

Home > Photography

AN INTERVIEW WITH TYLER ROLLINS OF THE TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART GALLERY

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The **Tyler Rollins Fine Art Gallery**, located in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, strives to show the interconnectedness of today's uniquely globalized modern art world. Specializing in contemporary Southeast Asian work, gallery director Tyler Rollins recently exhibited photographer **Tom Epperson**'s first solo exhibition in America. Tonight marks the opening of Rollins' newest show, **Tales from Wounded-Land — A Group Show by Eko Nugroho and Wedhar Riyadi**. I had the opportunity to interview Rollins about what inspires him, and what he'd like to see more of in the New York art scene.



Ron Agam: In Full Bloom, Installation View

Sophia Betz: I'm intrigued by the distinct physicality of the work you show in your gallery. Even the photographic exhibits incorporate physical elements such as the dolls and ice that Tom Epperson works with. What appeals to you about this aspect of the artwork?

Tyler Rollins: With Epperson's work, I was really fascinated with the way he approaches the ice itself. He spent a long time just exploring the properties of the medium, the way it can be formed and altered in many ways to create different effects – bubbles, frostiness, cracks, etc. Then, he combines that with another basic element, light, to show the interaction, the way the light is distorted, the way it highlights different features of the ice.



Tyler Rollins and Tom Epperson

I like artists who look at basic things in original ways, whether that is a physical material, such as ice, or a cultural phenomenon. In Epperson's case, he is examining the ice, but also the way in which the cultural identity of the Philippines has been influenced by the wider world. That is where the different objects he freezes come into play; they are basic, cherished items that are either very traditional to the Philippines, such as the balisong knife, or ones that have been adopted from the global popular culture, such as a Barbie doll.



Barbie, Tom Epperson, 2009

SB: What was one of the key experiences or inspirations for you to dedicate a gallery to showing art of Southeast Asia?

TR: I started traveling regularly to Southeast Asia in the late 1990s, so I have been following the contemporary art scenes there for some time. I noticed that there were so many very talented artists who were highly original with important things to say – but their work had never been shown in New York before. Although we have hundreds of galleries here in New York, there wasn't really a gallery focusing on Southeast Asia, a place where people could go to find out more about what's going on in the region. So it was very exciting for me to be able to provide this service. I think it helps to enrich the art scene here in New York, and it also helps the Southeast Asian artists to be able to widen their audience and get recognition here.



Fertile Land #2, Eko Nugroho, 2008

SB: How do you work with artists to show and sell their pieces? Give me a sense of the process of collaboration.

TR: It is very important first to find the right artists who are an appropriate fit for the gallery. Generally, this means that they have a strong personal voice and are motivated by a deep passion, not just by the latest art world trends or market considerations. And they need to be ready for a New York show; that is one reason why I like to focus on artists who are already at a certain point in their careers. Then we have to discuss and refine the concept for the exhibition; it's not just about putting up pictures. My gallery space has a distinct feel and layout, so we want to come up with a tightly focused exhibition that works well in the space. Although Southeast Asia is a long way from New York, it is important to meet with the artists as much as possible, as this allows for a free exchange of ideas as we look at their work. Of course a lot can be done today with the internet, but it can't replace personal interaction and direct experiencing of the art. You wouldn't want to see an exhibition just over the internet, and likewise you can't expect to curate only through remote interaction.

SB: I read on your site that one of the gallery's goals is "to highlight the interconnectedness of today's globalized art world." I'm impressed by your dedication to show not only great art, but the context in which it exists. Where do you see this interconnectedness, both in an aesthetic sense, and in a commercial sense?

TR: Southeast Asia itself is one of the most diverse regions of the world. Historically, it has always been a place of cultural exchange, lying as it does along the oceanic trade routes between India and China. So part of the gallery's mission is to highlight the inherent cultural diversity within Southeast Asia. You see the influences of different tribal and ethnic artistic styles, as well as the huge impact of the religious traditions that arrived from India – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam – and the themes and motifs associated with them. Then of course you have the impact of colonialism, the introduction of Western painting techniques and styles, the establishment of art academies following the Western model. Today, we see the massive influence of global pop culture on the art of the region, coming not only from the West, but also from other Asian countries, such as Japan. Commercially, the art world has become truly global, as we have seen in recent years with the explosion in the Chinese contemporary art market. But Southeast Asia has been less affected by the boom in Asian art. The values have not been driven up to crazy levels. The best artists are still unbelievably affordable in comparison to, say, Chinese or Western contemporary artists. And we have also not seen as much of that increasing conformity of style and loss of originality that is characteristic of the "auction artist" phenomenon.



Tyler Rollins Fine Art Gallery

SB: What are your favorite aspect of the gallery scene in New York, and in what ways do you think the community could work to improve it?

TR: The gallery scene here in New York is, I think, the biggest in the world, and it is incredibly dynamic and rich. It is the dream of most artists to be able to show here, so you can really see the best of the best. But I also think that the audiences here are incredible, very sophisticated and open to new things. This is really crucial to what I am trying to do, which is to raise awareness about Southeast Asia, a region that most people here still know little about. So there is an educational process that is necessary, and I find to do, which is very to that, at least when they are not overwhelmed with all the demands on their time or of life in New York. I think one thing, and I need to do is to focus on increasing our attention to this process in creative ways. You have to engage people, not just lecture them or throw things at them and expect them to be thrilled. There is a lot of editing that goes on – deciding what is the right art to present and what the most effective way is to do that. This is one of the important roles of the art gallery.

Visit the **Tyler Rollins Fine Art** Gallery online.