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ARTS

A Worldwide Focus on Hong Kong for Art Basel

By TED LOOS MARCH 26, 2018



Works by Huang Yuanqing will be shown by Pearl Lam this year at Art Basel Hong Kong. Courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Galleries

When the art fair Art Basel Hong Kong rolls into town for its sixth presentation from March 29 to March 31, about 248 galleries will be showing their wares in a marketplace that has been expertly primed for selling art.

Among the most business-focused cities in Asia and certainly the most Western, Hong Kong has had outlets of the international auction houses for decades, and, although 20 years past its days as a British colony, it now enjoys special status from the Chinese government to encourage commerce.

But it has had a major art fair only since 2008. Art Basel, which takes place at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, took over the fair Art HK and has, for the past five years, steadily turned it into a destination for international collectors hungry for paintings, sculptures, videos and installations of all stripes.

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The dealer Pearl Lam — who will be showing works by Liu Wentao, Huang Yuanqing, Robert Motherwell and others in her booth at the fair — has seen a huge transformation in the Asian collecting landscape. Few people have a more global view of the market as a whole: She has galleries in Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

“At first I said, it’s impossible for Hong Kong to have an art fair,” said Ms. Lam, a native of the city. “But in 2008, it really changed.”



Art Basel took over the fair Art HK and, since 2013, has steadily turned it into a destination for international collectors hungry for paintings, sculptures, videos and installations of all stripes. Jessica Hromas for Art Basel

The global axiom holds true: If dealers think they can sell a lot of art, they will show up pretty much anywhere, and the booming Asian economy makes the region attractive.

“What continues to mark this fair is the influx of great galleries coming in from all over the world — especially the Western world,” said Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel. “It reflects the potential they see.” He cited two new entries this year: [Tanya Bonakdar](#) and [Friedrich Petzel](#), both New York dealers.

In fact, there is more demand than supply in terms of booth space in the convention center.

“For the last several years, because the fair is so potentially attractive to galleries, we’ve limited ourselves to half of the total slots for those that are only active in the West,” Mr. Spiegler said, part of an effort to keep some Asian character to the fair.

They are keeping strict accounts: Of the 28 new galleries this year, 14 have exhibition spaces somewhere in Asia.

For American and European galleries that want to be admitted, Mr. Spiegler even assigns homework. “For an established gallery from the West, the beauty and the terror of this fair is that’s it’s a meritocracy,” he said, and not just during the fair. “You need a strategy. In order to succeed, you will have to put time in and designate someone to show face in person, since that’s important in Asia.”

Mr. Spiegler said that such conversations put him in a surprising position at times: “There are galleries we’d love to have, but once we speak we realize they have work to do before their first appearance. It’s a surreal experience for a fair director to caution big galleries from entering a fair, but it’s the responsible thing to do.”



"Swan (Inflatable)" by Jeff Koons. The David Zwirner gallery will show five recent Koons works at Art Basel Hong Kong. Jeff Koons, courtesy David Zwirner

Some of the biggest international galleries have already set down roots in Hong Kong, and one building in particular has proved alluring: the art-focused, 24-story development H Queen's. So far the tenants that have either opened space or plan to soon include the heavy hitters Pace, Hauser & Wirth, and David Zwirner. It's also Ms. Lam's Hong Kong outpost.

"It's added a new layer of excitement to the Hong Kong art scene," said [Leo Xu](#), the director of David Zwirner's gallery there. "The building is a vertical Chelsea."

At the fair, Zwirner will show five recent works by Jeff Koons. The concurrent show in the gallery's space at H Queen's features the German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. And the idea is that the exhibitions bolster each other: "People at the fair can get a taste of the gallery program," said Mr. Xu, who formerly had his own gallery in Shanghai.

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H Queen's is only one facet of the steadily growing Hong Kong art scene. Parts of it have benefited from governmental largess, in particular the [West Kowloon Cultural District](#). The scheduled 2019 debut of M+, a major new art center, is also expected to up the ante.

The city's top dealers all want Hong Kong to have strong, leading voices from the noncommercial sphere — they know that a healthy art ecosystem always features that element, with New York and London as prime examples.

“We're hoping that when M+ opens, they will step up and become that voice,” Ms. Lam said.

Although they both try to target some of the same collectors, the auction houses have welcomed other players.



“Fourfold future with yellow glow,” by Olafur Eliasson. Tanya Bonakdar, a New York dealer, is new at Art Basel Hong Kong this year and will show work by Mr. Eliasson.

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

“Between fairs and auctions, I see positive energy,” said Rebecca Wei, the president of Christie’s Asia, who is based in Hong Kong and attends the fair on multiple days.

Diversity of business models helps. Ms. Wei pointed out the difference in approaches from the opening price: “In auctions, you hammer up, and at fairs, you bargain down.”

The auction house view is that anything that gets a person to buy art for the first time is good. “Last year, one-third of buyers globally were new to Christie’s,” Ms. Wei said. “And 22 percent of them were from Asia.”

And the fair, with its focus on cutting-edge artists, brings new blood to the spring and fall contemporary art auctions. “They have introduced so many artist names to Asia,” Ms. Wei said. “It’s only four days, but it’s a vast show. They bring a huge supply to Hong Kong.”

The global nature of the art world means that a Mexico City-based gallery featuring a renowned Mexican artist is not out of place at an art fair in

Hong Kong. The [Kurimanzutto](#) gallery will fill its booth with works by [Gabriel Orozco](#), who has had his own solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The gallery made its debut at Art Basel Hong Kong last year. “We were quite impressed by the response from collectors,” said Mónica Manzutto, the co-founder. “We managed to find great contacts.”



Kurimanzutto, a gallery that made its debut at Art Basel Hong Kong last year, will fill its booth this year with works by the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, including the limestone sculpture "Dé Orbital."

Courtesy of the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Mr. Orozco is a relatively known quantity among Asian institutions, and is featured in the collection of Tokyo's Museum of Contemporary Art, among others. He has also been living in the region for the past several years, first in Tokyo and now in Bali.

"He tries to understand the specifics of the place he's living," Ms. Manzutto said. "We thought collectors from the region would want to see how that has impacted his art."

She said that two of the limestone sculptures in the booth, "Dé Orbital" and "Dé Fleur," both from 2018, demonstrate how Mr. Orozco has learned from Balinese carving techniques.

Taking a wider view, Mr. Spiegler pointed out that the idea of talking about Asia as a single market is somewhat absurd, given its geographical vastness and the number of countries and cultures it includes. Ms. Lam said that for her money, South Korea — about 2,000 miles away — is actually the continent's most sophisticated art market.

But in the eyes of dealers and fair organizers, that means only that there's room to grow.

"We claim a certain degree of credit," Mr. Spiegler said. "This show not only builds a bridge between East and West, it builds them between different markets in Asia."

He added, "For Australians, the idea of a great art fair only eight hours away was a godsend."

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