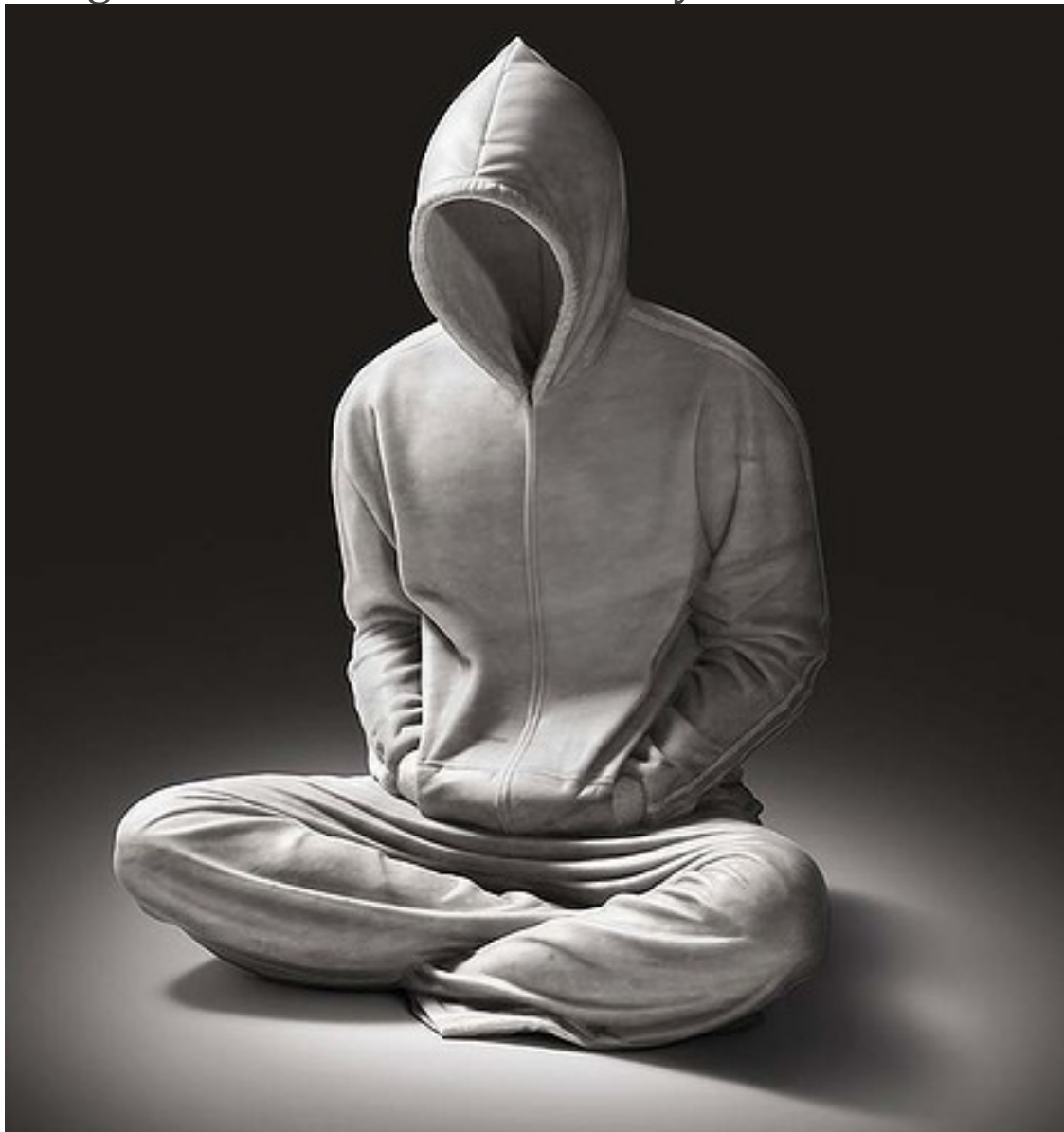


## The big picture

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No longer a cultural backwater, modern Hong Kong mixes business and beauty.



Under the hood ... *Soloist* by Alex Seton. Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art had a sellout with Seton's marble sculptures at ART HK 12.

Hong Kong is ideally located to take advantage of an Eastern economic boom that keeps defying Western prophets of doom.

Although it may sound scarcely believable, that defiant attitude is shared by leading Western art dealers who have begun opening gigantic new spaces in a city long known as a cultural backwater.

Those bad old days when Hong Kong was all business and no art have been swept away by the realisation that art can be very big business in its own right. The crucial catalyst has been the Hong Kong International Art Fair (ART HK), which has grown exponentially in popularity and turnover since its inception in 2008. At the age of five, it may be said that ART HK is no longer an emerging fair - it is a fully mature operation that ranks alongside Basel and Miami as one of the world's leading showcases for the commercial art trade.

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Featuring 266 galleries from 38 countries, ART HK is now almost the same size as its peers in Europe and the US.

The final list was chosen from more than 700 applications, using a selection process that required applicants to show flair and innovation. This produced a show of exceptional quality and consistency. In Asia, ART HK reigns supreme, with fairs in Singapore, mainland China and Korea offering scant competition.

The mushrooming gallery scene is all the proof that is required. Last year, Gagolian and Ben Brown opened new premises in the Pedder Building, and have now been joined by Pearl Lam and Simon Lee.

More impressive are the new Connaught Road venues of White Cube and Emmanuel Perrotin. These galleries are vast, immaculate and incalculably expensive.

