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AZERBAIJAN
BAHRAIN
BANGLADESH
BHUTAN
BRUNEI
CAMBODIA
CHINA
EAST TIMOR
GEORGIA
HONG KONG
INDIA
INDONESIA
IRAN
IRAQ
ISRAEL
JAPAN
JORDAN
KAZAKHSTAN
KOREA, NORTH
KOREA, SOUTH
KUWAIT
KYRGYZSTAN
LAOS
LEBANON
MACAU
MALAYSIA
MALDIVES
MONGOLIA
MYANMAR
NEPAL
NEW ZEALAND
OMAN
PAKISTAN
PALESTINE
PAPUA NEW GUINEA
PHILIPPINES
QATAR
SAUDI ARABIA
SINGAPORE
SRI LANKA
SYRIA
TAIWAN
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THE ARTISTS OF 2019 & ONE TO WATCH
COUNTRY REPORTS · FESTIVALS
EXHIBITIONS · AGENDA

artasiapacific



General installation view of Art Dubai 2019. Courtesy Art Dubai and Photo Solutions.

TOPSY TURVY



FRANK AUERBACH, *Reclining Head of Julia*, 2006, acrylic on board, 46 × 46 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Timothy Taylor, London/New York.



MARINA CRUZ, *White Threads and Fibers on Pink Garment*, 2019, oil on canvas, 121.92 × 91.44 cm. Courtesy the artist and Mind Set Art Center, Taipei/Seoul/Palo Alto/Paris.



Installation view of **GERASIMOS FLORATOS**'s *Pressing into crowds, there is still space upstairs*, 2018-19, wood, canvas, oil, paint, mixed media, dimensions variable, at Art Basel Hong Kong 2019. Courtesy Art Basel, Basel/Hong Kong/Miami.

Uncertainties about the China-United States trade war, the ongoing threat of a no-deal Brexit, and social unrest in countries across the world put seismic pressures on global manufacturing and trade sectors in 2019. The net result of these tensions was a sweeping economic slowdown, and escalated competition for the position of Asia's art-market capital.

Splintered Grounds

Earlier in the year it appeared that the art-fair industry's behemoth was unperturbed by the socioeconomic conditions of the region. As in the past, Art Basel Hong Kong (ABHK) (3/29–31) drew in key buyers from East and Southeast Asia, as well as from further afield. Signifying the spending power of the VIP attendees, big-ticket pieces were snapped up within hours of the preview. Among them, Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Elvis* (1962) changed hands at White Cube Gallery for USD 2.85 million. Cardi Gallery found takers for Zao Wou-ki's 1971 abstraction, priced at USD 1.8 million, and Pace clinched the sale of a 2012 Zhang Xiaogang canvas for a seven-figure sum. Likely none of the fair's guests had registered the still small-scale protests over a proposed extradition law happening on March 31. Come November, however, at least two galleries had withdrawn from ABHK 2020. ABHK and many of its logistics and hospitality partners extended discounts for exhibitors, in line with the tourism industry at large, which had been impacted by several months of demonstrations. Speculations swirled about the global market's center shifting further east, and north—to Shanghai.

The feasibility of that theory was tested at West Bund Art and Design (11/7–11) and Art021 (11/7–10). Serendipitously, on the fairs' opening days, news broke that China and the US were examining rolling back their respective tariffs—an encouraging sign that, along with the four-percent cut to China's value-added tax implemented in April, helped ease cash flows. At West Bund, transactions reached six-figures, such as with Frank Auerbach's *Reclining Head of Julia* (2006), exchanged for USD 700,000 at Timothy Taylor's booth, and Lee Bul's abstraction *Perdu XXVI* (2019), bought for USD 150,000 from Lehmann Maupin. At Art021, David Kordansky announced the sale of a USD 275,000 Fred Eversley sculpture. These publicized numbers—relatively modest compared to those at Art Basel Hong Kong—showed that, in 2019, splashy mega-purchases are a no-go in China, even in the relatively liberal, mercantile center of Shanghai. With a bubbling national debt crisis, unstable alliances between the wealthy and a fiercely ideological central government, and

heightened political control as the modern nation celebrated its 70th anniversary, China's elite comrades are under pressure to keep low profiles. Arguably, these ever-shifting conditions still disadvantage Shanghai as a veritable art market hotbed.

