# **PRIMARY POWERS**

If you follow and invest in the burgeoning art scene in Hong Kong, almost inevitably, you'll wind up in the company of these people, who are helping to define the direction of art in the city.

TEXT **RAYMOND MA, ANDREW DEMBINA & LIANA CAFOLLA** PHOTOGRAPHY **GARETH GAY** ASSISTED BY **PERRY TSE** ART DIRECTION & GROOMING **GRACE MA** 



TOBIAS BERGER Curator of M+

THE BOSSES

THE PROVIDERS





**THE VOICES** 



#### MICHAEL LYNCH CEO West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

With over four decades of experience in high-profile roles — including being chief executive of the Sydney Opera House and London's Southbank Centre, and serving as a director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation — Michael Lynch has built a formidable international reputation. But the 64-year-old veteran art administrator says the enormity that is the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) is, without doubt, his most challenging project yet.

"You've got 16 years of difficult history on this project, including false starts and everything else. It's by far my most difficult project," says Lynch, who has been awarded an Order of Australia and a Commander of the British Empire in recognition of his work turning around some of the world's most recognisable cultural icons.

"The story around [WKCD] has always been it's not going anywhere — I guess the challenge for me was within a relatively short period of time to move it from inertia to action," he says, noting recent milestones include commencement of the design of the district's park and the construction of a number of key buildings, such as M+, the new museum of visual culture expected to open in the next three or four years.

"We are building a collection of contemporary art which has never existed in this part of the region before. We are doing a whole lot of

**"WE ARE DOING A WHOLE LOT OF THINGS THAT HOPEFULLY CONTRIBUTE TO WHAT WILL BE THE LONGER TERM VISION FOR [HONG KONG]"** 

things that hopefully contribute

vision for the place," Lynch says.

While the booming art market has

dominated the art sector in Hong

Kong, one of the district's chief

aims is to bring it to the masses.

parts of what we are doing is

what is rampant commerce

and dedicated to giving people

an experience that they aren't

necessary going to have to pay for,

or is the preserve of only the rich

or informed. We want to make the

Kowloon accessible to everybody -

whether they are locals or tourists."

cultural experiences within West

getting a better balance between

"One of the really important

according to Lynch.

to what will be the longer term

"I AM NOT A COLLECTOR. I AM AN ORDINARY CONSUMER OF ART. THAT'S WHY I LOVE MUSEUMS -THEY ARE FREE OR VERY CHEAP"

Before returning to Hong Kong in 2012, Alice Mong spent a decade in arguably the world's cultural capital, New York. Her experience in the city is probably why one of her sincerest desires is for the people of Asia – including Hong Kong – to really "get" art. The rapid creation of wealth in recent decades across Asia, especially in mainland China, has provided individuals with the resources with which to purchase art, and the art business has exploded in the region. What Mong hopes will come next is a widespread broader appreciation of art, from the grassroots level up. "What I think is the next big

thing in art in Asia is that people

ALICE MONG EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Asia Society Hong Kong Center

> Society Hong Kong Center. "The money's already here and people are following it, but the 'Eureka' moment will be when people realise that these guys are not only worth some money, but they're actually not half bad." One important part of this is

will start realising that it is cool,"

says the executive director of Asia

York, with institutions like the Museum of Modern Art or the Metropolitan Art Museum, even a student with little or no money can enjoy a night [out enjoying art]. We don't even have that yet in Hong Kong," says Mong.

In her last role, as director of the Museum of Chinese in America, Mong was instrumental in transforming the New York Chinatown institution into a leading national museum dedicated to preserving the history and culture of Chinese people born and raised in the US. "I am not a collector. I am an ordinary consumer of art. That's why I love museums – they are free or very cheap," she says.

Mong says that the infrastructure for enjoyment of the arts in Hong Kong is slowly coming together – with, for example, the planned completion of M+ in the next few years. "In five years, a lot can happen because the difference between then and now is technology, and also the volume of wealth being created. Whether it's the way art is appreciated or sold, technology will fast track a lot of these developments," she says.



