Shalini first walked the well-trodden path of the corporate finance lawyer after study at Cambridge University (LL.B. Hons) and Columbia Law School (LL.M.). She worked for five years at Shearman & Sterling, NY providing legal counsel for securities transactions, after which she worked as general counsel for a Hong Kong based investment house for another two years. At that juncture, having observed the nascent art activity in Asia, she saw the opportunity to pursue a passion and radically divert her career path by creating a gallery that would distinguish itself through an innovative model which combined exhibition and education.

Shalini describes a combination of factors that let her 'take the plunge' and devote herself to such a drastic overhaul of career. She had been personally influenced in her youth by major Sri Lankan artists such as the then living members of the [Group of '43](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=8&ved=0CDsQFjAH&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.shaliniganendra.com%2Fpdf%2Fabout%2FSri%2520Lankan%2520Modern%2520and%2520Contemporary%2520Art.doc&ei=FPWIVaKgGJOQuAT2hYOgDA&usq=AFQjCNE74OSbwNttLi0ItDKL36t1SDHTQ&sig2=8MvyyIht7XTZ-VP7kOE72g&bvm=bv.96339352.d.c2E&cad=rja) (<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=8&ved=0CDsQFjAH&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.shaliniganendra.com%2Fpdf%2Fabout%2FSri%2520Lankan%2520Modern%2520and%2520Contemporary%2520Art.doc&ei=FPWIVaKgGJOQuAT2hYOgDA&usq=AFQjCNE74OSbwNttLi0ItDKL36t1SDHTQ&sig2=8MvyyIht7XTZ-VP7kOE72g&bvm=bv.96339352.d.c2E&cad=rja>), who came to pioneer the genre of modern art in Sri Lanka [2]. She also used personal time to proactively research and keep abreast of

developments in the art and design fields, beginning a personal collection at the age of 18. Furthermore, the thought of shaping an institutional model in an emerging market environment offered an enticing challenge. Thus, in 1998, she seized on her artistic predilections to establish SGFA in Kuala Lumpur.

Synergistic Elements

Shalini has offered an interesting perspective on the difference between her past life as a corporate lawyer and her current life as the director/owner of her own enterprise. In the corporate world, she was required to assimilate large amounts of data, dissect business models and build relationships with clients and with her team. Furthermore, she was trained to multi-task, manage complete project cycles, synthesize an industry's landscape through analysis and research, and develop a sensitivity to the interests of key stakeholders in each deal. As she has observed, these skills were all directly transferable to the development of a gallery enterprise, therein creating important **synergistic elements** from a managerial standpoint. For example, she identifies the international nature of her previous work as helping her to grasp the interconnected nature of global collaboration in the art industry. She also notes that the corporate lawyer's analytical and research faculties are conducive to forming an understanding of the trends and directions in the world of art. The relational aspect of her previous career also helped her to develop a sensitivity to the various participant communities in the art field. Additionally, the synergies of her two careers allowed her to contextualize the entire *Value Chain*, from the development of artists, through to the curators, exhibitions and collectors, in a cohesive manner. "Every life experience becomes relevant," she remarks, "and there is great potential for generating insight for new ventures through those past experiences. Experience builds resilience, which leverages new opportunities".

First-Mover Advantages

The nascent stage of SGFA was marked by structural bottlenecks that required both time and patience to surmount. Financial capital was not the greatest barrier to market entry; rather, the cultivation of networks and relationships with other members of the artistic value chain, coupled with rigorous industry and market research, demanded the greatest initial attention. Nonetheless, undertaking the risk of establishing the SGFA in Kuala Lumpur in such an embryonic period for the South-East Asian art market conferred several *first-mover advantages* to the gallery. First, it allowed SGFA to cultivate networks of clients and artists in a generally unencumbered fashion. Second, it allowed SGFA to influence the narrative of visual art in Malaysia, much in the spirit of Bourdieu's work *Distinction* (1987). Third, SGFA was able to draw in the most talented local and regional artists, and gain exclusive representation rights, as well as to acquire prized pieces for clients at an early stage. Fourth, it could earn reputational capital through effective branding strategies that would go broadly unchallenged because of the absence of major competitors. Fifth, through innovative initiatives, SGFA was able to access top curatorial and artistic talent. These first-mover advantages cemented the gallery's pioneering position in the emerging market for South-East Asian art.

