

Hong Kong gets down to business

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HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR

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The emergence of powerful new art 'hubs' in Asia threatens to relegate Australia to a provincial status, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Hong Kong has always understood money but not art. Unlike other business capitals, this hyperactive island's passion for profit has never been translated into a desire for cultural distinction. That held true until art and money became so closely intertwined that the prices paid for contemporary works became more important than the content. When this transcendental moment arrived, it was obvious that **Hong Kong** had to have an art fair.

One may not care for the supremely cynical works of Damien Hirst but there is no denying the beauty of his marketing strategies or the distinction of his prices. So when London's White Cube gallery sold Hirst's *The Inescapable Truth* (2005) for #1.75 million (\$3.08 million) on the first day of this year's fair to the Chinese collector Thomas Shao, the tone was set.

Hirst's sculpture - for want of a better word - is a glass tank of formaldehyde containing a dove suspended in flight above a human skull. The symbolism and the title may not be subtle but subtlety is hardly a requirement for collectors who view these works as supreme status symbols. For Thomas Shao, the founder of a Chinese publishing company called Modern Media, the publicity is part of the attraction. During the fair, Shao bought at least eight works and hosted one of the week's most glamorous parties on behalf of his new bilingual art magazine, Leap.

This is the third year of Art HK and it is being hailed by many as a coming of age. One dissenter is Magnus Renfrew, the fair's director, who says he is never quite satisfied and sees the event as a work in progress. He is right to be cautious, having signed Lehman Brothers as major sponsors in 2008 only to see the firm go down the gurgler before the 2009 fair began. Last year's fair also had to battle the global financial crisis and an outbreak of swine flu. As a result, many dealers went to **Hong Kong** with a fatalistic attitude and departed for home out of pocket but remarkably cheerful.

This year, with Deutsche Bank committed for five years of sponsorship and the art market starting to pump oxygen again, Art HK took on a more businesslike atmosphere. One tends to judge art fairs by the numbers of galleries that get left out, and this time there were more than 300 applicants for 155 spots.

One of the best features of the selection was the diversity of participating galleries, from the big names such as Pace, Castelli, Lisson and Gagosian to newcomers such as Pilar Corrias of London, which had a prizewinning, sell-out show of paintings by Shahzia Sikander, a young Pakistani artist who was exhibited at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006.

As an emerging market, **Hong Kong** has a fondness for recognisable names, and there were numerous works on display by artists such as Picasso, Giacometti, Hirst, Anish Kapoor, Yoshitomo Nara and most of the stars of the Chinese art boom, including Zhang Xiaogang, Zhang Huan, Yan Pei Ming and Yue Minjun.

Just as striking was the geographic spread of participants, including galleries from Istanbul, Budapest, Helsinki, Karachi, Ho Chi Min City, Athens and Beirut, alongside the usual spread of dealers from the major European centres, the US and north Asia. For Renfrew, this diversity is seminal to the fair's identity. It is one of the factors that distinguishes Art HK from the bigger international art fairs, notably Basel, now in its 41st year. Art Basel features more than 300 exhibitors chosen from 1100 applicants, with a preponderance of European and American galleries. Money, prestige and connections play a dominant role in deciding who gets selected, with long-term loyalty being no guarantee of acceptance, as Roslyn Oxley found when she was unexpectedly rejected from this year's events.

Instead, Roslyn Oxley⁹ headed the list of nine Australian galleries taking part in Art HK. She was accompanied by BreenSpace, Conny Dietzschold, GRANTPIRRIE, Barry Keldoulis, Mori Gallery, and Sullivan+Strumpf. For the first time Melbourne had a presence, in the form of Sutton Gallery and Tolarno Galleries. Flying the flag for New Zealand was Auckland's Starkwhite, which has become the most dedicated art fair participant of any gallery from this part of the world.

While the Oxleys did well with Tracey Moffatt, the most successful local dealer may have been Connie Dietzschold, who secured strong sales and commissions. GRANTPIRRIE was also pleased with its results, having included smaller works and a greater variety than last year, while Sullivan+Strumpf made an excellent **Hong Kong** debut. Other galleries had mixed success but nobody seemed to be complaining. Veterans of many fairs commented on the professionalism of Art HK, which left them feeling like valued clients rather than nervous petitioners.

The Australian presence was not confined to the galleries. One of the supplementary events was a Caravaggesque installation called *The Creek, 1977*, by the film director Baz Luhrmann and the painter Vincent Fantauzzo, working with a local gallery, 10 Chancery Lane. This was a highly theatrical scene of disaster, set in a darkened room, with two rows of small pictures illuminated by tiny lights. Death and religiosity were in abundant supply but not without a faint air of pastiche.

Fantauzzo provided one of the great stories of Art HK, as he spent the entire fair working with children on a graffiti mural on behalf of the Sovereign Foundation. The degree of difficulty was increased by the fact that he had broken his collarbone the previous week.

Elsewhere in **Hong Kong**, last year's Archibald Prize winner, Guy Maestri, was having a sell-out show with Cat Street Gallery. Although his work was unfamiliar to most buyers, this did not seem to hamper their enthusiasm. This open-minded approach was also in evidence at the fair, where buyers seemed far more interested in individual works than in the nationality of artists. Such attitudes reaffirm the increasing globalisation of contemporary art in an era

when many leading artists and dealers have bases in two or three continents.

For Australia, this may be a positive development, breaking down those barriers that have often relegated this nation to the status of a footnote in world art. **Hong Kong**, and Asia in general, provide an environment where Australians command greater attention and feel more at home. By one estimate, there were at least 160 Australians wandering around Art HK, not counting exhibitors. This included a number of prominent collectors.

While the tyranny of distance may be lessening, the international art market is still not a level playing field. This was demonstrated by the story of an Australian collector who tried to purchase a work by a leading Chinese artist only to be knocked back because the dealer didn't want the piece to go to Australia. No strictures would apply if the collector were based in Beijing, Shanghai or **Hong Kong**, because these cities are now seen as the breeding ground for a new generation of ultra-rich clients who are gradually taking over from their European and American counterparts. Add in the new money from Russia, India and the Gulf states, and this equates to a considerable realignment of priorities for the dealers and auction houses. Both Gagosian and Pace, for instance, have announced they will open branches in **Hong Kong**, joining Ben Brown and others. There is also an explosion of homegrown galleries, led by the upmarket Osage, which is more like a Museum of Contemporary Art than a place for tawdry commerce.

The resurgent confidence of the local market was also on display last Saturday evening at a crowded Christies auction of Asian contemporary art that saw a 100 per cent clearance rate and sales of \$HK303.4 million (\$46.7 million), up more than 60 per cent on the equivalent auction 12 months ago. Christies no longer holds auctions in Australia, as it is simply not profitable enough.

All of this must be ringing alarm bells for the organisers of the Melbourne Art Fair, which will be held from August 4-8. In **Hong Kong**, dealers and collectors can enjoy a truly international fair in a country with no import duties. In comparison, Melbourne seems distant and expensive, with an uncertain market. Most Australian collectors of international art tend to do their buying overseas, so there is little incentive for international galleries to take part. Perhaps geography is destiny, after all. While collectors and dealers may care less and less about an artist's nationality, it seems that Australia's leading art fest is destined to remain a provincial affair. From a standing start, **Hong Kong** is rapidly becoming one of the world's art "hubs", but with all possible energy and goodwill, Australia is a very long way from having a hub of its own.

John McDonald was a guest of the **Hong Kong** International Art Fair