



Art HK is undergoing a confusing name change, but the region's leading fair must not lose sight of where it comes from, writes John Batten

This year's Hong Kong International Art Fair (Art HK) hosted 266 galleries from 36 countries, 67,000 visitors and – a downside of such globalised international events – a display of homogeneous art that dominated over regional and local creativity. One Hong Kong artist described last week's event as a "visual merry-go-round". International art fairs induce conformity, and Art HK is no exception: this will be reinforced when the fair is renamed Art Basel. The oddity of "Asia's world city" hosting an art fair bearing the name of a Swiss city (population: 170,000) cannot be overstated. It is the sort of confused identity Hong Kong encountered as a "British Crown

besides Art Basel, 95 worldwide trade exhibitions and fairs (including Auto Basel and Baselworld, the the watch industry, attended by more than two million people. The majority owner (with about 40 per cent) of the publicly listed MCH Group is the city of Basel (Canton Basel-Stadt), and the city appoints five directors to MCH Group's board. Renaming next year's event will place it on par with the company's Art Basel edition in Miami in the US.

Hong Kong's art community, institutions and government have generously supported aspects of the current Art HK, most prominently through Home Affairs Bureau funding of the Asia Art Archive-organised "Backroom Conversations", a series of remarkable discussions, talks and presentations by art professionals. With Art Basel's spreading umbrella, the fair's future sponsors will undoubtedly consider their branding concerns and maybe next year's events, including "Conversations", should emphasise a stronger Home Conversation. One of

players, Hong Kong's liberal tax and business environment has allowed the fair to grow and independently become a magnet for visual art and commerce for five days every year. And Hong Kong galleries and art institutions (including the first dedicated exhibition by West Kowloon Cultural District's planned museum, M+), have astutely ridden on the coat tails of the art week to add necessary depth in presenting other visual art exhibitions around the city. However, the art fair's monetary success has evenly trickled down to Hong Kong's artists and non-participating galleries.

Art fairs are seldom places for intellectual enquiry and Hong Kong's only moment of such reflection was in the 2009 edition with Charles Mesewether's curated "Crossing the Persian Gulf" exhibition of six artists from Iran, Iraq and the UAE. Since then, the fair has provided project space for galleries or sponsors to mount an individual artwork by one artist.

This year's showing was generally decorative with lateral pieces from West Kowloon. One of

were particularly strong. A favourite among visitors was Shen Shaoxin's *I Sleep on Top of Myself*, a frighteningly like-like series of life-size silicon sculptures of rats, chickens and pigs sleeping peacefully as entranced visitors watched their mechanical heart beats and breathing.

In previous years there was a spontaneous push by some galleries to present a "warmer" artist at the fair, governed by trends and prevailing prices. These artists have included Julian Opie, Gerhard Richter, Candice Haber, Anish Kapoor, Bill Viola, Damien Hirst and last year's William Kentridge; all were represented again this year but not in volume, and no single artist appeared to dominate the booths of blue-chip galleries. The emergence this year of documentary photography featuring the stellar

Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic might see a future trend.

The fair offered its usual dizzy array of art and the best could often be found in smaller galleries and the competition section. Art Futures, Gutz Hergewald's *Playing is Collecting* at Chamber Fine Art finely replicates the botanical and ornithological collections of museums by careful renditions in watercolour on paper. The random spontaneity of the sketches gives a conceptual literary edge.

The fair generally had a paucity of photography, but the tabloid photographs of Jiang Pengqi at Hong Kong's Madspot Gallery, and Guy Tillim's lush illustrations and tropical landscape photographs at South Africa's Stevenson were excellent. Tomoko Yoneda's *Hair* series of black and white photographs at StageArts were carefully crafted and placed in a booth that displayed an overall strong selection.

That at the Naris Rosenthal's *A Tale of Two Cities* paintings, video and installation was of mass inequality. This display was intended to bring the fair's respect towards 20

market vendors was a fascinating contrast of two cities.

Likewise, the contextualisation of Tibetan mysticism in Kara Tassia's *Fire-light Night* at New York's Simon Preston Gallery, using scraped and deposed cowbuds to form religious mandalas and long Tibetan horns was a beautifully considered installation that discreetly hovered between secular abstractions and conceptual symbolism to religious contemplation.

Hong Kong artist Kiam Chi-keung's oversized bamboo birdcage at Galerie Ota-Chi was a wonderful abundant sculpture that didn't have its intended physical presence because it was heaved in within a tight booth. Christian Schrack's *Asia Windows* (paintings on intentionally damaged shoji screens) panels at Weingart were beautifully painted. Likewise, Takahiro Suzuki's *Get Eye* (Victoria Peak) at Antonarano is a craftsman's hand's-eye view of a colonial Hong Kong carved out of grey packing tape.

Automaker BMW's overly promotional stand in the middle of

All the fun of the fair (clockwise from top left): the hall of the