More Singapore galleries at HK fair

Five of them are exhibiting at Art Basel Hong Kong, which returns for the second year with a new movie segment

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Singapore artist Lee Wen does not give the game away easily.

It may be the first time the 57-year-old artist and performance art pioneer is showing at an art fair, and a major one at that, but the conversation between him and collectors at Art Basel Hong Kong tells back and forth with subdued grace rather than anxiety.

At the prestigious art fair with roots in Basel, Switzerland, comes into its own in Hong Kong in its second year with a spread of art and collectors. Singapore similarly is upping its presence at the event.

Five home-grown galleries are exhibiting at this fair, which opened to the public yesterday. The number is two more than at the inaugural edition last year.

In total, there are 245 galleries participating in this modern and contemporary art fair, roughly half of which come from countries in the East and the rest from the West.

Of the Singapore galleries, the STPI and Gajah Gallery are making return appearances. The newcomers are From Here Art, Phuket - which has dedicated its booth to Lee’s source of performance art works – and Fold Gallery, which is showing upcoming Singapore artist Ang Sookoon.

Seven other international galleries with outputs in Singapore, including Arndt from Berlin and The Drawing Room from the Philippines, are also at the fair.

Singapore’s presence at Art Basel Hong Kong is further bolstered by foreign galleries who show works by Singapore artists. They include Hong Kong galleries Osage, which has an installation by Chen Lijie Huang, and paintings by Ng Joon Kiat, and Gallery Exit, which is showing Genevieve Chua’s acrylic and screenprint works.

Japan’s Tomio Koyama Gallery, with a branch at Singapore’s art gallery enclave in Gillman Barracks, is also showing a painting by Ian Woo, who previously had a solo exhibition at the gallery in Singapore.

From Europe, Galerie krausngalerie in Vienna is showing Emma Ung’s delicate jewellery pieces that Berlin’s Carlier Gebeshar has pieces by Ming Wong.

Independent Singapore curator Kim Ong, 39, says showing at the fair is a definite high point for “It is good to see Singapore artists. They are not a big presence yet, but there are more of them than two years ago.”

Art Basel took over Art HK, one of China’s biggest art events, in 2011. It promised as Art Basel Hong Kong last year and drew more than 50,000 visitors over five days.

The fair’s Asia director, Mr Magnus Renfrew, 38, says: “We are very pleased with the Singapore galleries that are participating this year. Singapore has been an important audience for us, not only in terms of collectors, but also the galleries participating.”

He adds: “We are pleased to have strong works being shown, for example, by Lee Wen, one of the fathers of performance art in Singapore.”

Artists Chen and Ang are also featured in the Hong Kong fair’s new film section. The segment, an existing feature at the fair’s Basel and Miami editions, is a fitting addition to the programme in Hong Kong, given the long history of the territory’s film industry, says Mr Renfrew.

The film section comprises works by 41 artists and is hosted at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. It is curated by Chinese curator, artist and producer Li Jiehong, who selected works from submissions by galleries showing in the fair.

On the demand for works by Singapore artists, as well as what Singapore galleries show, Mr Renfrew says: “It seems that there is. The galleries want to come back and the galleries want to come only if they feel that they are having a successful time commercially.

Indeed, sales have been brisk. At the fair’s private preview on Wednesday, which drew luminaries such as Taiwanese art collector Rudy Tang and Britain’s Princess Michael of Kent, Gajah gallery sold four works by artists based in Asia for almost $500,000, which is said to be a new record for Singapore at a private art fair in Hong Kong.

“For you can come here and be surprised,” he says.

Lee’s doughnut-shaped ping pong table, with digital daily performance, delighted fairgoers who paused to take part in the interactive performance piece by playing the sport.

The artist, a Cultural Medallion recipient in 2005, says showing at the fair is a definite highlight for him and not because his works have sold well. Five of his pieces have been sold for between $4,000 and $10,000, mostly to Western collectors.

It is memorable. It is nice to do something new and have a new experience and meet people from different places.”