Cultural Entrepreneurship

The mission of SGFA speaks to the notion of Cultural Entrepreneurship which, in Shalini's words, "involves value creation through the development and innovation of 'cultural capital' for positive social and individual impact". The notion of *cultural capital* derives from the work of the seminal French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, particularly *Distinction* (1987) [3]. The Dutch cultural minister Rick van der Ploeg (1999) defined a 'cultural entrepreneur' as someone who masters the following two capacities [4]:

- 1) To possess knowledge of, and sensitivity towards, the arts and creative processes, [possibly combined with] the ability to spot creative talents.
- 2) To possess knowledge and comprehension of potential public and marketing techniques.

SGFA corresponds aptly to this prescient definition of 'cultural entrepreneur'. SGFA is both an institution and an agent in an emerging market, because it not only represents artists, but also provides a forum for interaction, thought development, research, and qualitative outreach. On one hand, SGFA leverages its knowledge and expertise to represent local and regional artists. The gallery organizes and curates exhibitions and projects to introduce these works to a Malaysian and international audiences (annual shows in New York during Asia Week (<http://www.asiaweekny.com/dealers/shalini-ganendra-fine-art>)). On the other hand, SGFA serves as a forum for artists, lecturers, curators, and collectors to interact and share 'cultural capital'. An important example of this is the gallery's Vision Culture Lectures (http://www.shaliniganendra.com/programs_vision_lecture.html), endorsed by the UNESCO Observatory which will publish a selection of 12 lectures as its *Arts and Asia Issue* (2015). The Lectures Series, started in 2010, has hosted over 25 speakers from prestigious institutions such as the Smithsonian Institute, ICP, the Guggenheim and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, most of whom are visiting the country for the first time.

A Cross-Cultural Platform

What makes SGFA truly unique, particularly in the context of commercial galleries, is that it combines a staunch for-profit endeavour with dedicated and robust non-profit structure. Thus far, the commercial has funded the non-profit. This dualism implies that though at times the gallery will engage in loss-making endeavours, these ventures still nourish the gallery indirectly. For example, the SGFA Vision Culture Lectures is a non-profit initiative that assembles international experts and introduces them to the Malaysian artistic ethos, which will eventually contribute to raising the profile of the region. Another example is by hosting global experts from international institutions such as ICP and the Guggenheim to engage with and advise local artists. These programs create a platform for informing foreign expertise and outlook, helping Malaysia to become “a part of the global art narrative,” in Shalini’s words. It also fosters long-term relations that enrich the international art scene through tacit networks. Shalini personally considers the non-profit element to be “as engaging and challenging”, because it helps her to “decipher trends”, access established entities, enhance brand value, and provide services in the visual arts value chain that might otherwise go unheeded. SGFA also boasts a mentorship program that hosts students from top universities as *residents* to gain valuable emerging market art experience. They learn about the day-to-day gallery activities and adopt a hands-on approach to the administrative process. Additionally, to create a distinct physical presence, the gallery commissioned the building of an award winning green space in Kuala Lumpur, by Malaysian architect Ken Yeang, in which it now resides. This Gallery Residence accommodates exhibitions, residencies, lectures as well as seminars. Shalini describes the space as ‘a place that speaks to our vision; a place that makes multidisciplinary dialogue an accessible possibility and is a venue of international distinction with a local footprint’. The gallery was designed with the ecological impact in mind, and it has been nominated for the 2016 Aga Khan Architectural Award. The SGFA thus serves as an important cross-cultural platform in a multiplicity of ways.

