

Dubertret has plans to rotate the artists on showcase at his residence, giving them an opportunity to be better known by the public and people who visit.

PROFILE

CULTURE CLASS

As the Voilah! French Festival returns for a supersized edition from May 4 to Jun 21, we chat with French ambassador to Singapore, Benjamin Dubertret, on art, culture, and the importance of tradition and innovation in society today.

BY KENNY LOH PHOTOGRAPHY LONG FEI

Benjamin Dubertret mirrors one's expectations of a nation's ambassador: a smooth yet commanding demeanour, poised and effortlessly eloquent. Having assumed his position at the French embassy here in Singapore close to two years, Dubertret is more than just a public figure, the man of a bigger picture notably in the realms of art and culture. With an aim to develop an active programming cultural policy on our shores, the annual Voilah! Festival, co-founded in 2007 by the French embassy, Institut Francais Singapour and the French Chamber of Commerce Singapore, will make a supersized return this year with over 40 events including the opening of the festival at the Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris, the French capital's biggest private museum in its first location outside Europe, the Planet Ocean exhibit of surreal aerial and underwater photographs by environmentalist Yann Arthus-Bertrand that shed light on issues linked to earth's seas, and a conference with astronauts Claudie and Jean-Pierre Haignere (the former was the first European woman to visit the International Space Station), which also features a live downlink event with Swiss aeronaut Bertrand Piccard as he journeys around the world on the Solar Impulse aircraft.

On the cusp of the festival's grand opening, L'Officiel Singapore sits down with Dubertret at his residence to find out more.

For a start, let's talk about the return of the Voilah! Festival in Singapore this year. What are some highlights goes should look forward to?

There have been previous editions of Voilah! in the past years, but this definitely is a fresh start. Never before have we had the festival on such a big scale and for such a long period of time. It will be the single biggest foreign festival in Singapore. There will be a great variety of over 40 different events set to cover virtually the entire spectrum of culture, from a food festival organised around 65 different French restaurants, bars and bakeries, and an exhibition of the famous photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand, to The Little Prince series of exhibitions that will be held for the visually impaired, with audio material and sculptures derived from the book by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, and not forgetting the grand opening of the festival, which will take place at the Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris.

Does this return mark a steady increase of awareness over the years in French art and culture?

As you said, I think it's a steady trend you see, we're celebrating not only the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence this year, but also the 50-year mark of diplomatic relations between France and Singapore. I would say it is significant in itself that on this occasion France has decided to relaunch and upscale this festival. Symmetrically, Singapore has also decided that they should have a Singapore festival in France, the only one in Europe. In 2009, we signed a joint agreement on culture between our two governments and we've also had a very good cultural cooperation especially since then. I would say it's a combination of a new awareness and at the same time a long-term trend.

What do you make of the French presence in art in Singapore, and your residence as a cultural hub?

Ideas are definitely flowing here. We've got close to 3,000 people coming to this residence for a variety of reasons annually. It could be a lunch, dinner or a cocktail reception. We believe this is a great opportunity to showcase the works of an artist here, so that was what I decided with my wife Chantal a few months ago that we should have the paintings of French contemporary



Chantal Amourous and French ambassador to Singapore Benjamin Dubertret.

"There have been previous editions of Voilah! in past years, but this definitely is a fresh start. Never before have we had the festival on such a big scale and for such a long period of time."

BENJAMIN DUBERTRET

artist Laure Hatchuel-Becker in the residence. She has a distinctive style with a lot of innovation like "3D oils", and we think it's lovely if we can give her some sort of help to find public awareness here in Singapore. In months to come, we will try to have a rotation, bringing a new artist in as time goes by. More broadly speaking, I would say that yes, culture has always played an important part in what I believe today is a very global and close relationship between our two countries.

Why is Paris still one of the world's major art capitals today?

The reason goes back to an interesting mix of tradition and innovation. Paris has been a place for artistic creation for hundreds of years in many areas. Look at its architecture for instance, paintings and so on. There is this rootedness in tradition and at the same time I believe that the city is offering this ecosystem whereby new things can also emerge. To grow a very big tree you certainly need creativity, but you also need this rootedness and I suppose that is one of the distinctive features that help Paris play the role of a major art capital.

Do you think there should be initiatives in place to educate the younger generation on art and culture?

We've done quite a lot on that already. That was part of our public cultural policy to make sure that the younger ones get in their school curriculum proper access to arts, its history and creation. Museums are also free for students, children and so on, so that also helps a lot. Maybe an area where we are actively trying to make things evolve is to make museums more accessible and interesting to kids. I think that is an important aspect of what we are working on currently.

Which is your favourite museum in Singapore, and why?

That would probably be the Asian Civilisation Museum because it has the best feel of cultural difference and gives access to the whole Southeast Asian civilisation, so I find it really quite remarkable. It does not mean that I am not interested in the others. The other thing is that Singapore has a National Gallery coming up soon and it was actually renovated and refurbished with the help of a French architect Jean-Francois Milou, I don't know exactly yet what would be shown there, but what I know is that it will be a wonderful venue to organise very big exhibitions including those from France. For 2016, we already have two big projects on Impressionism and contemporary art. This might hopefully be my next favourite museum.

Do you have any advice for Singaporeans who want to visit France for art and culture?

As you know, France is the No.1 tourist destination in the world. I suppose my one recommendation would be not to just go to Paris. I am Parisian and there is a lot on offer there, but it's particularly interesting to try and go to other regions. It may take some time to travel, but we have a very dense high-speed train network and it will definitely be worthwhile. Burgundy, for example, has this incredible mix of small heritage buildings, churches and beautiful rural landscapes. There we also have great food and wine. Every region has a distinctive feel of its own, like Savoie for instance, which has so much more to offer than just the world's largest ski resorts. Sampling this unique mix of culture and landscape is a wonderful way to travel and see things. Depending on what your taste is, try one or two regions and combine that with your trip to Paris.



The residence of the French ambassador welcomes close to 3,000 guests every year.