

International New York Times, *Art Basel Shows How Far Hong Kong Has Come*, text / Joyce Lau,  
2016 March

International New York Times

International New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1Dfl4ar>

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

## Art Basel Shows How Far Hong Kong Has Come

By JOYCE LAU MARCH 13, 2015

HONG KONG — Collectors and museum directors from around the world had the chance on Friday to deal discreetly with the 223 galleries participating in the third Art Basel in Hong Kong fair.

The private viewing was the quiet before the storm on Saturday night, when the event kicks off officially with a Champagne-soaked vernissage that has become Hong Kong's art party of the year. An estimated 65,000 visitors will descend on the fair before it closes on Tuesday.

The popularity of the annual Art Basel in Hong Kong is testament to how rapidly this city's art market has grown, and how far it still has to go.

One of the fair's big draws — the Encounters section, with large-scale installations by international artists — is a hit with the public precisely because Hong Kong still does not have a world-class contemporary art museum. The proposed M+ museum, in the state-funded West Kowloon Cultural District, will not open until 2018.

Hong Kong's annual art fair rose from the ashes of the 2008 financial crisis, when local entrepreneurs opened ART HK. That fledgling show, which drew on the strengths of the booming Chinese and Southeast Asian markets, quickly caught the attention of overseas buyers. MCH Group, the Swiss art giant that runs the Art Basel fairs in Switzerland and Miami Beach, bought a majority stake in

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ART HK in 2011 and renamed it in 2013, bringing it under the Art Basel umbrella.

Magnus Renfrew, a co-founder of ART HK who is considered a pivotal figure in developing Hong Kong's art market, oversaw the fair from 2008 to 2014. After a half-year search for his successor, and with just two months to go before this year's fair, MCH announced on Dec. 30 that the job would go to Adeline Ooi, an Art Basel executive specializing in the Southeast Asian market.

Hong Kong's local art scene is less established than Tokyo's, and less vibrant than Beijing's. But as a tax-free, English-speaking commercial center with few government restrictions, it is an ideal place to buy and sell art. In terms of sales, it is the third-largest art market in the world after New York and London.

One important aspect is Hong Kong's lack of censorship. "In Southeast Asia, religion is an issue when it comes to images dealing with nudity or sexuality," Ms. Ooi said by telephone from Sydney, Australia, one of many stops on a promotional trip across the Asia-Pacific region. At the Singapore Biennale art fair in 2011, she said, certain works were taken down.

"In Hong Kong, we have liberties we would not have in China," she said.

One example is M+. The museum-in-progress has made its mark with a collection that includes works by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, as well as photographs from the deadly June 4, 1989, crackdown in Beijing — images that would not likely be shown at a similar state-funded museum in mainland China.

"Hong Kong is a city that's not afraid of foreigners or foreign ideas," Ms. Ooi said. "It's not afraid of anything."

A change in schedule this year to March from May, to avoid clashes with other international art events, has brought more high-profile Western galleries to Art Basel in Hong Kong.

But what is noteworthy is the ascent of Asian galleries. Leo Xu Projects of Shanghai, which opened in 2011, spent two years in the Discoveries sector, which is for emerging, smaller galleries. This year, it is in the Galleries sector, next to big names from New York, London and Paris.

According to Chi-Won Yoon, chief executive of UBS Asia-Pacific, 40 percent of the company's art acquisition budget is now dedicated to the Asia-Pacific



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region. UBS is the main corporate sponsor of Art Basel in Hong Kong, which Mr. Yoon described as having “a certain energy that is different from the other fairs.”

The focus is on encouraging young Asian collectors. Art Basel in Hong Kong is expanding its Junior Art Hub, developing a mobile app called Planet Art and holding educational seminars at the University of Hong Kong.

Thanks to the annual fair, mid-March has now turned into Hong Kong Art Week. There will be 150 events around town, including free screenings of 40 films at the Hong Kong Arts Centre.

The old posse from ART HK has announced a rival art fair called Art Central, which will run at the same time as Art Basel in Hong Kong. In its inaugural year, Art Central will host 70 galleries at a newly commissioned space on the downtown waterfront, plus talks and seminars at The Asia Society.

Most Hong Kong galleries now time their big openings for March. Pearl Lam, an eccentric, cutting-edge gallerist, opened a second Hong Kong space this month at SoHo 189 with a solo show by the Chinese artist Ren Ri. SoHo 189, a building in the quickly gentrifying Soho area, also acts as the home for Gallery Huit and Leo Gallery.

Patrick Foret, Art Basel’s head of sponsorship, said that Hong Kong’s fair could aspire to be like Miami’s, which draws together “creative industries, fashion and art.”

Para Site, one of the city’s most established alternative art institutions, just opened a larger new space in Quarry Bay, in Eastern Hong Kong.

Also in Eastern Hong Kong is Chai Wan Mei, a loose series of parties and open houses in the artsy industrial neighborhood of Chai Wan, where many artists live and have studios. The Chai Wan Nights party has become the hot, sweaty alternative to Art Basel’s air-conditioned cocktail receptions.

“Chai Wan is a real eye-opener,” Ms. Ooi said. “Visitors don’t expect art in warehouse spaces in Hong Kong.”

Wilson Shieh, who has been an artist in Hong Kong for 20 years, has watched the local art scene develop from basically nothing.

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“When we graduated from art school, we didn’t even think of becoming full-time artists,” he said. “When I started, I couldn’t have imagined that we would have an art scene like this. In the ‘90s, Hong Kong was just a stopping-off point for collectors heading to Beijing.”

Mr. Shieh considers the city’s annual art fair to be a major boon to local artists. “It’s been eight years now that we’ve had a platform, an opportunity, to show ourselves to the world,” he said.

“Visitors are curious — some even come to my studio in Fotan,” he said, referring to another art community in the outlying New Territories. “I think Hong Kong’s golden era is yet to come.”

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