



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT, *Warrior*, 1982, acrylic, oilstick, and spray paint on wood panel, 183 × 122 cm. Courtesy Christie's Images Ltd.

Amid a global health crisis and rocky economic circumstances, collectors were emboldened to make riskier purchases, favoring the new and unfamiliar over the tried and true. This was seen in the extraordinary rebound by global contemporary art auctions in 2021. According to Artprice's annual report, from June 2020 to June 2021, USD 2.7 billion was transacted in the market—an all-time high, buoyed by online sales and the burgeoning realm of NFTs. By contrast, the figures for blue-chip modern art trailed behind those seen in pre-pandemic times, with niche names garnering the most interest.

Hitting the Throttle

In the recovery of the contemporary art market, China overtook the United States as the world's primary generator of art-auction turnover, with the former contributing 40 percent to global sales and the latter 32 percent. The action in China was led by Hong Kong, which boasted growth of an outstanding 277 percent, year-on-year.

Hong Kong's increasing importance was evident in how sales incorporated more offerings by artists whose markets are primarily in Europe and the US. For example, a third of the transactions for canvases by Jean-Michel Basquiat—the highest-grossing artist worldwide, who alone accounted for 14 percent of global contemporary art-auction turnover in 2020–21—were made in Hong Kong. Two big sales cemented the city's status as a Basquiat hotspot, rivaled only by New York: in March, Christie's found a taker for the iconic *Warrior* (1982) at USD 41.6 million; in June, an *Untitled* (1985) triptych earned USD 37.2 million at Sotheby's celebrity-curated sale helmed by Mandopop star Jay Chou.

International rising stars also grew in demand in Hong Kong. Among those whose works far exceeded expectations was New York-based millennial painter Loie Hollowell. The abstract canvas *Linked Lingams* (yellow, green, blue, purple, pink) (2018) set a new auction record for the artist at Sotheby's Jay-Chou-curated sales in June, tripling its high estimate. Pakistan-born Salman Toor likewise drew attention, with his painting *Three Boys* (2019) hammering at USD 723,000, more than seven times its high estimate, at Sotheby's Hong Kong in April. Longtime auction hall-of-famers also saw breakthroughs. Two new records were set in Hong Kong for Yoshitomo Nara, who remains the top-selling contemporary artist in Asia. In April, Poly Auction moved Nara's 2.6-meter-tall wooden house adorned with two paintings, *Berlin Barack* (2007), for USD 15.4 million, the artist's second-highest price and most expensive installation to date. This was topped by Phillips and Poly in a joint sale just two months later, when the portrait of a moody child *Missing in Action* (2000) hammered at USD 15.9 million.

Seeing more potential in Asia, the world's fastest-growing market, auction houses made bigger investments in Hong Kong. On May 18, Sotheby's announced that it was re-stationing two top specialists, Alex Branczik, European head of contemporary art, and Max Moore, vice president and co-head of New York's contemporary art day auction, to Hong Kong. On July 27, Christie's revealed that its new Asia-Pacific headquarters will be located in The Henderson building, which will be completed in 2024.

Not far behind Hong Kong in terms of growth is Beijing, which saw a 161-percent turnover increase. The Beijing arm of Poly Auction, China's largest state-owned auction house, made its fair share of records. For instance, in June, Chen Danqing's painting *Tibetan Series – Shepherds* (1980) was snapped up for USD 25.1 million, becoming the most valuable Chinese contemporary artwork auctioned. The sale also catapulted Chen into third place on the 2020/2021 list of top contemporary artists by auction record, after Basquiat and Beeple. At the same event, Liu Ye's blue-toned abstract canvas *Bamboo Bamboo Broadway* (2011–12) brought in USD 12.6 million, an unprecedentedly high price for the artist. China Guardian broke records for the sale of a non-Chinese artwork in December,

with Claude Monet's USD 24.1 million *Bassin aux nymphéas, les rosiers* (1913).

Joining Forces

Since the start of the pandemic, global sales jointly hosted by the international arms of auction houses have become more common as a means to capture profits despite travel restrictions. In December 2020, Phillips and Poly Auction ventured into new collaborative territory, partnering up for two successful inter-house auctions. The second of their joint 20th Century and Contemporary Art and Design sales, which took place in Hong Kong in June and were livestreamed in Poly's Beijing saleroom, was a resounding success, earning a combined total of USD 90.4 million, with 17 new artist records and a staggering 86 percent of lots sold above high estimates. Emily Mae Smith's *Broom Life* (2014) painting stole the spotlight, hammering at USD 1.59 million, more than 20 times its high estimate. *Figure in a Night Landscape* (2017), a painting by the late Matthew Wong also fared well, sextupling its high estimate to earn USD 4.7 million, just shy of Wong's USD 4.8 million record, notched at the 2020 iteration of Phillips and Poly Auction's joint sale. Paintings by Toor were again coveted, with *Girl with Driver* (2013) taken home for USD 890,000—more than three times the high estimate, and a new auction record for the artist. Poly and Phillips's achievements suggest collaboration could be a key survival strategy in an unpredictable global economy.

Historically New

Despite superhot trends lighting up the contemporary sector's recovery, sales figures for modern art were uneven. What stirred the interests of collectors were historically recognized artists who are rarely seen at auction. For example, in April, Sotheby's Hong Kong put on the block French-trained Vietnamese artist Mai Trung Thu's painted *Portrait de Mademoiselle Phuong* (1930), which the gavel fell for at USD 3.1 million, the highest price ever fetched by a Vietnamese artist. The same applied to South Asian practitioners. In March, Sotheby's New York's Asia Week sale of South Asian modern and contemporary art earned USD 7.1 million, with seven new artist records and the highest total achieved by the category since March 2016. Christie's New York adopted a similar strategy in September, with works by seldom-at-auction figures like Anwar Jalal Shemza and Abdur Rahman Chughtai multiplying high estimates to attain between USD 230,000–250,000 each. Fresh-to-market lots are another avenue to profits. VS Gaitonde's *Untitled* (1961) abstraction debuted with Saffronart on March 11—the winning bid of USD 5.5 million is the highest price paid for an Indian artist's work at auction.

By comparison, sales for the Chinese modernists who have flooded the market in recent years were more unpredictable. Sotheby's Hong Kong set a new record for Chu Teh-Chun in April, selling the abstract *Harmonie hivernale* (1986) triptych for USD 29.5 million, surpassing a USD 15.4 million high estimate. Zhang Daqian led Sotheby's Hong Kong Autumn Sale Week with the USD 27.5 million *Mist at Dawn* (1968). However, throughout the year other lots by Chu missed the top ends of estimates, as did works by Sanyu, a star of 2020 sales. Canvases by Zao Wou-ki and Xu Beihong even went unsold, including the latter's allegorical painting *Slave and Lion* (1924), offered by Christie's Hong Kong in a single-lot auction in May. Had there been a successful bid within its estimates of USD 45–58 million, it would have been the most expensive work by an Asian artist ever auctioned. The market rumblings of 2021 indicate that the same-old simply won't cut it—this is the time of big risks, big payoffs.

*All prices include buyer's premier, unless noted otherwise.

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LOIE HOLLOWELL, *Linked Lingams* (yellow, green, blue, purple, pink), 2018, oil paint, acrylic medium, sawdust, and high-density foam on linen, 122 × 91.5 × 9.3 cm. Courtesy Sotheby's Hong Kong.



VS GAITONDE, *Untitled*, 1961, oil on canvas, 127 × 203 cm. Courtesy Saffronart.

BOUNCE BACK BIGGER