

# post-ism

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## Kunsty Kvetch: Art Basel Hong Kong 2023



After three Covid-ridden years, in which the city shut itself off from the rest of the world in an attempt to control infection, the art hamster-wheel— fuelled by money, status-anxiety, booze and of course, lots of art— was in motion once again in Hong Kong. With restrictions finally lifted, including the mask mandate, the international art community was back in town with force in the last week of March. That's why you couldn't get a taxi and there were so many well-heeled internationals in town (no, it wasn't an influx of fresh expats—that's still not happening yet— although they may consider moving their family offices here, because, tax exemption regime).

Taking place against a background of inflation and rumours of a looming market meltdown, Art Basel Hong Kong opened on March 21st, coinciding with the Wealth for Good in Hong Kong Summit— an initiative to promote Hong Kong's asset and wealth management industry and encourage more family offices to establish a presence in the market. Good timing. It was a chorus of 'Hong Kong is back', art dealers desperately memorising flattery in Putonghua and the relieved sighs of an army of Russians happy to find there's at least one other city that welcomes their money.

Memories of draconian Covid restrictions (at its lowest point the government separated children from their parents in medical facilities, prompting a massive panicked exodus from the city), and the disruptions of the 2019 protests and riots, faded into the distance as the champagne and distractions kicked it, and international visitors once more came to party in our fragrant harbour.





Tishan Hsu at Empty Gallery

On the first day of VIP previews, guests asserted their social supremacy by flexing their VIP status



and announcing their 12pm fair arrival (or 11am, according to one VIP—he must have had the Brigadoon of invites). The KKR and Blackstone guys were still in the office though ‘coz it was financial reporting time, and “Who the f\*ck has time for a two-hour lunch-less break?”, one financier asked. “Don’t any of these people need to work?!” The Credit Suisse guys, who nobody wanted to mention (because failure is sad and contagious, and it can’t afford a seven figure artwork), were busy scrambling for head-hunters and a new name card.

The sport *du-jour* was guests name-dropping every party attended, every wealthy person and their NFT-obsessed spawn encountered (there were a lot), and weapons-profiteers-cum-art-patrons they’ve rubbed shoulders with. There ought to be an art fair status-anxiety sticker book. A gold star for every gallery and luxury brand party attended, and every oligarch offspring, minor or disgraced royal, K-Popper (not that type), Pharrell, and Ultra High Net Worth collector you’ve made eye contact with.

But, amidst the Covid-cautious air kissing; the furtive glances over shoulders mid-conversation to see if someone more interesting/famous/rich was in the room; the din of tiresome name-dropping; the flood of exotic skin Birkin bags; a mall strip of luxury brand booths skirting the fair; and anxious fist bumping from former crypto bros-cum-art dealers and Bepple proselytisers, there was art. Art for the people! An overwhelming amount of it.





Victor Ehikhamenor at Retro Africa gallery

Spread out across two floors of the packed Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, this



year's Art Basel edition welcomed 177 galleries (down from its peak of almost 250) from more than 30 countries, including first time exhibitions from 22 galleries such as Yiri Arts from Taipei; Loevenbruck from Paris; Gallery Vacancy from Shanghai; and Retro Africa from Abuja, Nigeria. The gallery brought a series of fabulous, bold, rosary-bead tapestry artworks by Nigerian-American writer and artist, Victor Ehikhamenor, that fuse African cultural heritage with the postcolonial politics of the artist's homeland.

The Encounters section was curated once more by Australian curator, Alexie Glass-Kantor, who delivered a stellar Australian Pavilion installation/performance at last year's Venice Biennale with contemporary artist and noise musician, Marco Fusinato. The Encounters programme consisted of 14 large-scale installations and performances dotted around the Convention Centre and various locations in Hong Kong, including a giant, inflatable, golden King Tutankhamun in a luxury mall (lest we forget the conflation of art, commerce, entertainment and luxury). It seemed to be the only type of inflation acknowledged during art week. Despite its six-figure price-tag, you could find Chinese knockoffs of this "jumping castle for the wealthy" (as one mall visitor described it) for sale on Taobao for about \$76.

The proletariat made a special appearance at the VIP preview in Korean artist, Gimhongsok's, *Solitude of Silences* (2017-2019), a performance installation featuring seven animal-masked mannequins from various labouring professions (cleaner, truck driver). Who says the art world is elitist? A signboard was placed next to each figure telling their story, inviting us to reflect on the authenticity of the narrative offered, and the value of labour in globalised capitalist systems. Meanwhile, a sculptural installation of text-inscribed marble plinths, *The Wine Dark Sea* (2022-23), by Ukrainian artist Stanislava Pinchuk, captures the plight of asylum seekers in Australia, and the turmoil of being torn from one's home to seek safety, shelter and freedom. The work is just as relevant to the recent atrocities in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, and many other places around the world today.



