

MARKET FORCES

Now an undeniable global art hub, Hong Kong's rapid, if somewhat bumpy, ascendancy is poised to continue. But challenges remain for the gallerists, collectors and curators who seek to establish the city as the region's undisputed art capital.

Catherine Shaw reports





Art HK hits: Ramin Haerizadeh's *Piss be upon him*, 2011, courtesy of Galerie Nathalie Obadia, above; *Summer 7*, by Yunhee Min, 2013, courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, facing page

If there was ever any doubt about China's stratospheric rise or indeed its current standing in the highest echelons of the art market, all one needs to do is look back 20 years, when its art scene was little more than an urban underground, punctuated by a few benign galleries selling Party-sanctioned kitsch. Today, though, it is the second largest in the world, according to art economist Clare McAndrew, who valued international art sales through dealers and auction houses in 2013 at \$65.7bn, fuelled not only by speculation from investors (though of course some of that exists), but by a rising demand, both local and international, for works created by a growing contingent of Chinese artists with worldwide reputations.

There has been much jostling in recent years to access that market, and Hong Kong took an early lead in establishing itself as the gateway, transforming itself from a

provincial cultural outback to the Asian base of choice for leading contemporary art galleries such as London's White Cube and Parisian mainstay Galerie Perrotin – and accomplished it all in just ten years. These days, it's home to a noteworthy roster of auction houses and major galleries, some of which are homegrown, that caters to buyers curious for a foray into Chinese art, as well as some Chinese buyers looking for Western acquisitions – all grateful for the city's relatively free trade, low taxes and robust legal system.

The transition has come in fits and starts, cresting in a furiously paced 2012 when five world-class galleries opened in the city, bringing a previously unseen range of creative works, from Japanese Manga wizard Takashi Murakami to American neo-pop artist KAWS and British sculptor Antony Gormley. "I originally left Hong Kong partly because there was no real audience for ▶



"ART HK HAS PUT THE CITY AT THE VERY HEART OF THE INTERNATIONAL ART WORLD"



Above: How the soon-to-be-opened M+ will look inside and on the Hong Kong skyline; below: gallerist Pearl Lam in front of *The River Full in Red*, 2006, by Zhu Jinshi

Facing page: Yinka Shonibare's *Dreaming Rich* at Lam's gallery



contemporary art," says Shanghai-based gallerist Pearl Lam, who in 2012 opened her eponymous gallery in the Pedder Building, a historic neoclassical edifice in Central, the city's most exclusive shopping district. "I would put on exhibitions and hardly anyone would come! That has definitely changed now thanks largely to the art fair," says Lam, referring to the city's first international contemporary art fair, Art HK.

The inaugural edition, held in 2008, drew some 19,000 visitors to 100 galleries and was quickly snapped up in 2013 by Art Basel, becoming the third global location for the powerhouse, after its Swiss base and Miami. This year's mega-event will showcase 245 participating galleries and is likely to attract more than 60,000 attendees from across the globe. "[It] has put the city at the very heart of the international art world," says Magnus Renfrew, Art Basel's Asia director. "It not only created a meeting place for the pan-Asian and global art world, but also increased the international profile of Hong Kong as a vibrant cultural scene and is driving traffic to its galleries and local institutions."

This has also been reflected in Hong Kong's art auction houses, which are reporting phenomenal results. At the end of last year, Sotheby's marked 40 years in Asia with a five-day auction and record sales totaling \$538m, following it up with a \$438m auction series this past spring. Christie's – which draws 72% of its Hong Kong auction sales from mainland clients – reported similarly spectacular results, with sales of Chinese paintings growing from \$84.9m in 2012 to \$130.9m in 2013. And earlier this year in April, sales at the inaugural Asia+ event at Christie's Hong Kong showroom reached \$3.7m, selling 88% of the works, most of which were from mid-level artists, a sign of some sophistication among collectors.

The appearance of international galleries and auctions are certainly a buoyant indicator, but experts like Philip Tinari, director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing and curator of this year's Armory Show's Focus programme on China, emphasises that

this sophistication needs time to develop into a real culture of understanding and collecting art. "Cities like New York have evolved a culture of investing in art by individuals and at a corporate level, which is why an art fair like The Armory is so successful at generating significant sales as well as drawing large crowds," he says. "Viewing and collecting art is what people in New York do."

For Alan Lo, who co-founded Duddell's, an influential art hub that opened last year offering dining, cocktails and curated art events in an Ilse Crawford-designed space, the art market in Hong Kong "could still go either way. We've seen an elevated level of interest in art in terms of the rise of a new generation of collectors, and public awareness has come a long way in a short time, but we still don't have an international standard institution, which means you can only do things at a local piecemeal level. The big bang will be when Hong Kong's new visual arts museum M+ opens in 2017."

