

Miami Beach's new Hong Kong sister fair dubbed a success

By David Walter
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BRENT NG / For The Miami Herald

At center: Hyung Koo Kang Lincoln, 2013, oil on canvas. At left is Hyung Koo Kang: Van Gogh and at right is Subodh Gupta Untitled, 2012 at Arario Gallery.

Art Basel Hong Kong ended its inaugural run with solid sales, a swell of last-minute visitors, and the beginnings of a unique identity: less crazy than sister fair Art Basel Miami Beach and less stuffy than Art Basel Switzerland, with a decided (and unsurprising) Asian bent.

A closing rush pushed attendance at the five-day fair to more than 60,000 visitors, slightly below figures for the Florida and Switzerland shows but in line with expectations — a decided success for the first-year fair. And though some galleries reported mixed sales results, they said they hoped to return next year.

Prior to the last-day jostling, the tone in Hong Kong's convention center was unusually calm, polite and attentive — fitting for a fair that functioned as a getting-to-know-you mixer between international gallerists and Asian buyers, many of whom are new to the contemporary art market.

"It's very sane," said Rhona Hoffmann, whose eponymous Chicago gallery is a Miami mainstay.

Sane, but not sleepy. In the final reckoning, Basel operator MCH Group largely delivered on the experience promised when it bought Hong Kong's existing fair, Art HK, two years ago with an eye toward capturing the growing Asian art market. Here were dozens of the same international galleries found in Art Basel's Miami Beach and Switzerland incarnations. Here were VIP collectors' lounges stocked with champagne and cigars. And yes, private dinners and nightclub afterparties where millionaire collectors could compare notes after full days of shopping.

Here, too, were big sales. They came in a steady stream, if not a rushing torrent. The splashiest deals included Wang Huaiqing's Chinese Emperor painting, which sold from Taipei's Tina Keng Gallery for \$2.6 million, and Fernando Botero's Quarteto, which a Malaysian collector picked up for \$1.3 million from Zurich's Galerie Gmurzynska.

The art offered was on the safer side as exhibitors avoided the edgy booth displays that give the Miami Beach fair its verve. Western galleries in particular opted for familiar mixes of their most

representative artists, the better to introduce themselves to new Asian customers.

“Galleries tried to establish their brand — that was more important in Hong Kong than in Miami,” said Christie’s contemporary art chief Amy Cappellazzo, who as director of Florida’s Rubell Family Collection helped to launch Art Basel Miami Beach 12 years ago.

That earlier spinoff had all the ingredients for instant success: an enthusiastic Miami collecting community, buzzy beachside party venues, and — most importantly — a mature North American contemporary art market. Hong Kong’s fair, by contrast, is a work in progress because Asian buyers are newer to the scene.

“It’s hard to know who the collectors are,” said Patricia Ortiz Monasterio of Mexico City’s Galeria OMR. But despite mixed results, she saw her gallery returning to Hong Kong fair as part of a long-term commitment to expanding in Asia. “If you only do an art fair for one year — put in all this time, all this money — what’s the point?”

Western galleries that have already established roots in the East had an upper hand in wooing collectors. For instance, fine art dealer De Sarthe Gallery, which moved from the U.S. to Hong Kong in 2011, reaped \$4 million in first-day sales thanks to early outreach to its network of collectors.

Other exhibitors found luck with works by artists who had already been celebrated in Asia. Despite its American themes, Vietnamese artist Danh Vo’s *We The People* project — a disassembled copy of the Statue of Liberty — was made in China and exhibited at last year’s Shanghai Biennial. Asian collectors flocked to three Lady Liberty segments on display at the booth of Paris’ Galerie Chantal Crousel. By Saturday they had sold for prices ranging from \$50,000 to \$115,000.

Still, even successful galleries reported that sales required more time and negotiation than in other art fairs, and sold-out booths were rare.

“In Basel Miami, New York, London, you have the same tribe, the same way of functioning,” said Nicolas Nahab of Galerie Chantal Crousel. Hong Kong’s buying pace was more deliberate. Fair organizers say they do not track sales, and no overall figures are available.

Art Basel Hong Kong also featured fewer of the usual Western art world suspects. “For the older generation of collectors, Hong Kong seems really far away and complicated,” said Marc Spiegler, the director of Art Basel’s worldwide operations. A busy spring international art calendar further conspired to keep American and European buyers away. New York’s second annual Frieze Art Fair took place two weeks before Art Basel Hong Kong. The Venice Biennale show, plus Art Basel’s Basel show, will soon follow. (December’s Art Basel Miami Beach, in contrast, has the early winter season all to itself.)

“It’s not a secret. We would love to have a date that’s convenient for both the Eastern and Western world,” Spiegler said. The problem is finding another open spot on the Hong Kong Convention Center’s fully booked schedule. “That being said, the foundation of this show will be the markets of Asia-Pacific.”

True to this mission, half of Art Basel Hong Kong’s 245 participating galleries were from east of

Istanbul. Many of these were smaller outfits exhibiting at a major art fair for the first time.

Art:1 of Jakarta, Indonesia, attracted big crowds with just one work on display: a canary-yellow 1953 Volkswagen beetle warped to form a perfect sphere by artist Ichwan Noor. Gallery Yang, from Beijing, went with a similarly stark presentation of 12 oversized farm instruments clothed in bespoke suits and ties by Yan Bing. The installation, which confronts how modern society uses people as tools, sold to a Swiss banker living in Hong Kong for \$62,000.