

# Art Basel Hong Kong: Ever Growing Asian Art Market



Author Junko Iwabuchi

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## Beginnings in Basel

With the growth of the global economy over the years, there seems to have been a surge of art fairs popping up all over the world and Art Basel (<https://www.artbasel.com/>) is known to be one of the top brands in this field. Art Basel was founded in Basel, Switzerland, in 1970 by local gallerists Ernst Beyeler, Trudl Bruckner and Balz Hilt. Thanks to its convenient location in Europe and the pleasant time of year when it takes place in June, the art fair has been a success from the beginning. More than 16,000 visitors attended the inaugural show to see the works of 90 galleries from 10 countries, and within five years the number of exhibitors surpassed 300 from 21 countries and visitors grew to 37,000.

In December 2002, Art Basel Miami Beach was started with the purpose of attracting wealthy European art collectors and this was also an instant success. In 2015, 267 leading galleries from 32 countries participated in the Miami Beach show and 77,000 visitors came to see the art works during a five-day period. Both in Basel and in Miami, modern masters such as Kandinsky, Picasso, and Chagall are exhibited and sold along with typically popular contemporary American artists, such as Jeff Koons and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Art Basel is a popular place for art connoisseurs of every level to congregate, but has also become a significant point of convergence for private collectors, museum directors, curators and trustees.

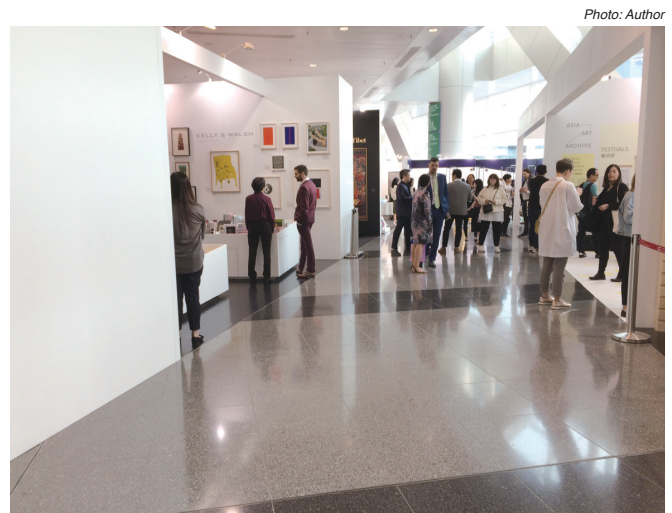
## Crazy Rich Asians at Art Basel Hong Kong

With growing investor interest in Hong Kong and neighboring countries in Asia, the managing company for Art Basel, MCH ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MCH\\_Group](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MCH_Group)), bought an existing art fair in 2013 to establish Art Basel Hong Kong (<https://www.artbasel.com/hong-kong>). In 2015, 239 galleries from 35 countries and territories participated in Hong Kong Art Basel and more than 70,000 visitors enjoyed the show. This year, in 2019, 242 galleries were represented at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from 36 countries and territories across Asia, Europe, North and South America, the Middle East and Africa. According to the press release, over half the galleries were from Asia and as many as 25 were from Hong Kong itself. The VIP preview for special guests – mainly collectors, museum directors, curators, trustees and the media – was held on March 27 and 28, and the fair was open to the general public from March 29 through 31. I've had the privilege of attending as a VIP for Basel, Switzerland and Miami Beach at various times in the past, and did so this time as well at the seventh edition of Art Basel Hong Kong.

I was quite stunned by the traffic jams while taking a cab to the venue. In fact, the cab driver complained that he didn't want to get near the place given his experience last year. To my amazement, it was evident that Art Basel Hong Kong had grown into the talk of the



Entrance to the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre on the 1st day of VIP preview



Exhibition booths of art institutions and art publishers



Photo: Author

Museum curators from abroad visiting Osage Gallery to see an AR installation by Japanese artist, Masaki Fujibata

\*The boy on the ground can be seen only through smart phone application.

town. When my friends and I first arrived at the exhibition site, we noticed there were several camera crews and broadcasters conducting interviews with Asian movie stars. We had no idea who these people were, but still we could tell their celebrity status from the way they were treated and their extravagant clothes. It very much reminded me of the landing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on the day of The Costume Institute Gala. And the floors filled with expensive art works were packed with dealers committed to selling what they brought and collectors determined to find the best buy. It was the first couple of hours of the first day of the VIP preview, but collectors were already bidding for the pieces they liked and the air was tight as they talked about prices.

There were various new pieces done by younger contemporary Asian artists especially for this occasion, but also I recognized museum-class paintings and drawings by turn-of-the-century Viennese master Egon Schiele in a large group. It is quite rare to see a Schiele that is actually for sale and in such a manner. One could also recognize works by Picasso, Giacometti and various others from the textbook of your high school days. It is such an exciting experience just walking through these booths, watching what collectors are buying and drinking champagne as you stop to rest. I also ran into an old friend, Richard Armstrong, director of the Guggenheim Museum and CEO of the Guggenheim Foundation from New York, while wandering among the art works. He jokingly said to me from some distance, "Shopping?" I had last bumped into him as I was getting off a tram in Basel a few years ago and now here he



Photo: Kentaro Hirano

Collaboration between BMW and Alexander Calder

was again in Hong Kong at Art Basel. You could tell that Art Basel is one destination where important figures in the art industry congregate every year.