#### MAGNUS RENFREW DIRECTOR ASIA Art Basel

Magnus Renfrew's online biography mentions he was named by ART + AUCTION magazine as one of 15 individuals "without whom the art world would not spin on its axis" in 2008. Since 2012, the Hong Kong-based 38-year old has been director for Asia and one of four members of the executive committee of world-renowned Art Basel. You might think that such accolades and responsibilities could go to a person's head, but Renfrew is humble about his role at Art Basel.

"We have a fantastic team working worldwide 365 days a year to make things happen. I don't believe it's purely about individuals," says Renfrew, who has around 20 years of experience in the international art world.

That's not to say he doesn't deserve enormous credit. Renfrew was fair director for ART HK: Hong Kong International Art Fair, from its inception in 2007 until 2012, when it was bought out by the owners of Art Basel – a milestone which he says marks probably one of the proudest moments in his career so far. "It doesn't get much better

than that – to be involved in something from the very outset and having a blank piece of paper in front of us, and five years later for it to be acquired by the leading art fair in the world." Renfrew says.

For the first ART HK Fair held in 2008, he got together over 100 galleries in just eight months. He was able to keep the show going despite losing Lehman Brothers as a lead sponsor during the global financial crisis. The inaugural Art Basel in Hong Kong event was held in May 2013. After playing a key role in putting Hong Kong on the map as an international hub for modern and contemporary art in Asia, Renfrew's still got bigger ambitions in mind.

"Certainly Art Basel's acquisition was a real endorsement, not only of the foundations that we laid to date; but also, whilst it's an achievement in itself, I really see it as the beginning rather than end of something. The opportunity now is to take the fair from one of regional to truly global importance," says Renfrew.

"IT DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER THAN THAT — TO BE INVOLVED IN SOMETHING FROM THE VERY OUTSET... AND FIVE YEARS LATER FOR IT TO BE ACQUIRED BY THE LEADING ART FAIR IN THE WORLD" With Hong Kong having emerged as the central hub for art trading in Asia, international galleries and mainland auction houses have been flocking into the city. You might think, therefore, that leading auction houses in Hong Kong are getting nervous about maintaining their historic dominance. Not so, according to Christie's Rebecca Wei. "We welcome the competition. We think it's healthy for the market. It keeps us on our toes," she says.

Wei says the real drivers for change for Christie's have been internal. "As a leading auction house, we need to continue to innovate," she says, adding that key initiatives have included industry talent development and mass market education.

"[Education] has almost become our second brand in Asia and we are doing more and more — not only by our specialist giving lectures but also having art professional[s]... speaking at our forums, panels, or at Alexandra House, at our new James Christie Room," she adds, referring to the gallery in Hong Kong that opened earlier this year named after Christie's founder.

"That's something that's more challenging we're facing rather than competition. New players who come in are 'new kids on the block' and it will take years for them to build up the fundamentals, platforms, facilities and infrastructure. This takes years and years of hard work. I don't think it's easy to catch up with us," says Wei, who was previously at McKinsey & Co for 10 years. Christie's, which was founded in London in 1766, has had a presence in Hong Kong for 30 years.

And while Wei expects the market in Hong Kong will shift towards private sales, she believes this will be driven by auction houses, rather than the growth in galleries. She also sees a certain synergy between the roles of galleries on the one hand, and auction houses on the other.

"It's a very healthy ecosystem. The galleries are here to incubate the primary market, which is to bring up new artists and to support their growth," Wei says, adding that there may also be private sales directly from artists in the future. "[O]ur primary role and

mission is still... continuously building record price for artists. The mission is quite different between auction houses and galleries and fundamentally, Christies is an auction house."



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#### **REBECCA WEI PRESIDENT** Christie's Asia (excluding China)

**"IT'S A VERY HEALTHY ECOSYSTEM. THE GALLERIES ARE HERE TO INCUBATE THE PRIMARY MARKET... OUR PRIMARY ROLE AND MISSION IS STILL... CONTINUOUSLY BUILDING RECORD PRICE FOR ARTISTS"** 

### **TOBIAS BERGER** CURATOR M+



**"WORK WE HAVE BOUGHT IN THE LAST TWO TO THREE YEARS** HAS INCLUDED A LOT **OF HONG KONG ART**"

The German-born curator has been involved in the fine art scene in Hong Kong for nearly a decade. Following curatorial studies in Holland, which he put to good use in art museums in Europe, Berger moved to New Zealand, before he took up the position of director and curator for the avant-garde art space Para/Site in Hong Kong from 2003 until 2005.

