

RONALD VENTURA CHEONG SOO PIENG GEORGETTE CHEN QIU TI LIU KANG SRIHADI SOEDARSONO ABDULLAH ARIF RUSLI

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History under the hammer

FAH THAI TAKES AN EXCLUSIVE PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAINS AT CHRISTIE'S HONG KONG AUCTION HOUSE DURING ITS ASIAN 20TH CENTURY & CONTEMPORARY ART SALE

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● A voice is heard from the back of the sales room: “One million!” A wave of excitement surges through the crowd and heads turn. It’s the first early-evening sale at Christie’s Asian 20th Century & Contemporary Art auction in Hong Kong, and the action is well under way. The deep-pocketed bidder, a rotund man with spiky white hair and wire spectacles, seems to have come out of nowhere. The auctioneer opened the bidding

at HK\$400,000 (US\$51,000) but this gentleman has jumped right in with more than double that amount, seemingly without breaking a sweat. Unlike other bidders who silently raise their paddles, he has broken protocol by impatiently calling out his bid. When the gavel finally comes down, the crowd bursts into applause. The gentleman puffs up his chest and offers a wry smile. In just under two minutes he has forked out a cool



RONALD VENTURA: *CROSSED TRIP* (HUMANIME SERIES)
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“HONG KONG IS THE WORLD’S THIRD-LARGEST ART AUCTION MARKET BEHIND NEW YORK AND LONDON”



HK\$4.2 million (US\$542m) on the colourful painting *Abstract Triptych* by Singapore's Cheong Soo Pieng, smashing a world record for the artist. “The evening sale always gets a lot of attention,” says Shanghai-based collector Jeffrey Lee in a hushed voice as the auction continues. “That’s just the tradition. It’s more high-value work and more of the highlights.”

In business since the middle of the 18th century, Christie’s auctions off billions of dollars worth of art each year and holds major sales in Hong Kong each November. Trailing only New York and London in terms of size, the Hong Kong auction market continues its rapid expansion.

While Christie’s controls a substantial share of the market for contemporary art here, it’s facing some competition. In fact, a growing number of international auction houses are flocking to Hong Kong. Alongside art, they’re increasingly holding major sales of jewellery and wine, a response to the soaring demand for precious gems and prized vintages among the well-heeled residents of Hong Kong’s Victoria Peak. During the same week as the Christie’s auction, China’s Poly Auction, Korea’s Seoul Auction and Taiwan’s Ravenel scheduled competing sales at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, just minutes away from Christie’s base at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre.

“It looks like a pretty good crowd. There are a lot of the usual suspects. A lot of major collectors from China and a few from Taiwan,” says art advisor Jehan Chu while scanning the Christie’s sales room. Fashionably dressed collectors from across the globe can be seen with catalogues in hand. On an elevated platform towards the right of the room, rows of auction-house specialists take bids by phone as François Curiel, Christie’s Asia president, paces the floor.

Meanwhile, at the front of the room, star auctioneer Andrea Fuczynski, a tall woman decked out in a striking red dress and with her hair done up in a sharp bob, continues calling out numbers while leaning over the wooden rostrum: “Twenty-six million, thank you madame; 27 million now on the phones; at 28 million the lady has it now, against your bidder. Coming back in?” On the block are works by some of Asia’s top artists, ranging from blue-chip Chinese painters like Zao Wou-Ki to South-East Asian stars like Filipino Ronald Ventura. Estimates range from lows of

HK\$20,000 (US\$2,500) to soaring highs that aren’t even printed in the catalogue; they’re only “available upon request”. One such estimate is the HK\$45 million (US\$5.8m) expected for star lot *La Forêt Blanche II* by Chinese artist Chu Teh-Chun.

In the audience, collectors steal glances at one another to find out who’s bidding on what. The fiercer the bidding, the more confidence they tend to have in the piece and the more likely they are to raise their paddle. Yet there are certain rules. “There’s an unspoken etiquette that if someone I know is bidding on the same thing, I would signal and either back out or let the other person back out,” Lee says. “I wouldn’t go head to head because that would damage the relationship.”

With bids ping-ponging across the room and the auctioneer cracking the occasional dry joke, the sale may appear to be a spontaneous affair but it’s a tightly controlled scene. “It’s like a performance,” says Eric Chang, Christie’s senior vice president and international director for Asian 20th Century & Contemporary Art. “We’re the conductors who put the whole thing together.” From strategising the order in which lots appear to planning the optimal seating arrangement for collectors, Christie’s puts considerable effort into choreographing its auctions.