### Are Japanese Businessmen Now Interested in Art?

I had a chance to speak with a prominent Japanese art dealer, Sueo Mizuma, executive director of Mizuma Art Gallery, during the fair. He has been in the art business for more than two decades, operating galleries in Tokyo, Singapore, Beijing and New York. He is also a frequent participant in international art fairs. I asked him whether Japanese businessmen, known to be not necessarily familiar with art, had shown any signs of change recently, and he said that he was beginning to see more and more younger self-made businessmen with a technology background taking time to visit art fairs. He also pointed out the increasing interest among younger galleries in getting out of Japan and seriously considering business opportunities globally. Hong Kong seems to be appropriate as their entry point and even though most of them cannot afford immediately to become a participant at Art Basel, there is a less costly and more flexible platform at Art Central (<http://artcentralhongkong.com/>) that takes place in the fashionable Central Harbourfront. Seventeen galleries from Japan were among the 100 galleries represented with a strong geographical focus on Asia at Art Central this year, and the period coincided with Art Basel. Local media were reporting that pieces sold at Art Basel are reserved for wealthy collectors, but Art Central is for everybody, and indeed the venue was filled with young people including art students. One could find a piece of art by up-and-coming artists within a price range of \$2,000-5,000, or



Photo: Kentaro Hirano



Entrance to Art Central

sometimes even less, and many of them sold very quickly. Another interesting feature of Art Central was the creative collaboration between visual arts and culinary arts (pop up restaurants by star chefs at the venue), which drew more people and tended to make them stay longer in the area.

Mizuma is hopeful about this steady exodus of Japanese galleries into new territories as he finds the potential of the market within Japan is too confined and exposure to global market adds value both to Japanese galleries and Japanese artists. I found it interesting that both younger Japanese galleries and collectors go to art fairs abroad, but it probably makes sense for them to feel and learn about what is sought by collectors in the global market. That is something they

would never know if they stayed inside the Japanese market and were not exposed to information from outside. Mizuma said he believes in the success of Japanese gallerists and Japanese artists outside of Japan, but is not so optimistic about the recovery of the Japanese art market. He also lamented the tendency of the Japanese to be critical of people enjoying their life and he often gets criticized for tweeting about visiting good restaurants and playing golf in between business. Let's hope that will slowly change with the arrival of younger generations.

### Where Is Hong Kong & Its Art Market Headed?

As any observer can see, Hong Kong is thriving and its products and services for the wealthy are very strong. If you go to the high-end supermarket City Super you can find an unusual lineup of foods, from balsamic vinegar to freshly rolled sushi, and even *natto* (fermented soy beans) flown in daily from Japan. Aromatic coffee is imported both from the United States and Italy and flavorful tea comes from England. Chocolates are from Belgium, France and Switzerland. They may be extremely expensive, but there are individuals who can afford to pay for such things. The main partner for Art Basel is the Swiss bank UBS and for Art Central it is the Singaporean multinational banking organization UOB. Both are known for their private banking and wealth management. If you are registered on the VIP list at Art Basel, you will be given many pages of information on luxurious hotels where you could easily spend more than \$1,000 per night.

Hong Kong has been like this for many years and will probably

Photo: Kentaro Hirano



Inflatable artwork by KAWS in Victoria Harbour

Photo: Kentaro Hirano



Piece by British artist Julian Opie in the center

Photo: Kentaro Hirano

*Piece on the floor by Korean minimalist, Lee Ufan*

Photo: Kentaro Hirano

*Visitors taking pictures of works by Egon Schiele*

remain so for decades to come. However, when I spoke to local business owners and asked casually if they had any concerns about the increasing influence of mainland China, they reluctantly replied “Yes” in lowered voices. Then they started talking about the high cost of living and how they are trying to cope with raising children, and particularly about the limited choice of education. One young man told me that he was sent to a boarding school in Malaysia because it was less costly. His parents valued a good education, but they couldn’t afford to send him to the United Kingdom, so decided to send him to an English-type boarding school in Malaysia where good teachers are recruited from all over the world. He went on to study in Europe afterwards as well. I asked him if he plans to remain in Hong Kong, or move outside if offered a good job opportunity elsewhere. He said, “I’m not sure, but we have enough relatives living in the US, Canada and Australia. They own businesses, big or small. Younger people including myself are open to moving to these countries and settling into a new environment, particularly when thinking of getting married and having children. But older ones... they never consider leaving Hong Kong. This is the only place they know and they can’t seem to think of the world outside of Hong Kong.”

Every time I go to Hong Kong, I notice that fewer and fewer cab drivers at the airport speak English. This happened in Berlin for a while too after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Maybe soon we will all be expected to communicate with cabbies in Chinese, or through a smartphone application that translates on your behalf. But somehow I feel the slow suffocation of the Hong Kong that used to be. One local gallery owner expressed unease over the uncertainty of

freedom of expression in the coming years and asked herself if she could continue organizing exhibitions with a political context.

Hong Kong will continue to thrive as a gourmet capital and remain as the storefront of goods and services for the rich, but to have an art fair that attracts world famous museum directors, curators, influential art collectors and cutting edge art events for young people such as Art Central will remain important as they could function as a protector or symbol of freedom of expression in Hong Kong.

There used to be a strict code of “no photography allowed” at Art Basel, but this year I saw almost everyone, young and older, taking pictures of each other with works of art in the background for their social media accounts. As long as they continue to have these festive art events and people congregate to discuss art and disseminate what they think through social media, the future of Hong Kong will remain bright, no matter what happens to the political environment. Announcements have already been made on the dates for Art Basel 2020 (<https://www.artbasel.com/hong-kong/at-the-show>) and Art Central 2020 (<http://artcentralhongkong.com/visit/>). I hope you may have the opportunity to join me there, as it’s always fun and exciting to plan a trip to Hong Kong.

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