

High-end art in Hong Kong

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A Hiroshi Senju exhibition, *Out of Nature: Cliffs and Falling Water*, at the Sundaram Tagore gallery in Hong Kong. (Sundaram Tagore)

Hong Kong has never been known for the arts. Shopping, yes. Cheap, delicious food and a rowdy bar district, definitely. But art? Not unless you count streets brimming with shops peddling questionable antiques and curios.

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Hong Kong's reputation as a capital of kitsch is clearly fading, though. This year's Hong Kong International Art Fair, a four-day affair held at the end of May, attracted more than 63,000 visitors – a nearly 38% increase over the previous year, which puts it in the same attendance ballpark as Switzerland's Art Basel, an annual contemporary art fair that the Daily Telegraph once called "the Olympics of the art world". In April, at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong, a new work by pioneer video artist Zhang Peili sold for \$23 million Hong Kong dollars, more than nine times its estimated value. And recently, it was announced that a former police station and prison in the middle of SoHo will house a contemporary arts complex, opening in 2014.

"The earth is clearly tipping eastwards on its axis, and Asia is playing a more important role in all our lives, be it economically, politically or culturally," said Magnus Renfrew, director of the Hong Kong International Art Fair. "The art market tends to follow the money and there is immense wealth being created in the region."

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Even further along the horizon is a new cultural district in West Kowloon, set to be completed in stages between 2012 and 2026. Despite multiple delays, criticism and turnover in project leadership, \$22 billion Hong Kong dollars have been allocated to develop a 40-hectare area devoted to the arts, including a new museum called M+, which is being led by Lars Nittve, founding director of the Tate Modern in London. The West Kowloon Cultural District Authority plans to build a temporary pavilion for M+ in 2012, and the main building is set to open after 2016. The district is a large step for a former colony whose government generally caters to real estate moguls' high-rise towers and shopping malls.

Over the last few years, Hong Kong's growing interest in the arts has most visibly manifested itself in the arrival of several internationally-recognized galleries. Increasingly curious buyers, growing affluence, low taxes and low import fees have all combined to create an environment amenable to gallery owners. And until the museums open, these dynamic Hong Kong galleries are a visitor's best hope at catching a glimpse of coveted works from emerging and established western and Asian artists.

One of the early arrivals, back in 2007, was **Sundaram Tagore**, a gallerist with outposts in New York and Beverly Hills who focuses on the intersection of Western and non-Western art and shows pieces that further a global dialogue.

"[Hong Kong is] the hot spot for an international gallery. That's the truth in what I've experienced," Tagore said. "What's happening in Asia is, because of the boom, there is a voracious appetite, and that's very positive."

The most recent exhibition was a collection of striking black-and-white prints by photographer Sebastiao Salgado, who highlights issues of poverty and globalization in striking landscapes and emotional portraits.

London gallery Ben Brown Fine Arts turned up two years later, in 2009. Though he was born in Hong Kong, Brown waited to start a gallery in his hometown until he felt the market was ripe and that buyers had gained a real appreciation for western art. Large abstract paintings by Spanish artist Miquel Barceo are on display until 29 July, their thick texture belying the artist's background as a sculptor who works with metals.

Next came Edouard Malingue, a French art dealer whose focus is on selling Impressionist and Modern works to Asian buyers. Opening with a bang last September, Malingue curated the biggest Picasso show Hong Kong had ever seen, and a subsequent exhibition showcased the likes of Magritte, Ernst and Pissarro. On view through 30 June in Malingue's white, sunny space are works by contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Huan, who uses ash to craft paintings and sculptures that denote the impermanence of human life.

Art behemoth Gagosian Gallery opened its doors in January with a widely lauded exhibition by Damien Hirst. In a city where space is hard to come by, the high-ceilinged 5,200-square-foot gallery is making the statement that Hong Kong is worth the investment. Director Nick Simunovic said the gallery's goals mirror its ones in other parts of the world: to mount "museum-quality exhibitions" and to help serious collectors add to their coffers. But Gagosian also aims to represent a wide range of artists of interest to both Asian and Western collectors. "I have been fielding requests for artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami, Richard Prince, Roy Lichtenstein, Alberto Giacometti and Pablo Picasso, among many others," Simunovic said.

In March, Pascal and Sylvie de Sarthe brought a branch of their flagship Phoenix, Arizona gallery to Hong Kong. The gallery highlights works ranging from Abstract Expressionism to Pop. The couple is the exclusive dealer for photographer and surrealist artist David LaChapelle in Asia and launched their Hong Kong outpost with a successful show of Chinese artist Zao Wou-ki's colourful abstract canvases.

Art world mainstays agree: Hong Kong still has a long way to go before it can be seen as a hub on par with New York, Paris or London. But it is clear that a city oft criticized as commercial and superficial is finally developing some cultural depth.