The Emerging Market Trends

The dynamics of the visual arts market in emerging markets diverges meaningfully from developing countries. Although direct competition is high, the galleries are catering to a small audiences that have lower (albeit fast growing) disposable incomes which limit their purchasing power. The Bourdieusian paradigm of aesthetic appreciation (1987) is also limited, and there is often an unfamiliarity with (and sometimes distrust of) the visual art market. Furthermore, there is a perception of artistic goods merely as disposable investment vehicles – to be bought and then resold at a higher price to another equally aesthetically uninformed buyer. SGFA’s non-profit initiatives have helped to remedy some of these biases to a slight degree, as it has sought to promote a broader and informed audience base.

As an emerging market, Malaysia represents a source of rapid potential client base growth in the coming decades. Shalini, who engages in long-term planning for the SGFA’s projects in 5-year intervals, compares Malaysia during the period 2015-2020 to China circa 1990-1995, when a boom in Chinese interest in the visual arts first began. Chinese artists began to find that rising disposable incomes helped to transform their passion into an investment vehicle for economic *parvenus* (Mandarin: 暴发户, *Baofahu*) who, despite their unfamiliarity with the artistic merits of the works produced, sought the guidance of important art institutions (analogous to SGFA in Malaysia today) to facilitate their investment decisions. In the ensuing decade (1995-2005), enterprising galleries in tier-1 cities such as Beijing and Shanghai help to guide the narrative on the visual arts. Over time, clusters such as Beijing’s [798 Art Zone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/798_Art_Zone) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/798_Art_Zone) took shape and leveraged *economies of agglomeration* [5] to expand the influence of the visual arts over a broader segment of the population, including aspirational and middle-class investors. This is the anticipated trajectory of Malaysia over the next decade as well; and given the nascent position of the art industry in the life-cycle, SGFA’s cemented leadership position offers the potential for disproportionate rewards.

Conclusion

As the prevalence of, and the expressed desire for, non-normative career paths grows among graduates of prestigious MBA programs, the need for exposing these graduates to the narratives of preceding success stories will grow in tandem, irrespective of whether individual graduates yearn for different geographies (emerging markets), different industries (art management), or both: as Datin Shalini Ganendra has exemplified. The SGFA serves both a for-profit and a non-profit objective. It is both an agent and a platform, where artists find not just representation, but also a forum for ideas. It also acts as an incubator for talent and mentorship, which serves to grow the depth of the artistic sector, and connects it to the broader art narrative. Malaysia’s (and South-East Asia’s) emerging market status offer a potential growth dynamic not found in the saturated North American markets. The endeavour to establish SGFA has not been without risks, and such a drastic career overhaul as Shalini’s – from the corporate realm to fine arts – not only demonstrates that radical career changes are possible, but often desirable. The **lateral skills**

garnered in a corporate setting and then effectively applied in the fine arts domain also illustrate how a plurality of perspectives can be used to jumpstart successful new ventures. Furthermore, the first-mover advantages of exploring a markedly different career path in an emerging market help the firm not just to carve out an unassailable market position, but also to define the market itself. Graduates of MBA programs longing to transition into non-archetypical careers can find comfort and direction in observing successful precedents such as that set by Shalini Ganendra and SGFA.

Notes:

[1] Certain progressive schools even tacitly or explicitly encourage this trend. For example, it is worth noting that McGill's Desautels is a 'Faculty of Management' as opposed to a 'Business School', because the concept of management has a far more comprehensive and universalist mandate than that circumscribed merely by 'business'.

[2] The Group of '43 were crucial to the evolution acted as a reactionary artistic force against the sterility of Ceylon Society of the Arts.

[3] Bourdieu's important argument was that the social world functions simultaneously "as a system of power relations" and as "a symbolic system in which minute distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgement".

[4] A good review (<http://www.klamer.nl/docs/cultural.pdf>) of 'cultural entrepreneurship' has been conducted by Arjo Klamer of Erasmus University, (2006).

[5] The Economies of Agglomeration (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economies_of_agglomeration), a theory of economic strategy dating as far back as Alfred Marshall (1890), shows that the huddling together of players in an industry produces economic benefits through various channels such as: the streamlining of the value chain, the concentration of client focus, the cross-over of talent between firms, as well as the sharing and development of ideas.

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