Between then and his appointment at M+, he organised a handful of other large-scale international projects. "We have already held the first of a number of temporary exhibitions, in the lead-up to M+ opening, and around 60 per cent of that was local art. Work we have bought in the last two to three years has included a lot of Hong Kong art and we buy through commercial galleries here."

Asked how he assesses the artwork shown across government, commercial and public spaces right now in Hong Kong, he says that Asia itself does not have many centres, citing Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing as the best.

Berger is very positive on the upside of the growing presence of international gallery and auction houses in Hong Kong, but hopes that local artists will continue to be represented by commercial institutions. "A year ago, we lost a couple of young, interesting and ambitious galleries - 2P gallery and Saamlung," he says. "Gallery Exit was an interesting gallery, but its owner has now moved [to White Cube]. Rent and the competition of the big international galleries and charity auctions has something to do with these disappearances.

"The government needs to rethink its funding policies non-profit art organisations such as the Sovereign Art Foundation and the Asia Art Archive are being self-funded."

# **"THE WHOLE CONCEPT OF MY GALLERY AND ATELIER IS AN ART PRESENTATION**"

Like an ageless pixie of the art world, Sin Sin Man has flitted from one creative field to another, always bringing with her a certain boundless joy and an unquenchable spirit of curiosity. In 1998, she left her internationally successful career as a commercial accessories designer to open Sin Sin Atelier,

#### **SIN SIN MAN** DIRECTOR Sin Sin Fine Art

where she blazed a trail by crosspollinating art with design. While conjuring up magical fashion accessories inspired by the sights and scenes of her sojourn in Bali, Indonesia, she became interested in exhibiting art pieces.

"In 2003, I had the realisation that I wanted to be involved with artists, alongside my own creations," says Man, who also performs Chinese opera when she can.

Asked where she sees the Hong Kong art scene in five years' time, Man says she is not the forecasting type. "I live for the moment. I am focusing on my own creations every day, and I put on exhibitions that I find interesting. I do have high hopes though that the Hong Kong art scene will be the centre of fine art in Southeast Asia," she adds.

Pondering the most challenging issues facing the local art scene, she says: "I am still discovering them – all the time."

As far as Man is concerned, the 'next big thing' is "Exposure", the exhibition she's curating for Sin Sin Gallery scheduled for May 15 to June 30. "With four Indonesian artists taking part, there is going to be a lot going on – sound performance, installation and paintings," she says, referring to her collaborators Dwi Setianto, Eddie Prabandono, Lie Fhung, and S Teddy Darmawan.

Man has two narrow, mood-lit premises across each other in a quiet street in Sheung Wan – one focusing on art, the other on fashion accessories and jewellery. "The whole concept of my gallery and atelier is an art presentation," she says.

"HONG KONG HAS THE CAPACITY TO ABSORB ART FROM EVERY WHERE SO LONG AS THE FOCUS IS ON THE ART AND NOT ON THE MONEY"

# SUNDARAM TAGORE

Sundaram Tagore Gallery – New York, Hong Kong and Singapore

> A regular Hong Kong visitor since 1993, Sundaram Tagore's first exploratory trips to the city were as a director at New York-based PaceWildenstein Gallery, which split into two art businesses in 2010.

At later Hong Kong art fairs, he was impressed with the city's business efficiency. After setting up a Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York, he opened a second in Hong Kong in 2007. "Although there were no international galleries at the time, I was willing to gamble when I was approached to open a gallery here," he recalls. "I jumped at the prospect purely because our gallery is based on the exchange of ideas between Western and Eastern cultures. We wanted to find a place in Asia – and Hong Kong was ideal in terms infrastructure and the geography of the city."

Tagore observes that, at the time, Hong Kong was a regional market mainly focused presenting mainland Chinese art and, to a certain extent, art from the region. "Since then, Hong Kong has become a centre for the dissemination of art from across the globe and, therefore, we fit in very well," he notes.

