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Art Basel Hong Kong grows up




Artwork by Cai Guo-Qiang at Art Basel Hong Kong. Mark Hughes

Sydney-based art adviser Mark Hughes has attended every Art Basel fair in Hong Kong since its debut. This is his take on its importance.

International art fairs are in the ascendant, creating new opportunities to view and acquire art beyond the established network of commercial galleries. Decried by some as pure commerce over creativity, at worst they're a necessary evil, at best a fabulous – albeit exhausting – pleasure.

The launch of Art Basel in Miami Beach in 2002 marked a watershed, since which art

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fairs have popped up all over the world – particularly in new or growing markets. Art Basel began its Hong Kong incarnation five years ago, and today it offers a crash course in art and its complex market.

The fair was built on foundations established by Magnus Renfrew, director of its predecessor, Art Hong Kong, who in the early days wisely encouraged galleries to manage expectations, not to expect quick sales and to keep their eyes on the horizon – assuring those early exhibitors that the market would appear and grow, if not immediately.



Metal Box (Bacharach) 2015. Aluminium sheets with gloss paint, polished steel, by Jim Lambie. Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. **Ruth Clark**

I have attended every fair in Hong Kong since that first intriguing, scrappy year, where the audience walked the aisles bewildered, looking at art through their cameras and not their eyes.

Participating galleries from the West also had to undergo a major re-boot – learning that their artists, famous in their respective regions, were in this region unknown. They had to learn to communicate more openly, and to provide information even on a basic level – with wall labels in English and Chinese and so on. All the "rules" of the

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standard art fair experience (sales to professional collectors early on, then quiet public weekends) were turned upside down.

But the hard work by fair organisers and galleries has paid off and Renfrew's prediction was right. In five years the fair has established a clear identity, and 2017 heralded the true arrival of [Art Basel Hong Kong](#) in all its glory.

The fair, at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from March 23 to March 25, featured 242 galleries from 34 countries and territories, including 29 galleries making their debut.

A large number of apparently wealthy Asian buyers and a healthy representation of collectors and museums from Australia, the United States and Europe attended over the two first critical private view days. Business was clearly being done, and the galleries were generally happy.



Conrad Ventur created a photographic installation representing objects and the architecture of a deceased friend's New York apartment. **Mark Hughes**

A question I often asked art gallery colleagues is where the works were being placed (it is easy but boring to sell works to clients from the gallery's home town) and the responses were varied but ultimately the same: Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong.

For a gallerist in an art fair, this is the reward; new markets, new relationships and new opportunities for your artists. Hong Kong offered this, finally, with real confidence.

I will leave sales figures, and prices to others to report, but the overall range and quality of works was high.

There was an array of political and conceptual work – Hank Willis Thomas (Ben Brown Gallery); Cildo Meireles (Bergamin & Gomide); Kader Attia (Krinzinger); Brook Andrew (Roslyn Oxley9 and Nathalie Obadia) and Ben Quilty (Tolarno). There was the opportunity to acquire work by living treasures: Etel Adnan (Galerie Lelong); Monir Farmanfarmaian (The Third Line); Alex Katz (Timothy Taylor, Richard Gray).



Antenna c. 1948. Painted sheet metal and wire by Alexander Calder. Courtesy the artist and Levy Gorvy.
Supplied

If you were interested in modern work and had deeper pockets there was a gorgeous selection of works by Alexander Calder (Levy Gorvy, Van de Weghe), Joan Mitchell (Timothy Taylor, Levy Gorvy) and Lucio Fontana (Luxembourg and Dayan).

Although I missed some of the sparkly "Asian bling" art from previous years when the fair was a little less grown-up, I thoroughly enjoyed being re-acquainted with a large variety of Asian contemporary art including Chen Wei (Leo Xu); Hong Soun (1335Mabini); Zhou Li (Kerlin); Do Ho Suh (STPI, Lehmann Maupin, Victoria Miro), Chiharu Shiota (Templon); Zhu Jinshi (Pearl Lam) and Sopheap Pich (Rollins).

Fabulous discoveries at the lower end (price-wise) included Kevin Harman (Ingleby); Daniel Steegmann Mangrane (Esther Schipper); Kitty Chou (Brown); and the moving solo presentation of Conrad Ventur (Rokeby), who created a photographic installation representing objects and the architecture of a deceased friend's New York apartment.

Some of the best painters working today were represented with delicious examples by John Currin (Sadie Coles, Gagosian), Luc Tuymans (Zwirner, Zeno X); George Condo (Skarstedt, Sprueth Magers) and Yoshitomo Nara (Blum & Poe).



Reality Through Material, 2015, Oil on canvas. Triptych by Zhu Jinshi. Courtesy the artist and Pearl Lam Galleries Supplied

And last but not least, you could slow down and enjoy your time in the solo booths of painters Sanya Kantarovsky (Stuart Shave Modern Art) and Matt Connors (Herald Street) full of A+ paintings of these highly desirable artists only available for museums, or promised as museum gifts (which we should all be doing anyway).

With all the sound and fury of the art market – all the parties, dinners and visual overload – we may be in need of reminding why we went there in the first place.

As British conceptual artist, Ryan Gander, put it during a panel discussion hosted by London's Lisson Gallery, "Art is something more than entertainment."

Listening to Gander talk about the necessity of taking risks and reminding us that imagination is everything, I was brought back to the core of what matters. The art fair may in many ways be the end point, but the process, the ideas, are what truly matter. It was these that brought us to the fair.



Untitled, 2016. Oil on canvas by Etel Adnan. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Lelong.

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