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HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR
香港國際藝術展

HONG KONG CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION CENTRE
26-29 MAY

Photos: Art HK 11

Hard sell

TODAY tries its hand at selling paintings at the biggest art fair in Asia



MAYO MARTIN
in Hong Kong
mayo@mediacorp.com.sg

WHAT do you do at the Hong Kong International Art Fair? Why, look for a birthday cake, of course.

Let me explain. This reporter had offered his services to Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI), one of only two participating Singaporean galleries at the event. I told them I wanted to know what it was like to sell art at an art fair. I told them I'd do anything — anything.

"Okay, you're now our intern," came

the reply. "Now, be a sport and go look for cake."

Which was how I found myself rushing around at the Hong Kong Convention Centre for a cake for birthday boy Ashley Bickerton, a Bali-based Barbadian artist and long-time friend and collaborator of the gallery who had dropped by at their booth. Mind you, this was after I had poured them some champagne and was told I had to get some more glasses at the Veuve Cliquot booth.

Ah, the things you do in the name of selling art.

No ordinary art fair

But Art HK, as the event is nicknamed, is no run-of-the-mill art fair. The four-day annual event is the most prestigious of the Asian lot. This is where the creme de la creme of the international art world — from superstar artists to multi-millionaire collectors to top museum curators — mingle and do business in the range of six or seven-digit figures.

Taking place at the end of May, it's also around the same time that auction house giants like Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams spread out their million-dollar wares for their spring auctions. Such that Hong Kong is now the largest art market in the world after New York and London.

This year's Art HK — the fourth edition — was the biggest so far. The vast venue space housed 260 galleries from 38

countries presenting works from more than 1,000 artists. Some 63,511 visitors dropped by — around the same number of people who went to Art Basel, the world's biggest art fair, last year.

Art HK's prestigious status was just recently confirmed when organisers of Art Basel and Art Basel Miami bought into the fair, effectively turning it into Art Basel

Hong Kong in all but name.

STPI has participated in all four editions of Art HK. This year, they brought over 30 works from Korean Do Ho Suh and Singaporean Heman Chong (with the latter featuring his paintings of cover versions of cult book classics). It's the first time they're showcasing a homegrown artist. According to STPI's marketing and development head Nor Jumaiyah, participating at the fair is "like transporting a chunk of your gallery operations to this part of the world".

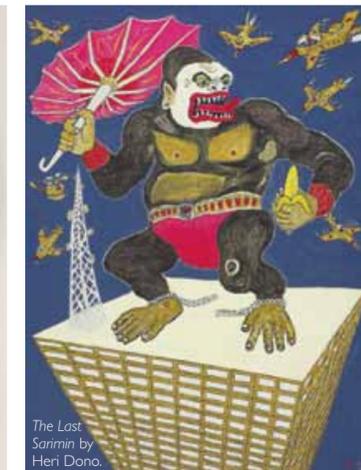
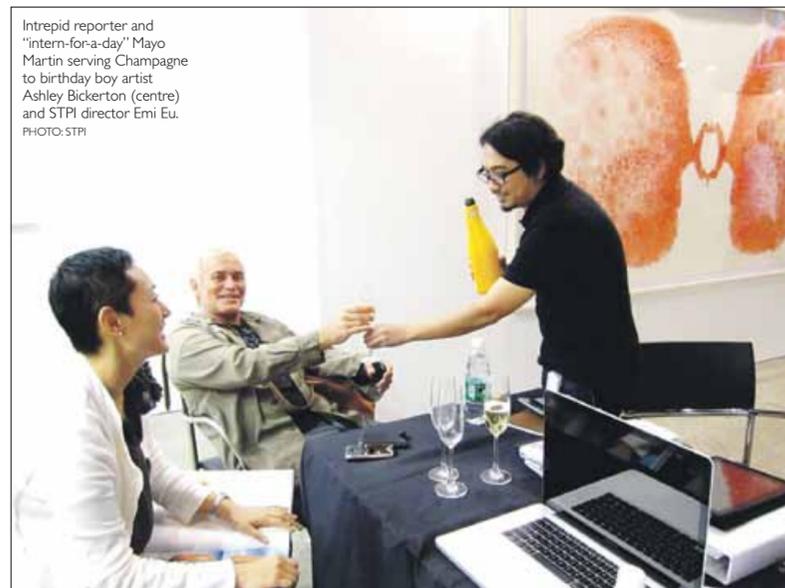
Top of the art world

It also means competing with some of the world's best galleries like London's Gagosian and White Cube galleries, not just for eyeballs but, more importantly, the uber deep pockets of prospective buyers. Which is more than just a piece of cake. (STPI's lean and mean team of four also had to handle day-to-day operations back in Singapore even as they manned their US\$32,000 (S\$39,344) booth.)

STPI's longstanding relationship with the fair had encouraged them to take up a space twice the size of their previous booths — and you couldn't have asked for a better spot in a sea of galleries. Their neighbours included big international galleries, and right across them was a commissioned sculpture by Takashi Murakami.

But you can't convince a buyer to go for your painting just by being at the right place. STPI gallery manager Lily Phua said having a booth that stood out was important. In their case, it meant keeping things clean and simple. "You go to some other booth that gives you a headache (with its clutter of works) and you might just go away."

