

Hong Kong Finds Its Footing in Art World

Special Report: The Art of Collecting

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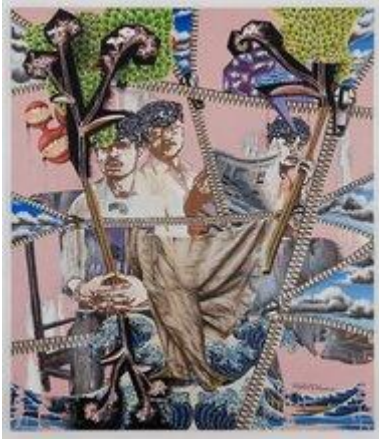


Thomas Lee for the International Herald Tribune

Visitors at the booth of Galerie Gmurzynska at last year's Art HK fair, the precursor to Art Basel Hong Kong.

As Art Basel inaugurates its first fair in the Far East on Thursday, it will not only be staking its claim to a growing market for contemporary and modern art, but also bolstering Hong Kong's position as the dominant art hub of Asia.

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Courtesy of Jitish Kallat and ARNDT Berlin

Jitish Kallat's "Allegory of the Unfolding Sky" is on display at Art Basel's inaugural fair in Hong Kong.

With the show, which features 245 galleries at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center through Sunday, the Art Basel Group has not strayed from its predecessor's goal of staging an Asia-focused event. "I know there was an initial fear that Basel would just make a copy of what they do in Switzerland and Miami," said Magnus Renfrew, Art Basel's director for Asia and the founder of Art HK, the precursor to Art Basel in Hong Kong. "But we've maintained our original mission. A majority of galleries are still from the Asia-Pacific region."

Many galleries in the region had indeed expressed fears that they would be pushed out of the event in favor of bigger, global names in the art world. While the presence of international galleries has certainly increased, the fair has put a spotlight on regional galleries in its Insights section, which features projects developed specifically for the Hong Kong show.

Art Basel is also continuing its tradition of presenting large-scale works from leading international artists in the Encounters section. This year's selections, curated by Yoku Hasegawa of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, will feature 17 artists, including the Shanghai-based MadIn Company, the Indian artist Jitish Kallat and the New Zealand-based artist Seung Yul Oh.

There was little a decade ago to presage that Hong Kong would draw so many galleries, artists and collectors. When Art HK, the precursor to Art Basel Hong Kong founded by Mr. Renfrew, had its premiere in 2008, much of the art world viewed the city as little more than a gateway to the more artistically flourishing centers of Beijing and Shanghai. Demand for Chinese art was soaring at the time, and although Sotheby's and Christie's had already established presences in Hong Kong — international auction houses were not permitted to operate independently on the mainland — many of the city's arts representatives were turned toward the blossoming arts centers of mainland China.

The Hong Kong gallery offerings were little better. Save for a few veterans like Hanart TZ Gallery, which opened in 1983, and Osage Gallery, established in 2004, contemporary art

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galleries in the city were dealing largely with commercial art and offering few platforms on which artists could thrive.

But Hong Kong has experienced an arts renaissance in the past few years, and the city now has 80 contemporary art galleries, according to Art Asia Pacific Magazine, with reputable dealers including Ben Brown Fine Arts, Gagosian, White Cube and Lehmann Maupin opening outposts in the city. For the economist Clare McAndrew, the author of a market report for the European Fine Art Fair this year in Maastricht, the Netherlands, Hong Kong's free market and its lack of taxes on imports or exports of art have contributed to drawing these foreign galleries.

The local government, meanwhile, has announced plans to invest 21.6 billion Hong Kong dollars, or about \$2.8 billion, in a new arts hub, the West Kowloon Cultural District, where the M+ contemporary art museum is scheduled to open in 2017.

Some of these developments have been in play for years, but many arts specialists credit the success of the Art HK fair, and its takeover in 2011 by the international giant Art Basel, with strengthening Hong Kong's position as the artistic hub of Asia. "The acquisition of Art HK by Art Basel has unquestionably cemented the city's position as a mandatory destination for collectors, curators and critics in the global art circuit," said Nick Simunovic, director of the Gagosian Gallery in Hong Kong.