Cary Kwok at Herald St Gallery

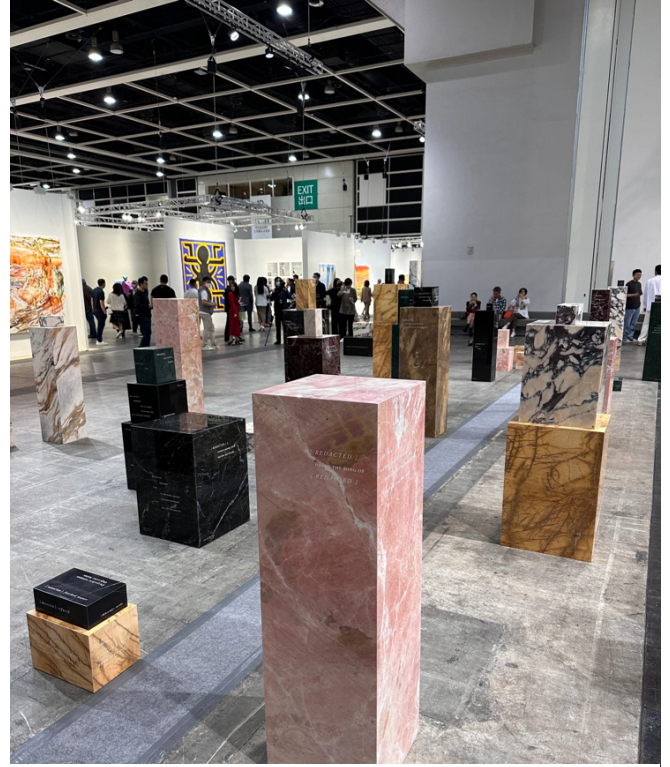
Sales were reportedly 'healthy' during the VIP preview days, with several seven-figure artworks snapped up, and a strong international collector presence, including from Korea, Japan, Philippines and of course, mainland China, as well as further afield. This was the first Art Basel Hong Kong helmed by Chief Executive Noah Horowitz since Marc Spiegler stepped down as global director of the fair last year, and the first quarantine-free Art Basel Hong Kong since Lupa Systems—investment company of James Murdoch (of *Succession* fame)— became a controlling shareholder of Art Basel parent company, MCH group late 2020.

Hong Kong art and galleries played a much more prominent role this year, with a strong focus on local talent. Local artist Trevor Yeung's installation in Encounters, *Mr. Cuddles Under The Eave* (2021), consisted of 13 uprooted *pachira aquatica*. Suspended from a metallic grid on the ceiling of the Convention Centre, the work recalls Typhoon Mangkhut in 2018 which destroyed thousands of trees in Hong Kong, but the use of money trees also seemed rather apt for an art fair.

Jaffa Lam, a Hong Kong artist whose socially-engaged practice for the past two decades involves collaborating with marginalised communities, presented the site-specific installation, *Trolley Party* (2023). The work consisted of a 14 metre patchwork sewn together by artist and female workers from the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association from recycled umbrella fabric, connected to six sculptures made of industrial trolleys that Lam transformed into chairs.



Jaffa Lam, *Trolley Party* (2023)  
Encounters Art Basel HK 2023



Stanislava Pinchuk, *The Wine Dark Sea* (2022-23)  
Encounters, Art Basel HK 2023





Nicolo Samori at Galerie Eigen + Art

Notable booths came from local galleries with Hong Kong's Empty Gallery featuring paintings by



Chinese-American artist, Tishan Hsu, and organic, futuristic, sculptures by Hong Kong artist, Jes Fan, who was also the recipient of the Sigg Prize. Hsu's work is finally getting the recognition it deserves. Last year the artist's work was included in *The Milk of Dreams* at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, and this year he also enjoyed an exhibition at Empty Gallery's Tin Wan space.

Born in the '50s Hsu's work was ahead of its time. Futuristic, mixed-media paintings and sculptures merge machine and man: silicone faces and body parts protrude from the surfaces of silkscreen-printed, textured canvases which are striated and rippled with pigment, giving the impression of flickering liquid screens. The work was post-internet before the internet saturated global society—gluing us to screens the world over— and before the term was even coined.