And contrary to expectations in this highly competitive arena, STPI actually get clients to check out their neighbouring



galleries' works — a gesture of goodwill that, if all goes well, gets reciprocated. "(Clients) remember you for your good service. And if you're selfish, galleries won't like you and won't introduce artists or clients to you as well."

There are also subtler tactics to draw people in. At one point, renowned photographer David LaChapelle was hanging around at a nearby gallery with Bickerton. A few smooth moves later — and with Bickerton's help — the hot shot lensman was hanging out at the STPI booth — and there was noticeably more people milling around.

"It's like having a rock star hang out at the booth," quipped STPI director Emi Eu. But the most important thing is to talk the talk — and do it a lot.

So I decided to try it out. With Eu's final word of advice ("Everybody is a potential buyer"), I spotted a well-dressed Caucasian giving the huge Do Ho Suh print the once-over.

I crept up to him. "Nice eh? All those circles are actually meant to hypnotise you into taking out your wallet!" Or at least that's how it played in my mind. Still, Mr Prospective Buyer stayed long enough for the STPI folks to come to the rescue.

What's another name for 'pretty plants'?

Meantime, I headed upstairs the following day to offer my services to the other gallery flying the Singapore flag.

Chan Hampe Galleries (CHG) had a small booth at Art HK 11's cosier and relatively more laid-back Asia One section, where lesser-known galleries were showcasing emergent individual artists.



They had brought in 28 works by young Singaporean artist Genevieve Chua.

It's the second art fair for CHG. Following their participation at Art Stage Singapore, Art HK director Magnus Renfrew invited them to apply. For a fee, of course. The gallery had to cough up S\$13,000 for the booth and S\$4,000 for freight shipping. And that doesn't include the tables and chairs and lighting costs.

Given that Chua's works ranged from S\$6,000 for a triptych to S\$550 for a smaller one, they had to do a lot of selling. But it seemed they were already on track. Six works were sold by the third day, including a triptych from Chua's *After The Flood* series of handpainted photographs.

"A big sale. Very, very encouraging," beamed CHG's Ben Hampe, who was manning the booth along with Chua herself. Although the shy, soft-spoken artist said she would "rather not be here actually", her presence had inadvertently played a big part in their first sale on the first day.

Apparently, a lady was looking at Chua's triptych, when a buyer of her previous works dropped by and immediately gushed — very loudly, "Oh my god, the whole crowd's going to come!"

"The lady quickly wrote out a cheque," an amused Chua shared.

Sensing I was raring to give my selling skills another go, Hampe reluctantly gave me a gallery name tag.

"Keep an eye out on anyone who spends some time with the art work," he said, adding that if anyone asks how it's made to simply point to Chua.

As backup, I asked Chua for some one-liner explanations for the works, in

case someone did ask.

She gamely rattled off: "Pontianak remade into a romantic story. Pontianak taking the shape of a moth during the day. Noxious weeds taking over the Singapore landscape after the 50th flood. Poisonous flowers changing colours during the night."

"Can I just say 'It's a series of pretty plants?'" I ventured.

In the end, I was relegated to simply asking visitors if they would like to sign up for the gallery's mailing list.

I didn't mind. Hampe was already doing an impressive job. To an old couple looking at one of Chua's photographs from the *Black Varieties* series (aka "Poisonous flowers changing colours during the night"), he smoothly mentioned her recent participation at the Singapore Biennale and Sotheby's auction, her coming residencies and projects in Japan, Korea and, actually, over at STPI. They didn't buy. But after hearing Hampe's spiel, I almost did.



Worth every bit of it

In the end, both galleries did pretty well.

STPI's final sales figure came up to S\$200,000, boosted largely by Do Ho Suh's works. But Chong didn't do so bad either — 80 per cent of his canvas works were sold to collectors in Hong Kong, Seoul and New York. (The latter was apparently an influential figure in the gallery scene.)

LaChapelle wasn't the only one who hung around the STPI booth. Apparently, Japanese artists MR and Murakami did too, not to mention curators from New York's Museum Of Modern Art.

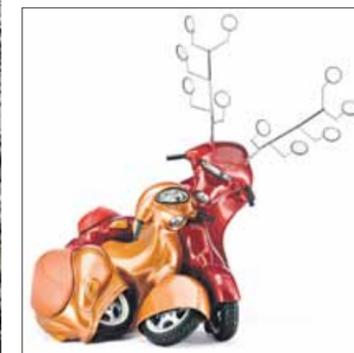
As for CHG, they sold a total of seven works and Hampe reckoned it wasn't bad. "We recovered costs," he laughed. "I wasn't expecting to make a profit ... especially seeing as it was the first time the gallery participated and Genevieve's a fairly young artist and didn't have a profile in Hong Kong."

So, was it worth it?

Hampe thought so. "It's important for us to continue the momentum and continue promoting our Singaporean artists at the international art fairs. It's the only way that we're going to grow awareness at that market level," he said.

Next year, both STPI and CHG will most likely be taking another shot at it. As for yours truly, let's just say I'll leave selling art to the experts.

Now, if you will hand me your glass, I'll pour you another one.



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