For Courtney Plummer, director of Lehmann Maupin's Hong Kong space, which opened in March this year, the idea of a Hong Kong gallery matured over time. "It really was a natural progression," she said of the gallery's decision to open in the city. "But we did notice that Hong Kong was in the air a lot, with the auctions, the opening of the Asia Society and the fair itself. The fair did not directly influence our decision to come, but it certainly made it clear to us that people love coming to Hong Kong."

In 2012, China had a 25 percent share of the global art market, much of it based in Hong Kong. The city is now the third-largest art auction center in the world, after New York and London, and Sotheby's Hong Kong alone had sales of more than 7.8 billion dollars in 2011.

Some major players in the Hong Kong art world caution against overstating the reputation the city had for many years as a "cultural desert," however. Mr. Renfrew of Art Basel said that this "was the prevailing thought" when he was scouting in Hong Kong in 2007 but that it "was an unfair assessment."

"There were many different organizations, like Asia Art Archives and Para/Site, who were contributing to the city's cultural life," he said, referring to a regional cultural research organization founded in 2000 in Hong Kong and to a contemporary space founded in 1996 that is run by artists. "There were also a number of strong galleries, like Hanart and Osage, who had strong programming that was different from the purely commercial objectives of the city's established antiques galleries," he continued. "I see the city's artistic developments as happening more in parallel with the fair."

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Central to that development are Hong Kong's protections of free speech and a culture of openness and critical thinking, said Robin Peckham, the founding director of Saamlung, a small project space and gallery in the Central district of Hong Kong. Mr. Peckham moved to the city from Beijing in 2009. "I was attracted by the more scholarly approaches in the working methodologies of artists in Hong Kong, and the broader culture of research in the art world," he explained. "Hong Kong is already more significant than Beijing and Shanghai: the transparency of the gallery and auction business, the possibilities of serious curatorial research offered by M+ and AAA — none of that exists elsewhere in China."

Once Hong Kong's art fairs and galleries shined a global spotlight on the city, the local government took notice. "We were seen mainly as a commercial enterprise, so they were not familiar with the cultural significance of an event like ours," Mr. Renfrew explained. "But I think the local government has since been greatly encouraged by the success of the fair. Fair attendance has risen from 19,000 visitors our first year to 67,000 visitors last year. They realize now that there is a hunger for contemporary art from the local populace."

The city, which posted a surplus of 64.9 billion dollars in the most recent fiscal year, has embarked on an ambitious plan for the West Kowloon Cultural District, which will include 60,000 square meters, or 645,000 square feet, of exhibition space at the M+ contemporary arts museum. Lars Nittve, a former director of the Tate Modern in London and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, has been appointed executive director of the museum and Pi Li, a major figure in the Chinese art world, a senior curator.

"The interest in Hong Kong developing a major institution has become stronger as a result of the fair and all the other developments throughout the city," Mr. Nittve said of Art HK and its successor. "The perception of Hong Kong, and its position in the region as a major art hub, has been strengthened."

For some, however, the influx of international galleries like Gagosian and White Cube presents a risk to local artists and galleries because they often focus on global heavyweights like Damien Hirst and Andy Warhol, rather than on local artists. While this is sometimes true — Gagosian did have a Damien Hirst show last year at its space in the Pedder Building — the galleries are generally viewed as bringing fresh air, money and new collectors to the city.

"The increased presence of international galleries is a very positive thing for Hong Kong," Mr. Renfrew said. "They have raised the level of artistic programming and introduced major international artists to the city." Not least, the changing landscape has encouraged local galleries to deepen their programming in the city. Tang Contemporary and 10 Chancery Lane are just two of the driving forces behind Art East Island, a series of exhibitions held in a warehouse building on the eastern reaches of Hong Kong Island. Past exhibitions have included an Ai Weiwei show and a Dinh Q. Le solo project.

The spotlight that comes with each gallery opening, and with prominent fairs like Art Basel Hong Kong, could also presage good things for local artists. "There are dozens of great

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artists working in Hong Kong who for many years were more or less overshadowed by the developments in mainland China,” said Mr. Simunovic of the Gagosian Gallery.

“As the cultural community grows,” he continued, “I think you will see Hong Kong-based artists rise to greater prominence.”

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