The aforementioned big bang is a cultural centre that will be dedicated to 20th- and 21st-century art, design and architecture, with a striking building designed by Herzog & de Meuron, which is part of the West Kowloon Cultural District currently under construction on a prime Hong Kong waterfront site. The centre's executive director, Lars Nittve, agrees that the city has some way to go to become a true art capital. "In terms of communication and logistics we are in a good position, so that makes us more likely to be an art capital, but we are definitely not there yet."

Nittve is focused instead on raising local awareness of art through a series of creative preopening events. The most recent, NEONSIGNS.HK, is an online exhibition that invites the public to post images and stories of their favourite neon signs. The museum has already acquired several notable "at risk" Hong Kong neon signs as a record of the unique urban landscape. "We have been conscious to present different projects that haven't been seen in Hong Kong. It prepares the wider audience for what is coming," explains Nittve. ▶



Faces of the Hong Kong art scene, clockwise from left: the dissident artist Ai Weiwei; Alan Lo, curator at Duddell's; Mimi Brown, founder of Spring Workshop; and Lars Nittve, executive director of M+



The project also offers an opportunity for local artists, many of whom point to the city's infamous sky-high rents and lack of accessible exhibition spaces as key obstacles. One of Hong Kong's best-known contemporary art collectors, Alan Lau, agrees. "There is curiosity about local artists but it doesn't always translate into support. There aren't enough places to show their work and space is so expensive." He continues: "When you have big names like Murakami and the Chapman Brothers, local artists tend to get crowded out." The problem is exacerbated, he observes, by the tendency for local artists to create a very different style of art to that which has been produced in China.

"I'm always asked who are the best artists to follow in Hong Kong, but whether we like it or not, interest is fuelled by how people see the art world and how they define work as worthy."

Hong Kong graphic designer and photographer anothermountainman (aka Stanley Wong) is one artist who has successfully built an international reputation. He first achieved recognition with his *red-white-blue* series which he presented at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, while his *Lanwei* series of photographs depicting abandoned construction projects across Asia has already been collected by M+. Wong recalls a few years ago attending the launch of

a book on Chinese contemporary art by a German publisher. "Someone asked whether there were any Hong Kong artists featured in the book, and the answer was no. Hong Kong artists' work does not always match the vision of curators who have more of a political and social agenda. My own personal creative work has always been about sending a social message, but until recently most local artists' work has been more about self expression."

Local artists shouldn't rely on M+ alone, suggests Nadim Abbas, another Hong Kong-based artist who has achieved international acclaim, most recently for his works exhibited at this year's Armory Show and a post-apocalyptic bunker-like



Images from anothermountainman's pictorial series of abandoned construction projects, Lanwei 50/Wonderland 01 in Beijing, left, and Lanwei 13/Guangzhou

bar for Art Basel HK. "M+ is a very specific entity and has a very specific function. The real problem at present is that there are very few outlets for artists to show their works. A lot of young artists I talk to are weary of trying to get themselves out there and lose heart quickly."

Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who curated an exhibition of Hong Kong artists at Duddell's in late 2013, is more inclined to place the blame on a broader social level. "Art is about challenge, and when there is no challenge there is no art. The city has so many young people who are well educated and they love art, but art is meaningless unless it questions the world about it. Contemporary art is a practice that needs a much broader attention from society, not just from an economic side."

Happily, it appears that things are changing. Spring Workshop, a nonprofit art space in the post-industrial Wong Chuk Hang neighbourhood, is a bright light on the horizon with its cross-disciplinary programme of residencies, exhibitions and presentations that take place in a 1,350sq m converted warehouse. The area is fast

developing a reputation as an up-and-coming creative district attracting galleries like Blindspot Annex, Gallery EXIT and 3812 Contemporary Art Projects, which emphasise local creatives.

Spring's efforts have included a wide range of projects, including a two-day series of film screenings and artist talks led by the creative duo behind MAP Office and a semi-permanent *Industrial Forest* installation by architects Eric Schuldenfrei and Marisa Yiu of hundreds of aluminium filaments on the workshop's elevated highway-side terrace. Spring founder Mimi Brown says she is keen to use projects such as these to highlight the unique confluence of cultures in Hong Kong. "Works like the *Industrial Forest* are an invitation to wonder...and enjoy...and then perhaps to engage more deeply with the larger ideas that art puts forward."

"Does it really matter if Hong Kong is not the art capital of Asia?" muses MAP Office co-founder Valérie Portefaix. "We could be the Miami to New York and still play a role, but we can't be anything if we don't engage the community in art." ◀



ARTFUL LODGINGS

It's not just Hong Kongers who are keen to learn more about their art and culture: visitors are seeking out experiences of the city's growing number of creative offerings. The **Peninsula Hong Kong**, now in its 85th year, has long run a programme offering cultural activities, including the six-hour Art Dialogue with Hong Kong. Guests are chauffeur-driven to artists working in situ, providing unique insight to some of the city's most lively local studios, as well as to galleries like Spring Workshop and the creative community enclave of Fo Tan, an art district in the New Territories. hongkong.peninsula.com

