

HD Rising in the East

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Art Basel **Hong Kong** had not even opened to the public by the time that Anastasia Klose's T-shirts branded with the slogan "Art | Blasé" **sold** out. She says the idea is "an artwork born of desperation", from a poverty-stricken artist struggling to make ends meet.

The Australian had the last laugh, however, when her One Stop Knock-Off Shop, a tongue-in-cheek take at Art Basel **Hong Kong** on the commercialisation of art and the flourishing fake designer goods industry in **China**, made a tidy profit thanks to T-shirts bearing smart slogans such as "I-Hauser - because you're Wirth it".

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As Klose, who's exhibiting with Tolarno Galleries from Melbourne, says: "Ironically, it is the first time I have been able to survive as an artist from my work.

"It is about the **commercial** aspect of art and, paradoxically, is a way for me to make a living. I am not making a moral point. I am an opportunist."

It's a quality that she shares with the throngs who fill the fair, eager to discover emerging artists from around the globe. Yet if there is one thing the 245 galleries, dozens of international museum curators and 65,000 visitors traipsing through the multitude of halls at Art Basel HK are not, it's blasé.

This is the new world as far as they are concerned - and everyone is hungry for a slice of the financial action.

Within a decade, Asia will eclipse both the US and Europe in terms of the number of people worth at least US\$30 **million** (Dh110m) and the value of their collective coffers, according to market research.

And even as **China** experienced a slowdown in economic growth last year, **Hong Kong** boomed as wealthy **Chinese** magnates moved their assets. Last year, as the report from Wealth-X states, there were 3,180 **millionaires** in the city state, worth a total of \$530 **billion**.

Together with Singapore, **Hong Kong** has become a magnet for the wealthy on the continent but, unlike mainland **China** or its fellow city state, it doesn't suffer from restrictive media censorship or crippling taxes.

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It is these factors that attracted one of the world's most significant art fairs to take note of a city with a population of seven **million** and transform it into an art powerhouse, drawing collectors and gallerists from around the world.

The fair had already been operating since 2008 in a more modest form as Art HK. Then, three years ago, the juggernaut that is Art Basel took over and turned it into a magnet for the art world.

MCH **Group**, which owns Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach, bought a 60 per cent majority **stake** in Asian Art Fairs Limited, which ran Art HK, with an option to **buy** the remaining 40 per cent this year.

It meant Art Basel had conquered three continents, with important centres in Europe, the US and Asia.

In short, the reach of Art Basel is now global, for its latest **acquisition** is not simply about **Hong Kong**. It sits, both geographically and metaphorically, at the heart of the Asia-Pacific region, which produces more than half the galleries on show.

The phrase "gateway between the East and West" is much overused but in truth, **Hong Kong** has long been an anomaly that bridges both worlds.

After centuries of being fought over by the British and the **Chinese**, the strategic spot was returned to **China** in 1997 as a Special Administrative Region after more than 150 years of British rule.

Hong Kong's complex history has left its legacy, with both artists and gallerists from across the region finding their own voice - and fathoming their place in the international art market.

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The soulless hangar of **Hong Kong** Convention and Exhibition Centre belies the quality of art within. Spanning two floors, the array of artwork on show from 39 countries ranges from Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami and Edward Ruscha to such contemporary **Chinese** artists as Zhang Xiaogang and Liu Wei.

If the artwork on display is of the highest quality, so is the line-up of galleries. All the big hitters from the western world are here - Gagosian, Pace, Marlborough, White Cube, Lisson, Ben Brown Fine Arts and Galerie Perrotin, joining Asian stalwarts such as Pearl Lam Galleries, whose artist Feng Mengbo has been added to the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi collection, and Hanart TZ, a regular at Abu Dhabi Art.

Indeed, many of the galleries have set up base in **Hong Kong**. The inaugural show from the newly opened Pace featured a series of new **oil** on paper works from Xiaogang, while Axel Vervoordt opened in the same building in the heart of the city's financial district with works by Ei Anatsui. A few doors away, the Gagosian's Giacometti exhibition in the striking, neoclassical Pedder Building rubbed shoulders with Lehmann Maupin, Hanart TZ, Simon Lee and Ben Brown Fine Arts.

And these are just the artworks on the fringes of the fair, which draws a stellar gathering of artists, collectors and gallerists, from Ei Anatsui, Murakami, Wim Delvoye and Oscar Murillo to White Cube's Jay Jopling and curators from the Guggenheim in New York, the Louvre in Paris, London's Tate Modern and Beijing's Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA).

More than 500 galleries applied to exhibit and less than half have made the cut as Art Basel HK, still only in its second year, finds its stride.

Magnus Renfrew, the British-born fair director, recalls having to justify launching a fair in Asia in its early days, a question he says "seems ridiculous now".