"Our statement is about the exchange and interchange of art in the context of globalisation, where a great deal of diversity exists. Hong Kong is able to embrace this and we're very happy to be part of the fabric of this culture," Tagore adds. "We also have to remind ourselves that art should always be at the forefront regardless of where it comes from."

In the same sense that no one distinguishes between Chinese science, Russian science or American science, art should not be about nationality, he says. "It should be about humanism and universality, particularly in this day and age when globalisation has flattened the world," Tagore adds.

"Art has been with us since the dawn of civilisation and it will continue to grow regardless of economic upswing or downswing. Hong Kong has the capacity to absorb art from everywhere so long as the focus is on the art and not on the money," he says.

# SHIRLEY YABLONSKY

Opera Gallery Hong Kong

A momentous encounter when she was merely 18 years old changed Shirley Yablonsky's life forever. "That was when I first met Gilles Dyan, founder of Opera Gallery, and I knew I would be involved in fine art. His passion for the arts was contagious," she recalls.

Yablonsky looks after the Hong Kong operations of what is deemed to be the first worldwide network of art galleries, with outposts in the US, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. She believes the local art scene will be robust in five years' time - holding its own with London, New York, Paris or Singapore. "It will still be beaming with excitement," she says. "The West Kowloon [Cultural] District will be a dominant addition, along with the [former] police headquarters on Hollywood Road, adding huge flavour to the local scene, which is currently dominated by galleries and auction houses."

Yablonsky foresees a much more vibrant local community of artists, with better prospects such as through overseas residency programmes. "Hong Kong is an ambitious yet fairly young market. We should remember that other major art centres developed culturally over centuries," she says, adding that careful art curating is needed to help promote art education and make the city more competitive in the global art market.

Scanning market trends, Yablonsky sees growing interest in abstract art and photography. "We are experiencing a strong shift towards abstract art with both immense talent on the rise, as well as growing collector interest," she says, adding that photography needs a re-evaluation in Hong Kong to bring its status up to par with those in more mature art centres in the West.

As part of its efforts to engage with the public, Opera Gallery has a major photography show in its calendar, complemented by a workshop led by awardwinning French photographer Gérard Rancinan.

"The gallery is as warm a place as my home," Yablonsky says. "The door is always open and anyone is welcome. When we first opened in Hong Kong, people thought they needed to pay an admission ticket to enter the gallery. Today, we are known to be one of the most welcoming art spaces in town, where curious students as well as established curators are all welcome."

"HONG KONG IS AN AMBITIOUS YET FAIRLY YOUNG MARKET. WE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT OTHER MAJOR ART CENTRES DEVELOPED CULTURALLY OVER CENTURIES"

## LI YAN DIRECTOR

Lehmann Maupin Hong Kong

From its New York base, Lehmann Maupin has been working in Asia for over 10 years now, says Li Yan, the gallery's director in Hong Kong. "It was a natural move for us to open a space here last year – to situate ourselves within Asia to get closer to our Asian artists and the Hong Kong art scene. We are looking to discover new talent, and expand the number of Asian artists we represent."

The gallery, known for introducing world-class artists via international art fairs and solo exhibitions in collaboration with leading museums across the globe, has a formidable roster of artists, such as Gilbert & George, Lee Bul, Tracey Emin, Juergen Teller and Liu Wei.

Li sees Hong Kong as the hub for contemporary art in Asia, thanks to its established art market and a thriving local art scene. "It is transforming into a rich and fastgrowing contemporary art centre attracting both international and local audiences. Western galleries cannot afford to not pay attention to this."

She says their mission at Lehmann Maupin is to identify and cultivate raw talent. "The artists come first. The gallery has given an exceptional group of artists their

**"THE FOCUS IS NO LONGER ON THE WEST, ON CITIES LIKE NEW YORK, PARIS OR LONDON. HONG KONG IS DEFINITELY THE CENTRE OF CULTURAL DIALOGUE FOR ASIA "** 

first solo shows in New York, as well as some first museums shows."

Li is excited about their Art Basel in Hong Kong participation this year, among other new opportunities for cultural exchange in the city. "With the development of public cultural institutions such as the West Kowloon Cultural District, and the opening of many internationally renowned galleries, the art scene is expected to continue to develop at a pace," she says.