Even if you are selling works by Anselm Kiefer or Takashi Murakami, it seems inconceivable that any dealer could hope to make a profit, given inner-city rental prices that exceed those of London and Manhattan.

One assumes these new spaces are an investment in the future, as economic power shifts inexorably from West to East, and art is required to beautify money.

The dealers are following trends established by the big auction houses that spent much of the 20th century selling Chinese art and antiques in New York or London. Now the currents are reversed, with Chinese clients buying back their patrimony from Western collectors via Hong Kong.

Although the biggest sums are paid for works of traditional Chinese art, there are mainland millionaires buying modern Western and Chinese art and a growing number who are setting up private museums. One of the most fascinating events of ART HK 12 was a panel consisting of private museum owners in Asia, including Li Bing, who has a museum on the outskirts of Beijing and a contemporary art collectors club; Wang Wei, who plans to start two museums in Shanghai; and Dr Oei Hong Djien of Indonesia, who has just set up his third museum. The great joy of a private museum is that you can do whatever you like. Dr Oei has made his money in the tobacco industry, and says he'll keep building museums so long as people keep smoking.

In Hong Kong it is not only the dealers who are starting new galleries - the Asia Society of New York has just renovated an impressive building that previously housed the Hong Kong Jockey Club and an explosives magazine. Australia's Melissa Chiu, the New York director of the Asia Society, led the assembled journalists on a tour of the new facility, a brilliant feat of architectural rejuvenation.

The new Asia Society is a classy addition to the city's artistic life but the behemoth that towers over other arts project in Hong Kong, and indeed the world, is the West Kowloon Cultural District. The responsibility for bringing this \$HK21.6 billion (\$2.74 billion) project to fruition lies with another Australian, Michael Lynch.

With an opening only three years away, there is a huge amount of work to be done. For Lynch and the director of the proposed new M+ museum, Lars Nittve, this includes a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the local population. During the art fair, they organised a show of contemporary-art installations in the nearby district of Yau Ma Tei. The positive responses convinced both men that preconceived ideas about Hong Kong philistinism were misguided. All the citizens needed, apparently, were opportunities to show their love of art.

Back at the fair, it was proving to be the best-ever year for the Australian dealers.

Tolarno Galleries had a sellout with Brendan Huntley's paintings and ceramic sculptures; while Sullivan+Strumpf matched this feat with a sellout of Alex Seton's marble sculptures. This is the second fair in a row in which Sullivan+Strumpf has sold everything, suggesting an unusually keen instinct for what people want, although Ursula Sullivan says the only recipe for success is to have good artists.

In the main Galleries section, Australia was represented by Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Roslyn Oxley9 and Anna Schwarz.

The Asia One section featured Ausin Tung, Nellie Castan (with the only indigenous artist, Bindy Cole), Tristian Koenig, Damien Minton, Tim Olsen, Ryan Renshaw, Sullivan+Strumpf, and Tolarno; the third component, Art Futures, included two emerging

Melbourne galleries, Neon Parc and Anna Pappas. This was more than respectable, with the numbers up by one from last year. It also suggests that fair director Magnus Renfrew's working definition of "Asia", which stretches from Turkey to the Pacific, is providing a measure of security for the Australian dealers, who are not big-time players.

Next year, when ART HK comes fully under the umbrella of the Art Basel group, there will inevitably be changes but anxieties have been lessened by the news that Renfrew will remain at the helm, and 50 per cent of the show will be devoted to Asian galleries. Last year the Galleries section was located on level one, while Asia One and Art Futures occupied the halls on level three. In 2012, the three sections have been artfully integrated, with Asia One enjoying a central position.

This removed the "upstairs, downstairs" effect of last year and created a more even platform for galleries large and small. This may have played a part in the success of the Australian galleries, which came as blessed relief from the inertia of the art market in Sydney and Melbourne. Tim Olsen was selling abstract expressionist paintings by Sophie Cape, while Barry Keldoulis offloaded a variety of works to a diverse group of clients. His best sale was a new wall piece by Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, bought by a well-known Indian artist. Ausin Tung, although based

in Melbourne, showed works by Shanghai artist Wu Daxin, including an amazing photo of the burnt ruin of the CCTV building in Beijing, which came across as an apocalyptic warning to China's soaring ambitions.

The smaller galleries at ART HK 12 seem to have done better than their larger, more glamorous counterparts. Many of the most prominent dealers sold almost nothing, although one only needs a single million-dollar sale to cover costs. They may have had themselves to blame, because some sent stockroom works to Hong Kong while saving their best pieces for Art Basel.

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The great value of Hong Kong is that it is probably the most open art market in the world, with few of the provincial hang-ups of other big cities. Hong Kong has a population of 7.07 million. Finally, an ever-popular feature of ART HK is the annual debate.

The proposition this time was "Contemporary art excludes the 99 per cent", with British filmmaker Ben Lewis and American artist Paul Chan arguing in favour, while conceptual art guru Joseph Kosuth and the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Liz Ann Macgregor, argued the contrary. A poll taken before the debate showed most of the audience opposed the idea, but afterwards most listeners had changed their minds, delivering a landslide victory to Lewis and Chan.

Macgregor's unsuccessful line was that art is all to do with ideas, not entertainment - although this hardly squares with her missionary zeal to bring contemporary art to the masses. It seems clear that if contemporary art is not to exclude the 99 per cent, it needs to take itself a little less seriously.

This is one of the reasons that commercial events such as ART HK tend to provide a better snapshot of today's art than the big curator-driven exhibitions. Nowadays, it is shopping rather than ideas that keeps the world of contemporary art turning.