It was only when **China** weathered the recession better than most other economies that it became apparent to financiers and gallerists that they would have to "diversify their markets because they could no longer solely rely on Europe and the United States".

Trying to ascertain what would sell, both from the point of view of collectors and artists, was another matter.

"One of the things I have heard repeatedly from collectors this year is that they have been very impressed with the quality of the **Chinese** material," he says.

"When we first started out as Art HK, people were very much trying to second-guess the market and trying to bring things they thought appealed to Asian tastes. That is happening much less now.

"There is a greater understanding from the western galleries about the landscape that they are in. The reality is the collectors do not want to be pandered to. They want to see the best material."

It is impossible to define tastes from the region, he adds.

"When you start collecting, you tend to **buy** work that is quite conservative in nature and usually from your own country.

"As time goes on and tastes evolve and change, often people want to be challenged more and move more towards collecting contemporary art. Once you've started buying contemporary art from your own country, it is not such a big deal to start buying contemporary art from anywhere else in the world.

"That is what we are seeing in **China**. Those collectors who were early to start collecting **Chinese** contemporary art are now collecting work from artists from all over the world."

Artists from the region, who less than a decade ago were pandering to what they thought would be a market for Asian or **Chinese** contemporary art, have become increasingly sophisticated under the umbrella of a flourishing gallery culture, both home-grown and nurtured by international imports.

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It is an attractive enough prospect to draw two Dubai-based galleries, Isabelle van den Eynde and XVA, while Athr Gallery from Saudi Arabia is testing the Asian market for the first time with Ahmed Mater's Disarm series, the latest instalment of his Desert of Pharan project examining development and increasing construction in Mecca.

This is new territory for the Saudi gallery, firmly established in the Middle East but with little gauge on whether Mater's singular vision will find an audience among those unfamiliar with his work or his theme.

Yet he sells an edition of each of his four works on display, three photographic and a set of light boxes. They are snapped up by two collectors known to the gallery and a new **Hong Kong**-based European collector.

The booth is inundated by visitors and tour groups fascinated by a part of the world they know little of.

"We have a lot of exposure in Europe and the Middle East," says the gallery's development manager Adnan Manjal. "In Dubai and Abu Dhabi, we are kings. Everyone knows us and we almost always sell out. Here we are the newbies where no one knows us.

"The US and the Far East are the next locations. We were at the Armory Show in New York in March and cannot wait to go back.

"Our work is fresh, edgy and very different to what these audiences usually see. They find Saudi Arabia exotic and have a very different understanding of it but seeing the art in front of them makes a big difference from reading about it."

Yet if audiences outside the Middle East are still largely unfamiliar with art from the region, it seems to be resonating with galleries and institutions.

Two of Mater's works have each been bought by the Smithsonian in the US and the Centre Pompidou in Paris while the UCCA acquired one after Art Dubai and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo exhibited his work alongside that of a fellow Saudi artist, Nasser Al Salem.

Meanwhile Cotton Rope No 7 by the veteran Emirati artist Hassan Sharif, brought by Isabelle van den Eynde, was one of the first acquisitions for **Hong Kong**'s new contemporary art museum **M+**, set to open in 2017. It will sit alongside Antony Gormley's Asian Field, created as part of a community collaborative project involving 350 people from Xiangshan in southern **China** and made up of 210,000 clay sculptures.

Doryn Chong, the chief curator from the new museum, says: "Works chosen by four generations of artists from **Hong Kong**, Asia, the UAE and the US reflect the global vision of **M+**."

Barrak Alzaid, the director of Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, adds: "It has been interesting to talk about Hassan here. People are very interested to learn and they are not limited to buying art from this region."

Mona Hauser of XVA Gallery took a gamble last year by bringing the Pakistani artist Imran Channa, who failed to sell, so this year she banks on her tried and tested artists Halim Al Karim and Faiza Butt. "It is about taking our artists outside our gallery space and discovering new frontiers," she says.

"This is an enormous market. It is like the Olympics, attracting everyone from the entire world and [Art Basel] does it right."

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At this crossroads between East and West, cross-cultural collecting is a constant preoccupation for those at the fair. While the lure of tapping into Asia's riches is clear, what will persuade the continent's wealthy to invest in art from other countries?

Lu Xun, a 30-year-old Cambridge University graduate, is archetypal of the new generation of wealthy **Chinese**; well-travelled intellectuals with a **firm** grasp on contemporary art beyond the country's boundaries. Together with his father Lu Jun, he has just opened the \$164m Sifang Art Museum in Nanjing, a stunning minimalist complex designed by the New York architect Steven Holl and featuring a **hotel**, conference facilities and gardens.

In a sign of the times, he had to override his father in deciding on the collection. A devotee of traditional ink paintings, Jun had little understanding of contemporary art. "A lot of us are educated in the West but we are very **Chinese** deep inside," says Xun. "I was probably the first **Chinese** [person] to collect western contemporary art five years ago but now you see much younger people who have started collecting western art at the same time as **Chinese** contemporary art."

