

ARTS

Art Basel Hong Kong: Where Commerce and Creativity Meet

By TED LOOS MARCH 22, 2017

It's hard to imagine a place more hard-wired for commerce than Hong Kong. The territory has a history steeped in trade, from its ceding to the British at the end of the First Opium War to its return to Chinese control in 1997 with a special economic and political status engineered to further economic development.

Buying and selling made the territory what it is.

So as the latest Art Basel Hong Kong opens tomorrow at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, featuring more than 240 galleries that are exhibiting through Saturday, the stage is set for collectors to be efficiently paired with artworks to take home and hang on the wall — or, given the size of many installations, placed in a garden, a public park or a private museum.

Art Basel Hong Kong, now in its fifth year, is the newest iteration of the lucrative brand that started in Basel, Switzerland, and later expanded to Miami Beach. This year's Hong Kong fair takes place at a time of unusual political tension, with Brexit, President Trump and rising nationalism acting as counterwinds to the churning, interconnected global economy that an enterprise like Art Basel tries to harness.

“We're not invincible,” said Adeline Ooi, the Asia director for Art Basel and its day-to-day chief. “We're affected by everything that happens, and we are living in uncertain times.”

But that uncertainty hasn't affected galleries' eagerness to come and show their wares.

Dealers like Hauser & Wirth and Gagosian — known for their international reach, multiple locations and ability to stage museum-quality shows — are on hand, as are Asia-based galleries like Bank, of Shanghai, that are new to Art Basel.

This year there is a new sector called Kabinett, which is a feature of the Miami Beach fair. The 19 participating dealers in this sector essentially put on focused mini-shows within their booths, many with a historical angle.

“We always want to enrich the content, and this allows galleries to switch up their timelines,” Ms. Ooi said. “A lot of the material otherwise is quite contemporary.”

The Swiss-based Galerie Gmurzynska is showing 1960s sculptures by Christo, who is famous for his “wrapped” landscapes and for “The Gates,” the 2005 project he and his wife, Jeanne-Claude, staged in Central Park in Manhattan.

“From the Asian collector standpoint, these predate his more famous works, and we haven’t had access to this earlier material,” Ms. Ooi said of the sculptures.

Pace Gallery, based in New York, will show pieces by a mix of international artists. Robert Rauschenberg is represented by two works, including the 1986 assemblage “Carnival (Glut).” Several works by Chinese artists will also be on display, including Zhang Huan’s oil on linen “3AM” (2010) and Zhang Xiaogang’s oil on paper “Jump” (2015).

Pace has branches in Beijing and Hong Kong. “We came in not as a colonialist gallery but to support the market by showing Asian art, mostly Chinese,” said Arne Glimcher, the gallery’s founder.

Last year, the powerhouse international gallery David Zwirner announced plans to open a Hong Kong branch in 2017. “What’s really flourished in the five years since we started here is the gallery scene,” said Marc Spiegler, the global director of Art Basel.

Ben Brown, who was born in Hong Kong and runs galleries there and in London, will be showing works by Lucio Fontana and Heinz Mack at the fair, as well as eight works by the German photographer Candida Höfer, as part of Kabinett.

Ms. Höfer is known for producing enormous images, but Ben Brown Fine Arts is offering “El Escorial VIII” (2000), slightly less than three feet square.

“Every time we show her huge works in Hong Kong, people say, ‘Do you have something smaller?’” Mr. Brown said. “These are more adaptable to this market.”

Mr. Brown, whose family still lives in Hong Kong, said that while the city had earned its prominence as a business center, it still had a long way to go as a place to see art when the fair wasn't in town. "It's not yet on the scale of London, New York and cities in Germany, and that's just wrong, given its size, wealth and sophistication," he said.

But there are positive signs for Hong Kong's reputation as a creative hub. In particular, the fruits of long-planned government funding are coming into view.

In 2008, 21.6 million Hong Kong dollars (about US\$3.4 million at current exchange) was put toward the West Kowloon Cultural District, which covers several institutions. One of the most prominent projects — a permanent home for the arts center M+, designed by the Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron — is scheduled to open in 2019. M+ has a multidisciplinary approach, encompassing art, cinema, architecture and design.

Even skeptics like Mr. Glimcher, who said he thought Beijing had a stronger local art scene than Hong Kong, are encouraged. "M+ is going to be the major game changer," he said.

Mr. Brown agreed that the opening of the M+ center would be a huge step.

(It should be noted that his mother, Rosamond Brown, is a philanthropist who helped organize an acquisition fund for M+.)

Even before the Herzog & de Meuron building is completed, M+ is putting on exhibitions in a small temporary space, the M+ Pavilion. "Ambiguously Yours: Gender in Hong Kong Popular Culture," which focuses on the culturally fertile decades of the 1980s and 1990s, runs through May 21.

"We wanted a topic that was relevant but not too academic," said Tina Pang, a curator at M+. "Gender ambiguity and fluidity is well reflected by many artists at that time."

Doryun Chong, the deputy director and chief curator of M+, said that although the government had put enormous resources behind M+ and the whole district, there was work to be done to get support from private sources.

“It’s a large chunk of money,” Mr. Chong said, adding that M+ is different from some government-run museums in that it has to seek multiple sources of support. “We will have to fund-raise.”

But even without the presence of his organization, he said, the local art scene is strong. “It’s a widespread misperception that Hong Kong is a cultural desert,” he said.

A handful of local arts organizations have gone the distance, and several are marking milestones. The Hong Kong Arts Center will turn 40 this year. Last year, the contemporary-art-focused Para Site marked its 20th anniversary. They operate alongside thriving commercial pillars, including branches of Sotheby’s and Christie’s.

“We wouldn’t have reached the level of clout and sophistication we have if it had only been driven by the market,” said Cosmin Costinas, the executive director of Para Site, which operates kunsthalle style, without a permanent collection. The center’s current show, “Soil and Stones, Souls and Songs,” runs through June 11.

Mr. Costinas said Hong Kong’s commercial clout, including Art Basel, was an asset to nonprofits. “It’s clear to me the fair has increased the overall media attention to the arts,” he said.

The fair organizers are making an effort to connect the event — a hub for jet-setting collectors that costs 150 to 400 Hong Kong dollars just to enter for a day — to the rest of Hong Kong life. The air inside the convention center can get rarefied indeed. “We try to have an interaction with the larger cultural landscape in all our locations,” said Mr. Spiegler, Art Basel’s global director.

The local artist Kingsley Ng has devised a free artwork for the fair that runs through March 28 called “Twenty-Five Minutes Older,” the title of which refers to the length of the ride on one of Hong Kong’s famous tram lines. The piece involves images projected inside two tram cars.

It all comes back to commerce, and given the prices of many of the works on view at Art Basel, the true audience for the fair is not the thousands of casual visitors, but a small cadre of collectors who aren’t significantly affected by downward shifts in the economy.

“A gallery’s business is often concentrated in just a couple of dozen people,” Mr. Spiegler said.

And if all goes well, some of them will be on hand at the convention center this week.

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