

Next step for Asian Art: an interview with Mr. Tomio Koyama

Three months until the long awaited Art Basel Hong Kong, participating galleries are in the final stage of preparing for the show. Artists and pieces confirmed. Catalogues on their way. All ready to go.

It will be interesting, however, to look back at square one: what brought them to the show in the first place? What does it mean for the prestigious international Art Fair to set foot in Asia? Precious is happy to talk to Mr. Koyama, director of Tomio Koyama gallery, about these issues, and to hear their view on the Asian and global art market and trends.

A graduate from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music (present-day Tokyo University of the Arts) in the faculty of Aesthetics and Art History, Mr Koyama opened Tomio Koyama Gallery at Saga-cho, Koto-ku, a renovated warehouse in Kiyosumi district, Tokyo, in 1996. Following its success, the gallery now also has a branch in Kyoto, Shibuya Hikarie building in Tokyo and Gillman Barracks in Singapore. The gallery represents more than 50 contemporary artists across generations and nationalities, including Hiroshi Sugito, Mika Ninagawa and Tom Friedman. A frequent participant of art fairs, it is no stranger to Art Basel, which it has taken part in since 2001. This year, they are featuring a fine selection of works in Art Basel Hong Kong by Franz Ackermann, Atsushi Fukui, Nana Funo, Satoshi Hirose, Hideaki Kawashima, Makiko Kudo, Takuro Kuwata, Yoshitomo Nara, Mika Ninagawa, Diego Singh, Kishio Suga, Zhao Xuebing at booth 1D10 in Hall 1 Section 1D.

(Subhead) Look out for talent and you'll find diversity

So, to start with, what does the director think of the Art Basel?

“Art Basel is an art fair with a long history. It is a very important opportunity for galleries, artists, collectors, museum people around the world to gather together. It is not only a fair for sales but also one that provides information regarding arts at different levels. I think it is an art fair that shows good sense and has great authority,” said Mr. Koyama. Art Basel has long been acclaimed for being able to cater for different age and needs, thereby providing the greatest inspiration for all.

Perhaps the all-welcoming policy of Art Basel is what attracts Mr. Koyama in the first place. Tomio Koyama gallery represents a great variety of artists, from those from Japan, their geographical origin, as well as Europe, America and Asia. Artists vary greatly in their age, from 20's to 60's. Mr. Koyama himself has no preference for a particular type of artist. “What I personally value in an artist is that he/she has his/her own worldview, and the level of techniques which support an effective representation of such view in their works,” he said. As such, it is hard to imagine their participation in an art fair that does not allow diversity.

(Subhead) Hong Kong as the new melting pot of capital and art work force

In addition to being well organized, Art Basel also has a history of making bold moves in the art world. Extending their reach to Hong Kong is one of them. Being a recurrent participant in ART HK, Mr. Koyama shared his observations of the Asian city.

“Hong Kong is a place where the capital and promising employment force gather. Auctions, art fairs and art museums are actively taking place or under construction. It is interesting that the development of art occurs in almost a reverse order on the timeline when compared to the West.

And truth be told, HK is the biggest market in the East (with a lot of potentials),” he said. That said, the gallery has no plans to set up a branch in Hong Kong at the moment.

Apart from the city’s existing strength, the expansion of the art market in Asia may also be a reason for the art fair to set foot in the continent. According to Mr. Koyama, Asian buyers start collecting art from their own countries, in hope of searching for their identity. “People start turning from economy to culture.”

(Subhead) Western Europe still in control of art market

That said, Mr. Koyama does not think that Asian buyers truly control the art market at this stage. “Asian art that have been recognized by Western European markets generally sell for a good price in Asia as well. It is still Western European countries that determine the value of art works in general. Yet, I do think that more Western European countries will start valuing and dealing Asian art in the future.”

When asked how Art Basel Hong Kong differs from its Basel and Miami counterparts, Mr. Koyama said, “It is wonderful how artworks/ artists from both the West and the East are represented in the show with their own distinctive beauty and values. This way, the show truly embraces diversity and provides information from both sides of the culture.

In Basel and Miami, the distinction between the East and the West is not as strong. It is more like a market for artworks which show similar values.”

Well, Western Art has come a long way until the contemporary era, and contemporary art has yet to go a long way to credit distinctive features of art from different cultures. From what our renowned interviewee has observed, perhaps Art Basel Hong Kong is a good testing stone of the new chemistry when East meets West.