

Classic, Contemporary, Collaborative and Cool: Fine Art Asia Meets Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel



Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel 2020, general impression. Image copyright and courtesy of Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel.



Fine Art Asia 2020, general impression.

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Fine Art Asia and Art Basel Hong Kong, two leading fairs combined forces, creating an intimate show that was personal, while unleashing new synergies that pave the way for new formats.

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IMAGES: Courtesy of various

It's certainly been disappointment after disappointment for those working at Art Basel this year, with all its large-scale, in-person fairs converted to dreaded Online Viewing Rooms. A beacon of hope finally showed itself with the announcement of Fine Art Asia, which for this iteration, held a reduced format, and combined with a new initiative, Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel, a succinct edit of 22 local galleries previously shown at Art Basel Hong Kong taking up real estate in an adjacent, connected hall.

Despite fears that the fourth wave of COVID-19 infections would affect attendance, this unusual duo of fairs—one focused on antiques and beyond, the other on cutting-edge contemporary art—reported strong attendance that met, if not exceeded, the calibrated expectations.


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Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel 2020, general impression. Image copyright and courtesy of Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel.





Fine Art Asia 2020, general impression. Image copyright and courtesy of Fine Art Asia.

"We'd known beforehand that the pandemic will affect the results of the fair, so we had definitely calibrated our expectations accordingly. Fine Art Asia is about half the size of before, and [Hong Kong Spotlight by] Art Basel is only 22 local galleries, so our expectations weren't high. But the outcome on the first day was ideal. It was actually comparable to our typical first-day attendance records," said Andy Hei, Founder and Director, Fine Art Asia.

Indeed, day one felt very much like the first day back at school after the summer holidays for those in the art world, with gallerists, media and collectors meandering down the lanes of Hong Kong Spotlight (or "meridians", as Art Basel typically terms them), which were widened to facilitate better flow of traffic. In fact, for many, this miniature fair was more enjoyable than the circus that the March fair and satellite events have become, with greater intimacy, more focused presentations, and in general less unnecessary noise, allowing the works to shine.

The energy was also different thanks to the combination of two almost disparate fairs, which in theory see much synergy and collaborative spirit, but have become quite divorced from the boom of the contemporary art market.



[Right] Angelle Siyang-Le, Project Lead on Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel and Regional Head of Gallery Relations Asia, Art Basel [Left] Andy Hei, Founder and Director, Fine Art Asia, at Fine Art Asia 2020. Image copyright and courtesy of Fine Art Asia.

To Angelle Siyang-Le, Project Lead on Hong Kong Spotlight and Regional Head of Gallery Relations Asia, Art Basel, the new format made Art Basel's contribution an entirely different animal: "It's concept is very different from an Art Basel fair and really cannot be compared. Hong Kong Spotlight is a platform for local galleries to engage with collectors and art lovers based here in Hong Kong."



As Hei noted, though, this strategic pivot wasn't so much just a win-win for both organisers as it was a pioneering concept that could lead by example, paving the way for more collaborative fairs, playing on the popularity of cross-collecting and the rise of entities such as Masterpiece, the London fair whose layout is curated to mix galleries and works of different eras and values.

"Of course, we don't expect every future fair to be a collaboration, but it's a new and interesting format that I, having spent decades in the art world, haven't come across—especially in this era of cross-collecting. I may be an antiques expert, but I also collect paintings from young up-and-coming ink artists in their 20s and 30s. What's important to most collectors is to keep an open mind to their collections, which ultimately benefits not only the quality but the value of their collections," he explains.

Indeed, even without Hong Kong Spotlight just behind a velvet rope, Fine Art Asia had a layout that to some might seem haphazard, but others would understand to be consciously cacophonous. The tagline for the fair might read "Where classic and contemporary converge", but here, a Hollywood Road antiques dealer might be a booth or two away from a Japanese contemporary art gallery, next to luxury homewares brand Lalique, next to local jeweller Yewn.



Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel 2020, booth view, Contemporary by Angela Li. Image copyright and courtesy of Hong Kong Spotlight by Art Basel.

"In this climate of cross collecting, we don't just want to showcase a mix of ancient and contemporary, or a mix of East and West," explains Hei. "We understand from the days that Hong Kong was still termed a 'cultural desert', that it's important to support young artists, student artists, particularly fresh graduates, by giving them a chance to showcase and sell their work at our fair, which is a long-standing tradition that lives on till today. We've also invited philanthropic organisations, and had charity auctions for a number of years, and that is why, following trends we've seen at fairs around the world, we have broadened the fair's purview even more to include a more eclectic mix of exhibitors."



Meanwhile, in the hall next door, many of the Art Basel stalwarts were enjoying the breathing room, both literal and figurative. Axel Vervoordt Gallery may have been one of the first galleries to promote cross-collecting with its presentations combining art, design and furniture, but for Hong Kong Spotlight, it chose to put on a solo show for Gutai artist Yuko Nasaka, although the gallery also contributed a large-scale Kimsooja installation, the subject of many an Instagram Stories post.

Represented by de Sarthe Gallery, Andrew Luk missed out on showing his own sweeping landscape at Art Basel's cancelled March edition in Hong Kong, but had wall space here for two new bodies of work created during the pandemic, which delved further into his concept of excavating the quotidian objects of now (Doritos among them) in a not-so-distant future. These were presented alongside Zhong Wei's pop commentary on Internet culture.

It wasn't just the usual suspects out there on the floor. In one of the quieter corners, Siyang-Le noted, "NANZUKA / AISHONANZUKA showcased a solo presentation titled 'Ya-Chimata' (meaning 'a gallery of kings' in Japanese), featuring a collection of black-and-white portraits taken in Asakusa by the recently deceased seminal Japanese portrait photographer Hiroh Kikai, who emerged from the abyss of Japan's photography culture." This stark series of black-and-white shots were printed in a small format and hung geometrically in a booth that was all the more precious because it wasn't a hotbed of networking and air kisses.



After a while, Hong Kong Spotlight seemed not that much different to Art Basel. But with social-distancing regulations tightened day by day as the fairs wore on, the two-in-one fair became less like the first day of school, and more like a one-time high-school reunion, as city people prepared for work-from-home and other contingency plans. That said, no matter what the sales outcome, both organisers were pleased and relieved to have executed something new and relatively pivotal.

"Some of the younger, more on-trend attendees of [Hong Kong Spotlight by] Art Basel were quite intrigued by the antiques in Fine Art Asia, and in fact these were able to give them that feeling of freshness and excitement that they had when they approached contemporary art for the first time," notes Hei. "It's a very natural way to diversify each market's audience."