

All for Art and Art for All

If you find shopping for art intimidating let your heart lead the way, says Affordable Art Fair Director Stephanie Kelly, who is on a mission to make collecting accessible for everyone

Art, demystified. The Affordable Art Fair's raison d'être is also what drives Stephanie Kelly, Fair Director for Hong Kong, to showcase the fun side of art to people in our sometimes-too-serious city.

An avid collector herself, New Zealand native Kelly has spent the past decade traveling and living in London, Singapore and now Hong Kong, filling each home with pieces snapped up along the way.

Hong Kong's art scene has grown rapidly in the six years she has worked at the fair, with more galleries opening across the city and a developing grassroots movement.

"There is a strong thirst for art knowledge and art appreciation, and collecting culture here is evolving," said Kelly.

Still, there's room to grow. Hong Kong remains a developing market, despite the popularity of the city's annual "Arts Month," which hosts a lineup of exhibitions and events around town. Only about half of the visitors to the fair already own a work of art, compared with the 80 percent to AAF's events in New York and 90 percent in London, she said.



For everyone, everywhere

More than 30,000 people visited last year's fair in Hong Kong, notching up HK\$34 million in sales and with one in five pieces going to first-time buyers, Kelly said.

Founded in London 19 years ago, the AAF aims to inform and inspire visitors within a pressure-free environment so they feel empowered to view and buy art. Information and prices are clearly displayed so there are no surprises. And with a wrapping service on site, artwork can be taken home on the spot.

"We want to put art into every home, large or small and whatever the budget," Kelly said.

To do that, AAF has built a network connecting more than 1,000 galleries and artists to markets in 10 cities around the world. As well as Hong Kong, London and New York, six other European events and Singapore round out the rolling global calendar. The Hong Kong fair features more than 115 local and international galleries, Kelly said, with roughly 60 percent from Asia and the remainder from the U.K., U.S., Middle East and beyond.

Monitoring changing trends is just as important in the art world as it is elsewhere. Kelly says the overall decline in bricks-and-mortar galleries within emerging and mid-range art markets has given rise to a non-traditional gallery model that focuses on pop-up exhibitions, art fairs and a stronger digital presence. The Hong Kong fair runs support programs to help galleries stay ahead of these changes, she said.



‘We want to put art into every home, large or small and whatever the budget’

Shopping with your heart

While buying and selling art can be profitable in purely monetary terms, the ROI on a piece you love is priceless.