Li says they were part of ART HK for three years, the annual art fair that was taken over by Art Basel in 2013. "It has made a great impact on Hong Kong's cultural scene, promoting art to audiences of different generations. Art Basel's presence brings even more collectors to the city," she says.

"The focus is no longer on the West, on cities like New York, Paris or London. I think many more galleries will recognise - as we did – the importance of expanding internationally, to meet new artists and collectors in Asia, and have a global presence. Hong Kong is definitely the centre of cultural dialogue for Asia," Li adds,



#### SIMON BIRCH HONG KONG-BASED ARTIST

Artist Simon Birch never doubted his calling – since childhood, he had loved to draw – but it took a double blow to push him into committing to his craft professionally.

Born in the UK to a Polish mother and Armenian father, Birch came to Hong Kong in 1997 and worked as a labourer on the Tsing Ma bridge and as a DJ organising rave parties. He was saving up to attend art school when his plans were thrown off balance.

"The Hong Kong government banned rave parties, and within six months they also banned the construction work that I was involved in – high-access work – so within a year, I'd lost both my jobs," he recalls. It was a catalytic moment that forced him to consider his future.

"I really thought, what is going to make me happy for the rest of my life?" he says. The answer was

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# "I THINK THE ART WORLD HAS BEEN RULED FOR TOO LONG BY COMMERCE AND BRAND-NAME ARTISTS, AND IT'S REALLY BORING"

art. He started exhibiting his work on walls in restaurants and bars and was encouraged by the positive feedback he got. "But I didn't sell a single painting for years. Then, at some point, I sold a painting. I thought it was Christmas."

Birch eventually did attend art school, gaining an MFA in fine art, but by then he had largely established himself. Now he exhibits mainly in New York and is preparing for a major installation exhibition in Manhattan next year.

When it comes to predicting future art trends, he is hoping the future will be more adventurous than the past.

"I'm not really qualified to say – I'm a painter, but I'm not really part of the art world. I think the art world has been ruled for too long by commerce and brand-name artists, and it's really boring. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the next big thing."

#### **OSCAR HO HING-KAY** DIRECTOR

M.A. Programme in Cultural Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

**"THERE IS STILL NOT MUCH LOCAL** REPRESENTATION IN HONG KONG. I **HOPE THINGS WILL CHANGE**"

Oscar Ho envisioned a career in the arts since he was a child. But while studying fine arts at university in Canada, his conviction wavered. "I had a moment of crisis in my second year. I was thinking of quitting," he says. It seemed to him then that art was only about "egos, about self-aggrandisement."

He decided to take a trip to think about his future. On his travels, he visited an anthropology museum in Toronto and saw an artwork by a Mexican painter that moved him deeply.

"It was of someone dying, with the family crying, and an angel," he recalls. "It really impressed on me how art spoke of the emotions, destiny, and being human. The impact was so powerful."

With his faith in the medium restored, he decided to pursue a career path in the arts, but not

quite the one he initially envisaged. "I wanted to be an artist, but I decided to become a curator, to survive," he says. "I needed to earn money. I still think I'm a better artist than curator."

He sees Hong Kong's artistic future as similarly complex. Following the handover in 1997, Ho says Hong Kong lost some of its creative energy and has been beset by uncertainty about its identity.

"China, much to our surprise, grew so fast... and Hong Kong felt so belittled," he says. "If we're not Chinese, what are we?"

Although Hong Kong has since spent a lot of money in developing an arts presence, Ho questions whether the investment has had any real benefit for local Hong Kong artists.

"There is still not much local representation in Hong Kong. I hope things will change."

# **"ART HAS THIS** PHENOMENAL **CAPACITY TO NOT GO WHERE** YOU THINK IT SHOULD GO"



#### LARS NITTVE **CHIEF CURATOR** M+

Lars Nittve remembers the day when he became irrevocably committed to a career in the arts. Still in his early 20s, he had been studying economics with the vague intention of becoming a banker when he visited a Le Corbusier exhibition in a museum in his home city of Stockholm, Sweden, and found himself riveted. He decided there and then on a dramatic change of career path. "I should not study economics, I should start art history instead," he recalls thinking. "I was prepared to give up everything. It was totally romantic." But he proved himself right. "When I started art history, it was like coming home," he says. "And it turned out I was quite good."

