



Crowning glory: Chinese artist Gu Wenda hung large national flags made out of human hair collected from each country, a reminder of our common humanity.
PHOTOS: HELMI YUSOF

Art Basel HK's mega-draw

Asia's biggest art fair brings on the bling with more than US\$1 billion worth of valuable art by top galleries going on sale, reports **HELMY YUSOF**

'Hong Kong has a very discerning international audience. People in the city move at such break-neck speeds, and they also approach art with a lot of guts – in the manner of pace, fashion and their cheque books.'

– Singapore artist Genevieve Chua on Art Basel's frenetic scene

HELINA Chan can barely contain her excitement. "We've sold six artworks and there are 10 that have been put on reserve by interested buyers," she exclaims with bated breath. Considering the iPreciation gallerist brought less than 30 works by Singapore artist Lee Wen to Art Basel Hong Kong, that's more than half of her stock sold or on reserve. And it is only the second day of the fair – there are three more days to go before the fair closes. "I want to sell everything by the end of it," she says determinedly. "It's not even for me – it's for Lee Wen."

Lee, 57, is one of Singapore's most important contemporary artists. He started practising performance art at a time when the Singapore government denied funding for any performance artist, following Josef Ng's controversial act of snipping his pubic hair in a 1993 performance. For more than 20 years, Lee struggled to gain recognition, selling very few works and living in abject conditions.

Lee's booth at Art Basel Hong Kong marks the first time that his works are being shown in a commercial solo exhibition. The brisk sale of the works validates Ms Chan's belief that "it always takes the establishment 20 years to understand contemporary art and artists. These works should have been recognised 20 years ago – not just now."

Lee, on the other hand, seems almost embarrassed by his overnight commercial success. When asked about sales, he looks away, takes a long pause, and then replies: "There's the other half of the booth to be sold."

Art Basel Hong Kong is the most prestigious art fair in the region. With 245 galleries spread over two floors, it is twice the size of Singapore's premier art fair Art Stage. The participating galleries include the world's biggest, such as Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, Pace Gallery and Blum & Poe. Compared to Art Stage's 45,000 visitors, ABHK attracts some 60,000 visitors, including the world's most famous and wealthiest collectors.

But Hong Kong's decisive lead doesn't just lie in the numbers and names game.

Singapore artist Genevieve Chua says: "Hong Kong has a very discerning international audience. People in the city move at such break-neck speeds, and they also approach art with a lot of guts – in the manner of pace, fashion and their cheque books. I usually stage more challenging pieces in Hong Kong because I'm confident audiences there can digest it."

Chua's bold conceptual series of works are being exhibited at the fair by Hong Kong's Gallery Exit. Titled *Ultrasound*, the series depicts the human womb as a strange subterranean space that appears almost uninhabitable.

Chua says: "There is quality in the production of art here because Hong Kong has an ease with manufacturing and materials. This means artists in Hong Kong and China can produce with a level of finish and finesse which buyers expect, and this sets the standard for the quality of works that are being showcased."

Singaporean curator Lim Qinyi, who works full-time at Hong Kong's progressive art space Para Site, agrees about the maturity of the Hong Kong audience. She says: "There is a serious discourse about art here that doesn't exist in Singapore. There is an authentic art ecology with writers, artists and curators embracing and discussing issues, and resolving them."

To wit, Para Site is exhibiting a groundbreaking show over five locations titled *Ten Million Rooms of Yearning: Sex In Hong Kong*. The exhibition features paintings, photographs and videos around the topic of sex and desire and is open to the public without any age restrictions. (See story on the next page.)



Strong showing: Singapore's Lee Wen (left, talking to a visitor) showed his performance works such as his *Strange Fruit*, made up of red Chinese lanterns; and his circular ping pong table (above). Gallerist Stephanie Fong (below, standing) and artist Ang Sookoon pose with Ang's artworks made out of human hair, which comment on femininity



The Hong Kong culture is in the midst of creating a large arts and culture district on the waterfront in Kowloon. It will include the M+ museum that's headed by former Tate Modern director Lars Nittve, and is expected to feature a world-class art collection that includes Uli Sigg's donation of 1,510 Chinese artworks dating back to the 1960s.

For these reasons, many galleries and artists clamour to make it through Art Basel's stringent selection process and have their artworks displayed in Hong Kong.

