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'This is not the end, this is not doomsday': Hong Kong fairs survive escalated violence in city

Law banning face masks sparks more protests and brings Metro and buses to a halt, but Fine Art Asia chief says impact on fair is minimal

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(Mask-free) visitors battled chaos in Hong Kong to get to the Masterpiece London pavilion at Fine Art Asia Courtesy of Masterpiece

"It could be worse," observed Andy Hei, the founder and director of the twin fairs Fine Art Asia and Ink Asia in Hong Kong on Friday, just after the city's embattled government invoked an emergency law to outlaw face masks during protests and other public gatherings, sparking a new wave of clashes around the city.

Hei emphasises a long-term perspective: "How I understand it all is to compare it with modern Chinese history, which is a good lesson. History is a good museum. For a single human, what we can do is keep going. This is not the end, this is not doomsday—of the world or of the Hong Kong art world."

Many, though, worry that it is. Even after four months of protests against a now-shelved law permitting extradition from Hong Kong to Mainland China, the fairs, which ran from 3 October to last night, had the misfortune to coincide with the ban's announcement and ensuing escalation of violence. The Hong Metro and most buses ceased operation over the three-day weekend in response to escalating conflicts between police and anti-government protesters. The ban on masks, commonly used by Hongkongers against germs and pollution as well as protesters to preserve their anonymity, is viewed as a new extreme in restricted freedom, sparking peaceful as well as violent protests that included the shooting of a 14-year old boy by a policeman who was hit by a petrol bomb.

Art Basel in Hong Kong has announced dates for its 2020 edition as 19 to 21 March, and thus far has expressed confidence that the fair will proceed unimpeded by civil unrest, but within Hong Kong and Mainland art circles there is widespread speculation that it may be forced to move, possibly to Singapore, given the escalating tensions in Hong Kong and that fair's greater reliance on collectors from Mainland China, which is a main target of the protests' animus.

"I went to China ten days ago to make sure collectors feel alright, and were still coming," Hei says. "After the opening night, it was more than okay - the numbers were even a bit more than last year." Hei says the fair increased security by 10% this year, and his team underwent crisis management training with the venue, the Hong Kong Exhibition Centre, which also hosts Art Basel in Hong Kong. But the main challenges were external, chiefly the public transport shutdown from Friday which left exhibitors and visitors stranded.

Despite the weekend's upheaval, the annual autumn auctions on the Hong Kong Exhibition Centre's first floor set several new records, including US\$25.2m (with fees) for Sanyu's painting *Nv (Woman)* at Sotheby's on 5 October and HK\$40.1m for Nara Yoshitomo's sculpture *Not Everything But/Green House* at Poly Auction on 6 October.



A Lucio Fontana work in the Masterpiece London pavilion at Fine Art Asia Courtesy of Masterpiece

However, some exhibitors at the fair felt the squeeze from the turmoil. “We haven’t sold anything yet,” said Kelvin Yang, the managing director of Hong Kong’s Galerie du Monde, which has participated in Ink Asia for five of its six editions. Still, he added: “It’s a very difficult time for Hong Kong, being able to keep the fair open seems like a miracle.”

“This year there were probably fewer visitors, but those that came were focused and interested—not a dull moment!” says Nynke van der Ven of Vanderven Oriental Art from Holland. She saw museums and collectors from Hong Kong as well as Mainland China and thinks: “Having Masterpiece there was an asset.” Vanderven has attended Fine Art Asia for nine years, and says: “No year has been quite the same. The unrest affected the fair in the practical sense that it could be hard for visitors to cross town to get to the fair...Sadly, evening dinners were hard to organise as people stayed in to avoid any trouble.”

Van der Ven adds: “It is very hard trying to project going forward, lets hope things calm down. To us Hong Kong is still a very convenient springboard in dealing with mainland Chinese, is it has all the advantages and few of the impracticalities.”

Fine Art Asia also launched a new partnership with Masterpiece London this year, though the planned mini-fair of around 25 stands was dialled down to a pavilion with 35 works from 15 galleries. “Despite the current situation, our experience this week has been very positive,

reinforcing the continued importance of the art market in Asia and specifically Hong Kong," says Masterpiece's managing director Lucie Kitchener. "The number of collectors, cultural representatives and visitors, particularly from Hong Kong and mainland China, has exceeded our expectations. The Masterpiece Pavilion has received an overwhelmingly positive response - both in terms of the works of art and our broader ethos of cross-collecting." She describes collector interest as significant "across disciplines... This endorses our decision to partner with Fine Art Asia and lead our international expansion with a presence here. We greatly appreciate the support we have had and are delighted to have seen very strong collector attendance by Hong Kong and mainland China. We see this year's showcase as a valuable first step and look forward to returning in 2020 with a presentation of individual gallery booths."

Meanwhile Fine Art Asia's spinoff fair in Beijing, Guardian Fine Art Asia, held in cooperation with Mainland auction house Guardian, will have its fourth edition from 31 October to 3 November, and another sister fair is in the works for Taipei next year. Organised by Chang's Oriental Art Gallery, it will be held at the Huashan 1914 Creative Park some time between early April and early May, Hei says: "There are still some low-profile collectors in small Taiwanese cities, but the first step to reaching them is to go to Taipei, we need to meet them there."

Meanwhile, Hei says, Hong Kong retains its value as a freeport. "Nobody can tell what might happen tomorrow. Sales are about the business climate, not social movements. The negative is coming more from the trade war than Hong Kong; now just visitors are down, but regular customers come. I am concentrated on making people happy, and I hope they will spend money. I still see hope for Hong Kong."

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