

HONG KONG

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“the largest
new cultural
district in
the world”

— NORMAN FOSTER

It makes perfect sense for Art Basel, the world’s most influential art fair operator, to have bought a controlling stake in the five-year-old Art HK art fair. It completes their global reach: a home base in Europe, a fair in the United States, and now Hong Kong, the gateway to Asia. Moving East is currently the global trend and fast-paced Hong Kong is the logical base from which to access the rapidly growing Asian markets. Since last year, several internationally established galleries have opened spacious branches in the city – amongst them, Gagosian, White Cube and Lehmann Maupin. At the time, it might have seemed like a gamble to have opened a fair in Hong Kong in 2008. The positives would have included Hong Kong, the city itself. Easy-going, safe, accessible by direct flights from most of the worlds’ capitals, it hosts an established infrastructure, Michelin-star-studded restaurants, luxurious hotels and

a dazzling cityscape designed by the world’s greatest architects. The city’s tax free status and its established financial services industry would have also counted in your favour. Finally, its strategic geographical positioning would have clinched the deal. The negatives would have included the fact that Hong Kong was not known as an art hub and that very few of the many commercial galleries specialized in contemporary art. Still very absent today is a museum-going culture and infrastructure, it is small for a major centre. (Hong Kong Art Museum, the University Museum of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Art Centre and two non-profit institutions, Para/Site and Asia Art Archive). The most talked about museums currently in Hong Kong are the ones in development: M+ and the Central Police Station Revitalisation Project. Due to open in 2014, M+ already made a mark at this year’s art fair weekend with

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Jan Smith, *Hong Kong Nights*, Image courtesy of Erdmann Contemporary.



a pop-up inflatable sculpture park. News that a major work by South African born artist, Candice Breitz, had been secured for their permanent collection was also made public.

The daily art fair newspaper carried plenty of stories about the developments surrounding the Central Police Station Revitalisation Project, a colonial British compound which includes a court and the city's oldest prison. (I couldn't help seeing the similarities to our Constitution Hill precinct in Johannesburg). As the name suggests, the Central Police Station development is conveniently located in Central where many of the current galleries are located. What is encouraging is that both these multi-billion dollar projects, (the latter in part supported by private entities and local government) are obvious attempts to strengthen the city's weak institutional scene. In media reports it becomes clear that M+'s greatest focus will be on their educational program, identified as the key in building and nurturing an art supportive and appreciative audience, and in particular a taste for international contemporary art. The big question is, can a city or country host an international art fair in the absence of an active institutional infrastructure? Can the one exist in the absence of the other, and ultimately, how will its growth be affected?

Judging from their visitors numbers, Art HK, under the directorship of Magnus Renfrew, proved to have been very successful. The inaugural event in 2008 attracted 19 000 visitors and by 2012 these numbers had grown to 67 000. According to Renfrew, Art HK's approach of being regionally inclusive (in terms of galleries and artists represented) will be maintained by the new owners. The Asian and Asian Pacific region referred to is very large

indeed, and stretches from New Zealand to Japan, including Australia, the Middle East, the Levant, Turkey, the Indian subcontinent, and of course Asia. Importantly, access to this region's collector base is one that the organisers of Art Basel would need to reach in order to sustain such an ambitious and large event.

Art Basel opened in Hong Kong with a huge splash. Most of the cab drivers knew that the Hong Kong International Exhibition Centre was hosting the art fair. Hotels were booked up, and the flights full of fair goers. My overall impression of the fair was that most of the international galleries had opted to feature known names with good market traction; in other words, safe choices. Each of the two halls, located on two different levels, was carefully planned with typical Swiss precision. The galleries were spread around the central *Encounters* sector (large-scale sculptures and installations curated by Yuko Hasegawa) and the *Insights* sectors (drawn from the Asia and Asia-Pacific region showcasing artists exclusively from this region) and the *Discoveries* sector (showcasing new generation international artists with work especially created for the fair). But the front line was held by the big guns, their works dotted around the entrance. The moment was not lost on my colleague, Chinese born and Berlin educated curator and photographer, Lian Zhiping. She remarked that it was all China, Japan and the professors from Germany. Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi, Olafur Eliasson, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer, Daniel Richter, Gerhard Richter, Yoshitomo Nara, Takashi Murakami and Hiroshi Sugimoto were all there.

Misa Shin Gallery's booth was dedicated to Shomei

“Alle meine Deutschen Professoren sind hier!”

Tomatsu; one of Japan's most influential post-war photographers. The thoughtful, clean and linear display of these historically superb and significant photographs were presented in a few cubicles (except in one where an entire series was presented on one wall) and was a fitting tribute to this great master of photography.

As one moved deeper into the halls the scene subtly changed, showing more of the regions' cultural diversity. It is here where I spotted South Korean Insook Kim's work, two photographs in particular attracting my attention: *Happy Hour* and *Saturday Night*. A former student of German photographer Thomas Ruff; Kim's works are immediately reminiscent of the Dusseldorf *Kunstakademie's* style: monumental in scale, and from a distance, seemingly reliant on the Dusseldorf trademark of repetition. Commenting on familiar issues of solitude and sexuality - albeit refreshingly original - these works occupy the complex terrain of voyeurism. Closer views were often limited due to crowds, but necessary to enjoy the full impact of these sophisticated and deeply layered photo-montages.

Text based works were plentiful, but none as arresting as Doug Aitken's offering, a LED lit light-box entitled, *100 Years*, dated 2013.

I really enjoyed the clever display of a series of painted bronze sculptures of recognisable garden weeds. These works were positioned in the cracks of the booth floor; looking as if they were growing out of the temporary booth wall. I liked it, it looked so real - and it fooled my colleague. But I knew that not even a weed can germinate a seed during the course of an art fair. Time is too short, and there is not enough air in the art bubble... Most of the local gallery owners agree that launching an art fair in 2008 has substantially changed the art scene in that city. It has been good for business. Its continued growth has attracted not only the world greatest collectors, but is also developing an art audience in the city. An art fair like Art Basel provides the opportunity to view visionary artworks from across the world; albeit compartmentalized, isolated-in-a-booth display of works



selected from a gallery stable. The next step is to develop an environment in which not only the commercial success of artworks are considered and discussed, but also its global relevance and critical traction. I have the impression that Hong Kong is hard at work to develop that next level of engagement; world-class exhibitions in world class museums.

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Photograph by Jan Smith, Featuring work by Marnie Weber. Courtesy Erdmann Contemporary.

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Photograph by Lian Zhiping, Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery Booth, Featuring work by Tony Matelli. Quote by Lian Zhiping, Chinese born/ Berlin based curator. Courtesy Erdmann Contemporary