Eddy new works

Singapore's Fost Gallery, one of the keenest champions of Singapore art, is making its debut in Hong Kong after one previous failed attempt. Fost Gallery's founder Stephanie Fong says: "It means something for a gallery to be accepted in important fairs like this. Hitherto, we have only shown in Art Stage Singapore, so it is important that it is in an event like Art Basel Hong Kong that we are now making our international debut."

Fost is showing Singapore artist Ang Sookoon – whose large cloud-like "hairballs" and brooms made out of hair – make a "feminine, not feminist" statement about womanhood and beauty. Ang says: "The Singapore art market alone cannot sustain a living for its local artists making installations, videos or larger scale sculptures like me. So it is... important to have my work shown here."

Elsewhere in the fair, a new country has cropped up overnight. It calls itself *The Republic of Jing Bang*

and it is looking for only 100 new citizens. Anyone who has US\$13,000 of spare cash can apply for citizenship, which entitles him to a passport, identity card, national flag and other accoutrements.

The immigration officer processing the citizenship applications is none other than Ms Emi Eu, the director of Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), which collaborated with Shanghai-based gallery ShangArt for the performative installation.

And though the "country" is a fictitious one created by Chinese artist Sun Xun, one which will continue to exist completely in the realm of the imagination, there are already more than 50 successful applications for citizenship.

Artist Sun says: "I wanted to explore the limits of what a country means, what citizenship means. In this globalised world where boundaries have dissolved, is there any need to identify with ourselves as belonging to one country? That's why I created this imaginary country."

The dissolution of boundaries and nationalities is also at the heart of the fair's most popular installation work – a huge circular ping pong table in the shape of a doughnut created by Singapore's Lee Wen. The ping pong table attracted a stream of well-heeled visitors to drop their designer bags and pick up a bat for a game of ping pong. On Art Basel's Instagram page, Lee's artwork attracted 1,500 "Likes" – more than any other artwork.

Lee says: "A ping pong table is rectangular and usually involves a 'dialogue' between two players on opposite sides. But what if we reinvented the shape of the ping pong table into one that's round and has

no borders on its left and right? What if several people can play at the same time, allowing for various dialogues to occur simultaneously?"

In the same vein, Chinese artist Gu Wenda hung large national flags made out of human hair collected from each country, a reminder of our common humanity, while Indonesian artist FX Harsono created installation works that examine the complex amalgamation of the Chinese Indonesian identity.

Thai artist Jakkai Siributr created an installation that resembles the Kabaa, the black cuboid building in Mecca, which Muslims around the world pray towards. Seven on to his installation are the names of 78 Thai Muslims who died in the tragic Tak Bai incident in the Southern Thailand 10 years ago. Siributr, who is Buddhist, wanted to mark the 10th anniversary of the death of his fellow countrymen.

Buying spree

The work is shown by Yavuz Fine Art, a Singapore-based gallery run by Mr Can Yavuz. He says: "This is a good fair for us. When we took part two years ago, we made great contacts and sold major works to private and institutional collections from the Asia-Pacific region."

This year's edition of Art Basel Hong Kong is noticeably more adventurous than the previous year's, with more video, sculptures and installation works featured by various galleries. That did not seem to impact the buying spree, with several galleries reporting good sales of their blue-chip works. Fair insurer AXA Art estimates the value of art on sale to be in excess of US\$1 billion.

According to Bloomberg, David Zwirner sold three paintings ranging from US\$75,000 to \$180,000 in the first few hours of the VIP opening. White Cube sold a Damien Hirst blade painting for £800,000 (\$1.68 million). Paul Kasmin sold an I Nyoman Masriadi work for US\$350,000, and Singapore's Gajah Gallery sold two Ashley Bickerton canvases for US\$190,000 and US\$160,000. The Singapore Tyler Print Institute also sold several works, including a Ronald Ventura work for S\$125,000.

Silverlens Gallery, a leading Filipino gallery with branches in Manila and Singapore, has taken part in Hong Kong's top art fair since it started in 2008. Silverlens founder Isa Lorenzo says: "Why do we take part in this fair every year? How could we not? It's the most important fair in Asia. Everyone comes here – and I mean everyone."

Art Basel Hong Kong is now on at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre till Sunday