

# Western Art Dealers Take New Approach to Hong Kong

By NINA SIEGAL MAY 15, 2014

As the Hong Kong art market has blossomed in the past several years, a range of Western art galleries, including global players such as Gagosian, White Cube, Sundaram Tagore and Lehmann Maupin, have opened large outposts in the city, with varying degrees of success.

This month, to coincide with the Art Basel in Hong Kong art fair, two more prominent Western art dealers — Axel Vervoordt of Antwerp and the Pace Gallery of New York — will also open doors to new spaces in Hong Kong. But, taking note of some of the lessons learned by earlier Western pioneers, they are taking a slightly different approach: going small.

Both galleries will be opening in the Entertainment Building at 30 Queen's Road, part of the Central district arts scene, about one minute's walk from the Pedder Building which houses the Gagosian, Lehmann Maupin, Pearl Lam and Simon Lee galleries. Unlike their predecessors down the block, however, which each occupy about 4,000 to 5,000 square feet, or about 372 to 465 square meters, these spaces are only about 700 square feet each — very small by art gallery standards.

“It's a shoebox size and that's why we want to have just one artist installation or show one artist's work every time,” said Boris Vervoordt, director of Axel Vervoordt NV, which deals in art and antiques and also has an interior design business. “It's not the kind of space where you can do a retrospective show. It gives us a conversation starter.”

Mr. Vervoordt, a son of Axel Vervoordt, the company's founder, said he thought of the space as an extension of the company's Belgium gallery, which sells works by international contemporary artists, and as a venue to “explore a dialogue between East and West.” The Hong Kong gallery's inaugural

exhibition, “Theory of Se,” is a series of three commissioned works by the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, who has created tapestry-like sculptures from recycled liquor-bottle caps.

“We felt we needed a gateway to Asia for the European artists we are representing, and to have a presence in Asia for the Japanese artists that we represent,” Boris Vervoordt said. The choice to open the gallery with an exhibition by a Ghanaian artist also reflects a desire to be truly global. “For us as a European gallery, to bring an artist from Africa to Asia is great,” he said. “I’m proud of that.”

For Pace Gallery, the new space “is more like an office and a large private viewing room, though it’s certainly open to the public,” said Arne Glimcher, the chairman. “We’ll have exhibitions about four or five times a year, but an exhibition can be three works or four works, or if it’s watercolors or works on paper or small sculptures, it can be 10 works.”

Pace, a Manhattan-based gallery with spaces in London and Menlo Park, Calif., opened a 22,000-square-foot Beijing gallery in a former munitions factory in 2008. The Hong Kong space, Mr. Glimcher said, will be linked to the Beijing space, allowing the gallery to sell Chinese contemporary art to clients throughout Asia in a free port, which does not charge import or export tariffs.

“Beijing is always going to be our flagship in Asia, and I think this is an important extra,” he said.

Unlike other Western galleries in Hong Kong, Pace will not be using the space to sell art by the Western artists on its roster, which includes Mark Rothko, Donald Judd, Robert Ryman and Alexander Calder. In Hong Kong, it will focus on Asian contemporary art by artists such as the Shanghai-based sculptor Liu Jianhua and the Japanese neo-pop artist Yoshitomo Nara. For its inaugural show, opening May 14, Pace Hong Kong will present recent oil paintings on paper by the contemporary artist Zhang Xiaogang, who explores memory in his images using a combination of Western surrealist and Eastern classical art motifs.

“We didn’t come in as carpetbaggers to sell our wares; we came in to support a wonderful burgeoning art world,” Mr. Glimcher said. “Our Asian clients who are interested in Western art come to the States. Our role in Asia is to support the Chinese art scene, because we totally believe in it.”

Mr. Glimcher said Pace made the decision to go small after observing some of the earlier Western gallery forays into Hong Kong. “I think several of them regret the scale at which they’ve opened,” he said, “and some have realized that their galleries are mostly visited during the art fair and the auctions, mostly by people from other parts of Asia or Europe or America.”

Those events, he said, only draw international art world connoisseurs to Hong Kong twice a year, and the local market for art does not yet sustain an ongoing program of large exhibitions. “One can have a very large opening, and then almost nobody comes to the exhibition,” he said.

Mr. Glimcher also said he thought some of the other galleries might have miscalculated the level of interest in Western art. “These people put millions and millions of dollars into these huge spaces thinking that they were going to make a killing and filling it with international art,” he said. “But that’s not what Asia’s about right now. The Asians realize that they have something really extraordinary going on: the art that’s there. And they are buying it.”

For Mr. Vervoordt, after observing other galleries’ operations in Hong Kong in the past few years and talking to colleagues in the trade, the art world there may still be a little like the Wild East.

“The local market is not very trustworthy, it’s not very easy, it’s a completely different mentality,” he said. “People might come in and buy something at the opening and cancel it at the end of the show or restart the negotiations; it’s a tough and complicated market.”

But he finds that challenge exciting, he added: “I’ve never been very calculated in any of my decisions. I really feel we should do this and we’ll see how things go from there.”

Mr. Glimcher is confident that the art scene in Hong Kong will continue to grow, and that, over time, more locals will start visiting art galleries as part of their social life, as people do in New York or London.

“Hong Kong is such a business town and such a transient town that’s it’s not part of the culture yet,” he said, “but I think it will be. Hong Kong is very carefully considered for us as a necessity, but we’re going to grow slowly as the art scene there grows.”