Southeast Asia similarly saw the jostling of two major art-trading centers. The cancellation of Art Stage Singapore on January 16—just nine days ahead of its scheduled opening—and the two-time postponement of Art SG, now slated for October 2020, suggested that local demand could not prop up the existing supply of art fairs. Perhaps more appropriately scaled, the regionally focused fair SEA Focus launched with just 26 exhibitors in a tent at Gillman Barracks and will have a sophomore edition of 20 galleries during Singapore Art Week in January 2020.

By contrast, over in Indonesia—the region's largest economy—the boutique Art Moments Jakarta (5/3–5) and the larger Art Jakarta (8/30–9/1), both launched with buzzy fanfare. Reflecting the common sentiments among many of the galleries participating at Art Jakarta, Arario Gallery stated that following the fall of Art Stage Singapore, they were looking for a replacement fair in the region, and decided to test the waters. At both fairs, steady sales to regional collectors attested to the city's appeal. During Art Jakarta, at the booth of Yavuz Gallery, Ronald Ventura's golden sculpture of a gaping bulldog went to a Filipino buyer for USD 600,000 and Art Agenda, SEA sold sculptor Li Chen's *Human Nature* (2013) for USD 250,000 to a local collector. The potential for growth in Indonesia is not to be ignored.

The significance of securing trade ties with Southeast Asia has not escaped Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, who is aiming to lessen Taiwan's economic dependence on China. Following her groundwork, Taiwan's art market is positioned for expansion along similar lines. This was signified in January at the inaugural Taipei Dangdai (1/17–20), which saw brisk sales mainly for big international names but little support for regional artists. Headline transactions included that of Georg Baselitz's *Der Bote (The Messenger)* (1984), which went to a Taiwanese foundation for USD 2.3 million via Thaddaeus Ropac. David Zwirner moved a Yayoi Kusama painting for more than USD 1 million, while Lisson Gallery sold Anish Kapoor's mirrored, dish-shape installation for USD 966,000. Amid rocky conditions in Hong Kong and China, Taiwan might stand to further its edge.

Familiar Frontiers

Elsewhere, fairs attempted to ride out stormy geopolitical and economic conditions by

peddling well-recognized wares to domestic clientele. Instead of celebrating a "Guest Country of Honor," for example, the 18th Korea International Art Fair (9/26–29) had the special showcase "Romanticism in History – Korean Modernism Painting Exhibition." A dearth of participating galleries from around East Asia reinforced the fair's national focus. Among the exhibitors, Kukje Gallery placed Lee Ufan's Dansaekhwa painting *With Winds* (1988) in a Korean collection for USD 850,000. Total sales across the 175 booths nevertheless achieved USD 26.3 million, up from the USD 24.7 million attained the year before, thus validating the fair's strategy.

The same phenomenon was apparent at Sydney Contemporary (9/12–15), which featured mostly local fare across its 95 booths. Alcaston Gallery brought a presentation of works by Indigenous artists, including Betty Kuntiwa Pumani, whose paintings of the Indigenous ceremonial site Antara were purchased for between USD 8,790 and USD 16,230 each. Tiger Yaltangki's vibrant canvas *Malpa Wiru (Good Friends)* (2019) was snapped up for USD 13,060. Works with heftier price tags, such as John Olsen's USD 390,000 painting *Lily Pond at Humpty Doo* (2004), displayed at Gow Langsford Gallery's booth, remained unsold. Five-figures likewise appeared to be the upper threshold for collectors at Art Fair Philippines (2/22–24), which celebrates Filipino art, though without neglecting to connect buyers with international names. Marina Cruz's photorealistic depiction of *White Threads and Fibers on Pink Garment* (2019) was taken home for USD 15,000 at Mind Set Art Center during the VIP preview, while Edouard Malingue sold an abstract composition by Taiwanese conceptual artist Chou Yu-Cheng for USD 27,000.

Regional disturbances did not prevent Art Dubai from maintaining its reputation as an important gathering place for galleries and collectors from the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Europe. More than 50 international museum representatives were brought to the fair, many for the first time. Though this strategy for expanding the market might take a while to pay off, gallerists can already secure sales within the five-digit range. Galerie Templon demonstrated the popularity of Chiharu Shiota's threaded sculptures, which found buyers at prices of USD 28,000–67,000, and Addis Fine Art sold Tadesse Mesfin's USD 24,000–28,500 paintings to three Dubai buyers and one from Europe.

While it is impossible to forecast what the streets of Hong Kong will be like in March 2020—not to mention whether Beijing and Washington will indeed reach a truce—smaller alternatives to Hong Kong's centrality in the region are emerging. **CC**