Lucie Chang Fine Arts presented an eye-catching booth by Hong Kong artist Stanley Wong, known as another mountainman, wrapped in the iconic blue, white and red stripes of Hong Kong market bags, tying together ideas of consumption and cultural identity. Blindspot Gallery showcased work by Angela Su (who represented Hong Kong at the 2022 Venice Biennale) whose film, *Cosmic Call* (2019), was part of this year's Art Basel Film program, and weaves together facts and fiction to create an alternative understanding of epidemics (the most recent of which seems all but a memory). The gallery also presented video work by Turner Prize nominee Wai Kin Sin, as well as masks created from makeup-imprinted face wipes discarded from their drag performances.



Nibha Sikander with her work at Tarq Gallery



From South East Asia, Jhaveri Contemporary in the Discoveries section featured works by Joydeb

Roaja, which had previously shown at the Dhaka Art Summit earlier this year. Figures of soldiers and villagers, made of cardboard and ink on paper, lined the booth walls and display plinths, speaking of the displacement during the flooding of the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam in the 1960s, of local indigenous Chakma people of Bangladesh at the hands of military officials.

At Mumbai-based Tarq Gallery, a Wunderkammer presentation of deconstructed Lepidoptera and birds by young artist, Nibha Sikander (who was present to chat with visitors about her work), hung from the booth walls in framed glass cases. Made from layers of coloured paper and exquisitely detailed to resemble butterflies, moths, insects and birds from her hometown, their deconstructed forms resembled colourful intricate abstract paintings.

Paintings dominated the fair this year. Berlin and Leipzig-based Galerie Eigen + Art, brought paintings by Neo Rauch and Tim Eitel, and a sold-out selection of works by Italian artist Nicola Samori. His dark, baroque, figurative oil paintings are painted over carved marble and rock crystal, with faces showing the crystalline structure beneath. In one large chiaroscuro portrait of a seated man, thick layers of textured, wrinkled paint give the impression of sagging folds of skin.





Kazuo Shirago, *Kisan 1*, (1991), at Fergus McCaffrey Gallery

New York gallery Fergus McCaffrey, had a booth of textural, gestural, painted eye-candy, featuring a visceral red painting by Gutai artist, Kazuo Shiraga (which sold for \$5 million), as well as pink and lavender-pigmented, abstract, oil on paper and canvas paintings by Viennese artist, Martha Jungwirth. David Zwirner Gallery also hooked a seven figure sale, placing a portrait painting of French New Wave filmmaker, Francois Truffaut, by Elizabeth Peyton (*Truffaut*, 2005) for \$2.2 million with a museum in China.

Meanwhile, at Berlin's Peres Projects, a vulvic, red, gouache on paper painting by Rebecca Ackroyd, and a sherbet coloured figurative oil on linen painting by Paolo Salvador, caught my eye. Another favourite was London's Herald St Gallery with works by Hong Kong-born, London-based artist, Cary Kwok. A series of five small, gorgeously detailed, acrylic and ink on paper paintings lined the booth walls, and spoke of solitude, love and coupledom.