Significantly, he says, while his focus on **Chinese** art is on emerging artists, his western interests tend to be "blue chip" artists: "It is proximity. Because I live in **China**, I will be the first to find out about emerging artists. Most of the time I find out about western artists at a later stage."

Galerie Gmurzynska must surely be the epitome of an international gallery. The Zurich-based gallery chose to devote its entire booth to paintings and sculptures by the Colombian artist Fernando Botero, whose signature voluptuous figures might seem, on the surface, to have little connection with Asia. "Voluminous people represent wealth and happiness in Asia," says the gallery's co-owner Mathias Rastorfer.

He originally exhibited in the first three years of Abu Dhabi Art but felt Art Basel **Hong Kong** "catered to a much larger market".

For many of the galleries present, however, it is not a question of doing one over the other. A number choose to attend at least one fair in Asia as well as the Middle East.

Kishore Singh, head of exhibitions at Delhi Art Gallery, which also exhibits at Art Dubai and in Singapore, London and Dhaka, says the **Hong Kong** fair is a different proposition. "We need to create new markets as part of our outreach," he says. "The **Chinese** market has been looking at works other than **Chinese** for a few years now and collecting very aggressively. This year we have had inquiries from collectors other than Indians, which is always interesting."

He is not alone in making comparisons. A team from Art Dubai is present in **Hong Kong** while officials from Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority are out in force at the fair. It seems the world is watching and waiting to see what Asia does next, not least because **China** is planning to open another 1,000 museums in the next five years while its projection of establishing 3,500 museums by 2015 is already three years ahead of target. But the question remains: what will fill them? "Museum collections are memory banks of modern life," says Philip Tinari, the director of the UCCA in Beijing. As museums are a source of national pride, leaving the "stewardship of objects deemed of cultural significance" to chance is not an option.

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There are many parallels between the burgeoning art scenes in the Middle and Far East: while both are distinctive in their own right and building extensive museum collections at home, in the past they have each been accused of producing artwork that could be seen as derivative of western art. Both are now finding their own style.

There can be few more poetic examples of art being a mutual language overcoming barriers of geography and language than the bond Mater has forged with the **Chinese** artist and activist Ai Weiwei. The pair were introduced by Chris Dercon, the director of Tate Modern, after he saw similarities in the angst expressed in their work during a visit to Saudi Arabia last year.

While the two artists have never met in person, they have had a number of conversations on Skype, the first of which left a lasting impact on Mater. Holding up his iPad, Ai Weiwei swung it around to show his studio: "It was beautiful - like he was taking my hand and giving me a feeling of flying. Then he told me art was about establishing confidence and conflict and to just believe in your instincts," says Mater.

"It was a very important meeting. He said art is not about compromise. He is very passionate and supportive.

"There is an important connection between the Saudi art scene and what Ai Weiwei did in his three books [Black, White and Gray].

"The role of the artist is to reflect reality and discover a new way. I have a mission ... to create a kind of debate with intellectuals, artists and writers. Artists should be engaged, not just observe."

Mater says he is perturbed by how the Middle Eastern market presents its own artists to the world by "branding" them and thrusting them upon an international stage before they have had time to grow.

The artist drew up a manifesto of his concerns, which were published in the magazine ArtAsiaPacific last year.

In it, he rails against the "pressures of the growing Middle Eastern art market, with its desires to develop the art scene for **commercial** reasons, treating our practices as a means to a resulting commodity, our visual languages and aesthetics being transformed into identifiable and inflexible brands.

"International exposure, interest and fascination in Saudi contemporary art has led to imported and commercially orientated systems that have started to dissolve and weaken the power of the people's voice, the artist's voice."

Are Middle Eastern artists being pushed before they are ready to jump?

Perhaps a lesson can be drawn from the renegade **Chinese** artists behind the 1999 show Post-Sense Sensibility, which shocked the world with its use of animal carcasses and human body parts.

Without any exposure to a gallery culture and fed only snippets of information about exhibitions around the world - including Young British Artists like Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst - the exhibition, which opened in a cramped basement and was shut down within hours, aimed to articulate seismic political and cultural changes for a generation still finding its own voice.

Fifteen years on, those artists have been reunited in **Hong Kong** for a show called Aftermath at the private members' club Duddell's. Tinari, who curated the exhibition, says: "One of the most interesting dynamics is that this generation does not feel the need for foreign approval in the way the one before did. There are legitimate galleries and institutions which makes it even more urgent to build collections."

Gene Sherman, the executive director of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in Sydney, a philanthropic forum for contemporary art from Australia, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East, puts it even more succinctly: "Good art reflects something of the inner world of the creator, is part of its culture and transcends its culture ... That is when a work becomes important."

Tahira Yaqoob is a regular contributor to The Review.

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