Now, with about 35 years of experience in the international art world under his belt, Nittve predicts that the local arts scene will see rapid changes over the next five years, with some disparities to remedy along the way. Development has been "a bit too one-sided, with so much hinging on the commercial side, an over-emphasis on commercial considerations."

It's an imbalance that M+, along with new arts venues including the former police station on Hollywood Road, will help to correct, he believes. "It's important to have real institutions," he says. "In three to four years, M+ will be up and running. M+ is so massive that we will, almost alone, rebalance the scene." Rather than attempting to predict the next new trend in the art world, Nittve favours a waitand-see approach. "Art has this phenomenal capacity to not go where you think it should go," he says. "Let's stay open-minded and we'll be pleasantly surprised."

## FRANK VIGNERON CURATOR AND PROFESSOR

CUHK Department of Fine Arts

Professor Frank Vigneron's academic role has given him a bird's eye view of the exponential rise in interest in the fine arts among young people over the last decade. In his early years at Chinese University, just 15 secondary school students would typically attend the department's information days. That's changed.

"Next information day, we'll have to deal with 120 students," he says. "Everyone seems to be wanting to study fine arts." Artists nowadays hone their skills through study rather than daubing in Parisian garrets, says the Frenchman.

"You will not find a single professional artist in the world right now who doesn't have an arts degree," he says. "That's been true I guess for the last 20 or 30 years." While the profile of fine arts

may be on the rise, Vigneron sees

the outlook for budding artists in the city as less than promising. The future of the artists' community in Fo Tan, whose residents hold regular open weekends that see tens of thousand of visitors descend on the village, is under threat because of the same problems faced by all artists in Hong Kong: rising rents.

"We have a lot of really interesting people doing arts in Hong Kong, as you would in any great city in the world," he says. "But the financial situation – the rents, in particular – this is slowing down absolutely everything. It's getting a lot worse. And no matter how institutions like Art Basel and the big galleries from Europe deal with the art situation in Hong Kong, it doesn't look good for the next decade. I'm being pessimistic here. I hope I'm wrong."

**"WE HAVE A LOT OF REALLY INTERESTING PEOPLE DOING ARTS IN HONG KONG, AS YOU WOULD IN ANY GREAT CITY IN THE WORLD... BUT THE FINANCIAL SITUATION — THE RENTS, IN PARTICULAR — THIS IS SLOWING DOWN ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING"**  **CHI-WON YOON CEO AND CHAIRMAN** UBS Asia Pacific

> Chi-Won Yoon is CEO and chairman at UBS Asia Pacific. Although his career is that of a high-flying investment banker, he spent much of his childhood immersed in the arts.

"My mother is an artist, and as a child I would often accompany her to art galleries and exhibitions all over the world – particularly in Indonesia, where I spent nearly six years of my childhood," says Yoon, who is from South Korea. "I grew up with art and artists, and loved every moment of it. Art means many things to different people, but for me art is a form of communication and insight."

In Hong Kong, the traditional role of patron of the arts is often played by banks and other institutions, rather than individuals, and Hong Kong's lightning-speed climb up the global arts ladder has not gone unnoticed at UBS. The bank has played a prominent role in promoting and sponsoring both local and international artists, and its own impressive contemporary art collection includes works by local artist Wilson Shieh.

"The launch of Art Basel in Hong Kong last year was a seminal moment," says Yoon. "In light of the global interest in the region, the show is likely to become a key fixture in the international culture calendar and UBS is thrilled to be a lead partner."

The space constraints suffered by artists in Hong Kong is an ongoing frustration in a small, packed city. Yoon sees light at the end of the tunnel because of new spaces set to open in the next few years. E V I fu gr ho K

"I am optimistic about the future and for the continued growth of the arts scene here," he says. "In five years, M+, Hong Kong's museum for visual culture, promises to be an outstanding complement to the city's cultural offering."



# "MY MOTHER IS AN ARTIST, AND AS A CHILD I WOULD OFTEN ACCOMPANY HER TO ART GALLERIES AND EXHIBITIONS ALL OVER THE WORLD — PARTICULARLY IN INDONESIA"