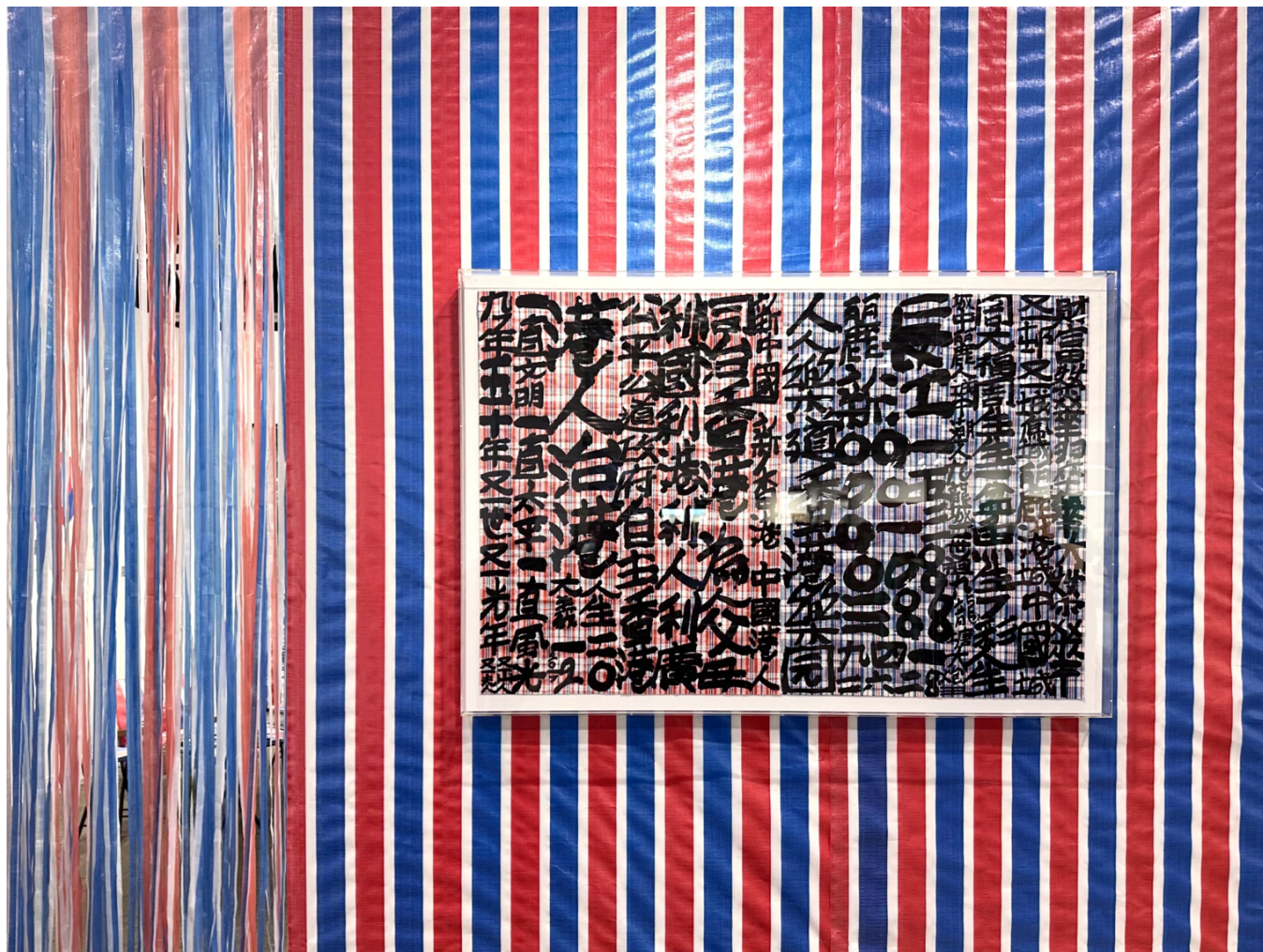
Walking past the booth of LA-based Anat Ebgi Gallery you'd be forgiven for believing the booth to still be under installation. Works of contemporary icons were hung still wrapped in packing materials like bubble wrap, cardboard and tape. Or so it seemed. Created by Canadian artist, Tammi Campbell, the paintings replicate artworks by canonical male artists from the 1960s and 1970s— Ed Ruscha, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Josef Albers. The packing materials and tape are in fact sculpted from acrylic paint, adding a layer of tongue-in-cheek illusion, and awe at the artist's obsessive compulsive eye for detail and precision. Campbell's appropriative practice has a feminist slant, using totemic male artists who dominate institutional, collection, and market narratives to question institutional structures, the art canon, and highlight the (in)visibility of women or lesser known artists.





Paintings by Tammi Campbell at Anat Ebgi Gallery





another mountainman at Lucie Chang Fine Arts

After a Covid-imposed hiatus, guests seemed to be revenge partying and had plenty of distractions to choose from with several parties and art events held around town every night. This included the first international party for the long awaited M+ Museum to kick off the week, billed as the coolest party of art week and attended by 'everyone', apparently. Even this social-phobic art writer stuck around long enough to get an Aperol Spritz-inflicted headache the next morning.

There was also a cocktail by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which recently had an impressive SANAA-designed extension added to its building; an artist's party thrown by Swire at The Continental, attended for five minutes by Pharrell, artists Takashi Murakami (the guy's like the Waldo of art fairs—try not spotting him) and Awol Erizku of inflatable Tutankhamun fame (who spun some tunes on the deck); and an brunch presentation for the Diriyah Biennale Foundation of the oil Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Diriyah Biennale presentation prompted a flurry of excitement from at least one member of Hong Kong's LGBTQI+ community, proving that art is an effective cultural PR tool when it comes to (art)washing reputations (and human rights abuses). Errr, doesn't Saudi Arabia still punish homosexuality with imprisonment, flogging, fines, capital punishment and deportation? The

'modernising' Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman (MBS) has poured billions of dollars of oil revenue into culture in order to create cultural legitimacy and credibility through soft power (a strategy not without precedent elsewhere) as a distraction from its political and religious oppression. So far it seems to have worked.

Art does have the power to change the way we see the world around us, it seems. And it can even help bring back to life a small East Asian harbour city that not too long ago many declared 'over'. Just make sure you throw a damn good party.





Jes Fan at Empty Gallery