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The Year of the Artist

By ALEXANDRA A. SENO

It's been a banner year for the Asian arts scene, with record auction sales, major gallery openings and the rising international renown of a handful of top Asian artists.

Above all, the story of 2010 was that of wealthy Asian collectors, especially from China, putting their stamp on the global art market. Their impact was felt especially in the regional epicenter of the commercial art scene: Hong Kong.



Courtesy of HK LCSD

The animated 'Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival'



Agence France-Presse

Sotheby's Hong Kong autumn preview

International auction houses rode the wave of Asia's appetite for fine art and held record-breaking sales in the city. At Christie's and Sotheby's sales in Hong Kong—each hosts a spring and a fall sale in the city—collectors spent a record \$1.4 billion on art and antiques, as well as watches, jewelry and wine. Chinese antiques recorded some of the most spectacular sales, including the \$16.7 million paid at Christie's by Hong Kong real estate developer Joseph Lau for a pair of imperial crane statues, and the \$32 million paid by an anonymous collector for an 18th-century Chinese vase. Blue-chip Asian artists such as China's Zheng Fanzhi and Zao Wouki, and Taiwan's Cheng Chenpo also attracted strong bidding.

It's unclear whether this excitement for Hong Kong auctions is sustainable, but for now the industry is in overdrive. In its third year, the Hong Kong International Art Fair, Art HK, strengthened its claim to be the top contemporary art event in the region.

The 2010 fair attracted 46,000-plus visitors (a 60% bump from the year before) including many art buyers from all over Asia. Highlights included the sale by White Cube, the influential London gallery, of a Damien Hirst installation of a dove suspended in a tank of liquid for \$2.6 million to an anonymous Chinese collector. As the fair's organizers prepare for the 2011 event in May, they have been touting Art HK's ability to draw

top-ranked dealers from the U.S. and Europe, including participants such as London's Lisson and New York's Gagosian, as well as new entrants such as Acquavella, Sean Kelly from New York and Victoria Miro from London.

Meanwhile, some of those same galleries have also been drawn in to Hong Kong on a longer-term basis. A half-

dozen or so of the top gallery names in the world —such as London's Ben Brown, as well as Gagosian—set up their first Asian outposts in the territory, while a number of others are currently scouting for space, including The Pace Gallery in New York.

Outside Hong Kong, Asia saw a number of major arts events this year. In Seoul, a series of exhibitions marked the city's role as 2010 World Design Capital, a designation awarded by the International Design Alliance, a prestigious global association of industrial designers, architects and visual artists. The government-backed Gwangju Biennale, held in the fall, made history with the appointment of its first European director, New York-based Italian art critic and curator Massimiliano Gioni as artistic director.

In China, 2010 saw local auction houses pose a challenge to major international firms—at least in sales within Asia. Among the rising auction powerhouses, China Guardian is probably the biggest player; the firm said its November auction topped \$544 million.

At the Shanghai World Expo, a modernized version of one of China's most important artworks became one of the most popular attractions. Some art critics and historians questioned the integrity of the Chinese pavilion's "River of Wisdom"—an animated version of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) scroll, "Along the River During the Qingming Festival"—but eager visitors queued for hours to see the piece, which also drew large crowds when it went on display in Hong Kong.

In Singapore, work progressed on a 5,500 square-meter National Art Gallery, to be completed in 2013. The museum of Southeast Asian art from the 18th century onward will be housed in the refurbished 1920s City Hall and Supreme Court Buildings. Another major art initiative in the city-state was the opening of Singapore FreePort, an art-storage facility and a space for collectors to display their art, and Art Stage Singapore, an international contemporary-art fair that debuts next month.



Artist Liu Xiaodong

Courtesy of UCCA

A handful of individual Asian artists have also seen their stars rise in the past twelve months. Thai installation artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul won the Palme d'Or, the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival, for the movie "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives."

China's Liu Xiaodong, best known as a figurative painter and an auction-crowd favorite, created buzz with a documentary film about his oeuvre with Taiwanese art-house director Hou Hsiao-hsien. And Ai Weiwei, the prominent Chinese artist and activist, wowed critics and the public in London with his Jingdezhen-made ceramic sunflower seeds at the Tate Gallery.

Elsewhere, collectors from Indonesia in particular pushed up the price of top-selling lots of Southeast Asian art at auction and at galleries. Among the most coveted names was Agus Suwage, who has been busy in his Jogjakarta studio preparing for his first New York show, due to open in March at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, one of the city's top venues and the only major gallery in New York featuring top contemporary Southeast Asian works. In India, a highlight of the art year included the \$2.2 million sale, at the Saffronart auction in Mumbai earlier this month, of Arpita Singh's "Wish Dream"—a six meter by four meter painting inspired by Buddhist traditions. Mumbai-born, U.K.-based sculptor and installation artist Anish Kapoor also caused a stir with twin shows in New Delhi and Mumbai—his first in India.

But the most prominent trend of 2010 was undoubtedly the power of Asian art buyers—an influence that was also not confined to the region. Collectors from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere were often among the most enthusiastic bidders at auctions and gallery sales in New York and London. Indeed, one of the stories of 2010's global arts scene was the sale, for \$83 million, of a yellow Qing Dynasty vase. The piece had been found earlier in an attic in the U.K. and was sold at Bainbridges, a small British auction house. No surprises that the buyer came from mainland China.



Reuters

An Antony Gormley sculpture, 'Rupture II' on show at Art HK

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