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Art Basel Hong Kong // News

Hong Kong's contemporary art scene is blossoming in difficult times

With four new art spaces opening, cultural workers see a bright future for the city

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Along with its global role, Hong Kong is increasingly nourishing local artists, including Chan Wai Lap, who continues exploring pools with a new commission

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Hong Kong's pragmatism can provide an odd oasis in troubled times. As much of the world contends with the fiery belly of this uncertain era, the ever forward-looking city has just finished shaking off the cobwebs of its locked-in Covid era and political upheavals and begun barreling into a confident future. Along with the March line-up of Art Basel Hong Kong and satellite fairs as well

as a wealth of museum and gallery exhibitions, the city this year resumes the expansion of its arts ecosystem with four new art spaces. To many, 2026 has the buzz of a new chapter.

“If it weren’t for the pandemic, I think we would have been in Hong Kong much earlier,” says Craig Yee, the director of Ink Studio, a Beijing and New York gallery launching a space in Central’s Tai Kwun complex in March. “But the pandemic takes three years away and then you have around two years of recovery. So here we are in 2026.”

Along with Ink Studio, founded in 2012, the Shanghai gallery Antenna Space, established in 2013, is opening a branch in the Wong Chuk Hang area in March. The area will also be home to Gold, the exhibition and salon space of the cultural think tank Serakai Studio. The Hong Kong curator Jims Lam is also launching a new curatorial platform called Knotting Space in the H Queen’s complex the same month.

“I don’t think that even locally, we are expecting Hong Kong to return to how it was [in the late 2010s],” says Art Basel Hong Kong’s director Angelle Siyang-Le. “Hong Kong has changed because the world has changed. It’s now about how Hong Kong plays a new role as a global city in a macro context.”

That context is increasingly Asian as the region’s art scenes become more confident and interdependent—and that regional strength provides some buffer from trade wars and military conflict. “I don’t know what will happen” with the US economy and politics, Yee says, but looking globally at where culture, economies and art markets will thrive, he says, look to Asia.

All roads lead to Hong Kong

Yee points out that much of Southeast Asia’s wealth—and art collecting—is dominated by the Nanyang ethnic

Chinese populations, who have Fujianese and Cantonese heritage and consider Hong Kong a sort of cultural homeland. “Hong Kong is still the centre”, attracting art and general visitors alike, he says. “The city is still where mainland Chinese will go, where Taiwanese Chinese will go. It’s where Singapore Chinese will go, where Southeast Asian Chinese will go,” Yee says.

Hong Kong’s cultural infrastructure, including its commercial galleries, the Art Basel fair, auction house headquarters, efficient logistics and world-class institutions like M+, Tai Kwun and the Asia Art Archive (AAA), “position the city at the centre of Asia’s art network—a dynamic hub for the circulation of people, events, and ideas,” says Anthony Yung, AAA’s head of research and archives. “Historically, Hong Kong served as a regional hub, particularly in connecting mainland China and Southeast Asia with the rest of the world. It is a place where diverse cultures meet, fostering an exceptional openness and hybridity... shaping both Hong Kong artists and our distinctive role within today’s global art ecology.”

But as China’s pull on Hong Kong grows, some have raised concerns the latter might lose some of its character in a process of “mainlandification”. Tobias Berger, the co-founder and curatorial director of Serakai Studio and its new space Gold, observes an opposite phenomenon as well: of Hong Kong attracting “creative and interesting people” from the mainland who acclimatise and assimilate. Tying into Gold’s second show, which will be more interdisciplinary, Berger says the designs and artworks coming out of mainland cities like Chengdu, Guangzhou and Shanghai, “are at the moment the most creative output we see in Asia. I’ve never seen such a push into creativity in my life as in the past two or three years.”

Meanwhile, mainland art buying has taken a hit due to the real estate slump in the country, Yee says. “That’s

probably the biggest drag on the market—and it's still dragging." In the past, developers accounted for around half of mainland Chinese art sales, he says. "None of these people are in the market anymore", and many are selling their collections, "so there's a flood of content on the secondary market", which in turn also suppresses the primary market. "That's a headwind that we've all been struggling with for the past three to five years." Still, other industries and asset classes are rising. "Will these people come out and spend money on contemporary art? We'll find out."

According to Anthony Yung, the post-Covid years have germinated a "growing reflection on the sustainability of our previously intense global connectedness" in the Hong Kong art world, out of which "a renewed interest in local culture has emerged". He adds, "In Hong Kong there is widespread enthusiasm for rediscovering our local history and landscape." Yung worked with the veteran local art critic Oscar Ho Hing Kay to produce the book *Hong Kong Art: A Curator's History (1987-2004)*, published in March during Art Basel Hong Kong.

The book documents the roots of Hong Kong contemporary art in the 1980s and 1990s, when "being an artist in Hong Kong was not regarded as a proper profession, so many artists had day jobs. Most famously, Ellen Pau, our pioneer in video and media art, was a radiographer and a mammographer at the public hospital," Yung says. Pau is the curator of Art Basel Hong Kong's film sector this year. "Among the core group of artists, there was a strong experimental and avant-garde spirit, with little concern for commercial success or mainstream acceptance. Their artistic vocabularies were often obscure, deliberately distancing themselves from popular culture", when Cantopop music and cinema were regionally dominant, Yung says.

Connecting with Hong Kong's artistic legacy

Around the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China, “issues surrounding the city’s history, the documentation of its present, and questions of cultural identity became increasingly significant to many artists. These two characteristics—maintaining a distance from professionalisation and mainstream culture, and a deep concern for our unique cultural identity—remain, in my opinion, the underlying traits of Hong Kong art,” Yung says. He adds that Hong Kong now produces a wellspring of “exciting young artists and art professionals who are active participants in the global art community. Yet many of them lack the opportunity to understand or connect with our own artistic legacy.”

Siyang-Le says Hong Kong art now “works very hard to maintain this balanced ecosystem” between a “transactional” art market and hub, and an independent exhibition environment for artists, curators and audiences. Even before the turbulent past decade, she says, Hong Kong’s geographic and political “strategic position” means it is “always adapting to changes”. Culturally business-minded, Hongkongers are “pragmatic, adaptable and not afraid of change.” On a deeper level, she says, “Hong Kong is very experimental, because we are always facing different cultures, historically, so people in Hong Kong are not afraid of accepting and adapting to new culture and making it their own.”

That adventurous nature has already brought phenomenal artistic growth to Hong Kong. “I honestly believe that this is the most exciting, most transformative and most interesting city globally,” Berger says. He points to the city’s “extraordinary development” of art infrastructure and ecology, building to Asia’s most advanced in 20 years. “I think the global future will be decided here.”