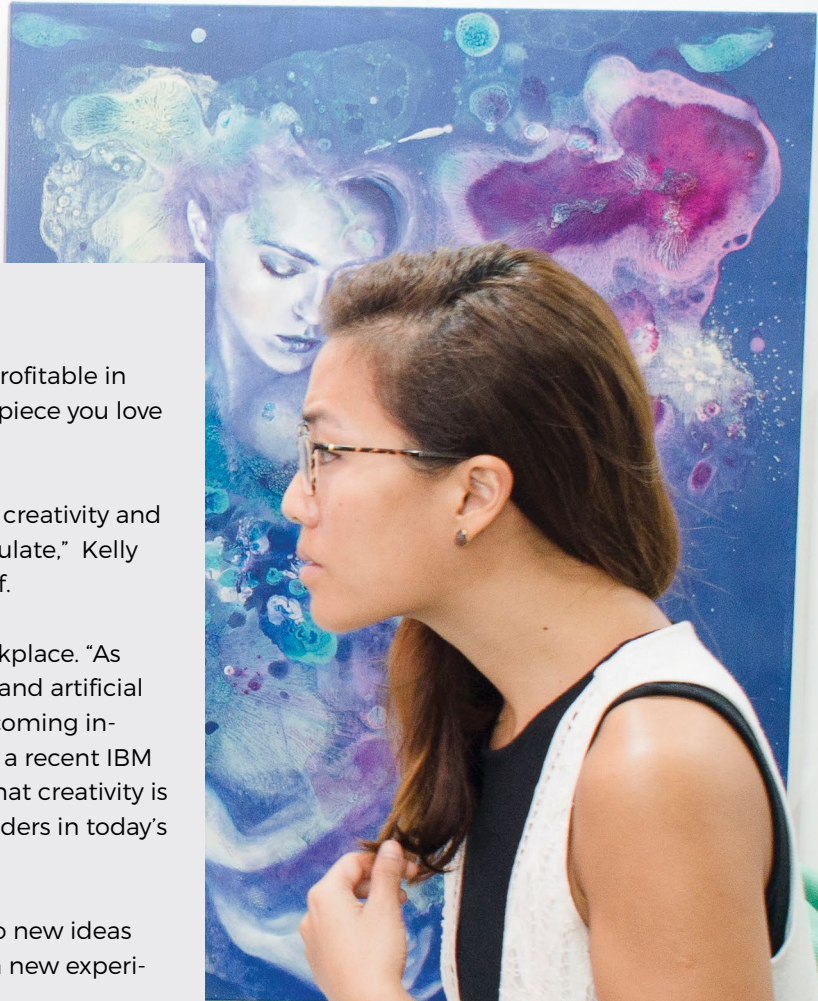
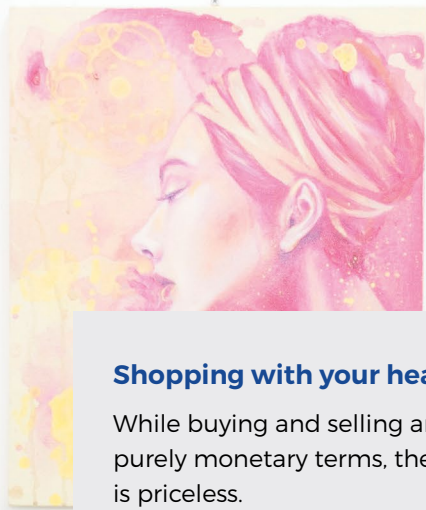
“Artists can unlock a greater depth of creativity and express ideas we find difficult to articulate,” Kelly said about the importance of art itself.

Art can also bring benefits to the workplace. “As we move into the age of automation and artificial intelligence, art and creativity are becoming increasingly important,” she said, citing a recent IBM study of 1,500 CEOs which revealed that creativity is the single most important skill for leaders in today’s innovation economy.

“Artist-innovators are radically open to new ideas and willing to immerse themselves in new experiences,” she said.

Ultimately, Kelly said she encourages people to buy for love. Even the majority of seasoned and serious buyers do it for passion or to express their personality, she said, referring to a survey of high net worth collectors and their reasons for purchasing art, which found that just 32% were concerned with a return on their investment.

“You are really investing in an artist’s career,” as she put it.





Shop Sm(ART)

Here are Kelly's top tips for first time art buyers

Be prepared

Take some time to think about what you are looking for – a new local artist, an artwork to celebrate an occasion, or the perfect piece to fill a blank wall. Find out what's on offer from the galleries and artists exhibiting by browsing catalogues, website and social media first.

Ask questions

Gallerists are there to talk to visitors, so don't be afraid to strike up a conversation. They will want to share the story behind the artwork – the artists' inspiration, their training, techniques and materials, and not to mention, their accolades!

Snap your shortlist

With 1,000+ artists on display, the process can feel overwhelming. Take photos to create a shortlist of artworks you like – making sure you include the information labels. If you need more time to make a decision, the gallery may agree to reserve the artwork for you to avoid disappointment.

Trust your instincts

If you find yourself still thinking about a certain piece as you walk through the fair, you know you've found your fit. Trust your taste and buy art that makes you feel happy every time you see it.

The Affordable Art Fair will take place between 18-20 May inside the Hong Kong Convention & Exhibition Center in Wanchai.