Day-to-day life at the house is similarly intense. Each artwork may only take minutes to sell, but getting it to the rostrum and ensuring collectors raise their paddles takes months of preparation. “They are always under pressure,” says Jonathan Crockett, an art consultant and former Christie’s employee. “As soon as they finish one auction, they’ve only got a few months to source a whole load of artwork for the next one.” For this year’s sales, Christie’s secured more than 580 works. To manage the line-up, officials relied on a massive rolodex which is the envy of the art world. “The auction houses know most big collectors,” Crockett says. “They’re constantly providing client entertainment and earning their trust.”

Christie’s prides itself on securing work from leading private collections that are rarely seen on the market. “For some important pieces we could spend three years or five years to get the work,” Chang says. “Some collectors have very nice pieces, but they don’t want to sell, so we keep coming back.”



THE AUCTION MASTERS:
Joyce Chan Wing-ye, associate specialist;
(below left) Eric Chang, international director;
(below right) Jonathan Stone, chairman and
international head of Asian art, at Christie's
offices in Central, Hong Kong





FIVE AUCTION RECORDS IN 2012

“BY THE END OF THE AUCTION WEEK, CHRISTIE’S HONG KONG RAKES IN A STAGGERING HK\$2.6 BILLION”



CHU TEH-CHUN (CHINA)
La Forêt Blanche II, 1987
Oil on canvas
HK\$60,020,000 (US\$7,784,600)

CHEONG SOO PIENG (SINGAPORE)
Abstract Triptych, 1963
Oil on canvas
HK\$4,220,000 (US\$547,335)

QIU TI (CHINA)
West Lake in Autumn, 1946
Oil on canvas
HK\$5,300,000 (US\$687,410)

ABDUL AZIZ (INDONESIA)
The Courtship, 1993
Oil on canvas
HK\$3,140,000 (US\$407,065)

GEORGETTE CHEN (SINGAPORE)
Cattleya Orchid, 1993
Oil on canvas
HK\$1,700,000 (US\$220,385)

In some cases, the auction house simply gets lucky. The presence of one of the prized Chu Teh-Chun lots in this year's autumn sale was the result of a collector strolling into the Christie's office and announcing that she had a work by the artist in her home. Chang travelled to Paris to investigate. "It was quite exciting because this is a really early work of a very large size," he recalls. "We didn't know who had paintings like this [on the market]."

Forming what amounts to a sales team for the auction house, art specialists check the condition of works of art, compile catalogues (essential sales tools for the auctions), maintain relations with collectors and stir interest in the lots. In the run-up to an auction, much of their time is spent curating the sprawling exhibition of works destined for auction. When preview day rolls around, specialists are out in full force, prowling the floor while collectors examine the works on display and register their

paddles. A day later, everything on display goes on the auction block. Works of art are sold alongside wine, watches, furniture and jewellery. This year, an exotic Burmese "Pigeon's Blood" ruby and diamond necklace is sold for an impressive HK\$39.9 million (US\$5.1m). Meanwhile, the prices paid for works in the Asian 20th Century & Contemporary Art category set 10 world records for the artists. By the end of the week, Christie's rakes in a staggering HK\$2.6 billion (US\$335m). It's the icing on the cake for

the auction house, which made art market history earlier in the year by posting worldwide sales of US\$3.5bn for the first half of 2012.

Unfortunately, while interest in Hong Kong's art market continues to grow, little of this hype is trickling down to local artists. For its part, Christie's says it hopes to play a more significant role in the Hong Kong art community. Aside from its sales, the auction house is placing increased emphasis on non-sale exhibitions like its show of little-known Song



HONG KONG AUCTION RECORDS OVER THE YEARS

ZENG FANZHI (CHINESE)
Mask Series 1996 No 6, 1996
Oil on canvas
HK\$75,367,500 (2008)

YUE MINJUN (CHINESE)
Gweong-Gweong, 1993
Oil on canvas
HK\$54,087,500 (2008)

CAI GUO-QIANG (CHINESE)
Set of 14 Drawings for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2002
Gunpowder on paper
HK\$74,247,500 (2007)

"THE ARCHDUKE JOSEPH DIAMOND"
Internally flawless Golconda diamond of 76.02cts
US\$21,474,525 (2011)

"THE HOPE RUBY"
Burmese ruby ring of 32.08cts, by Chaumet
US\$6,742,440 (2012)

"SINGING BIRD" PISTOLS
Most expensive item ever sold at a watch auction
HK\$45,460,000 (2012)

dynasty ceramics in November last year. "When most people think about auctions they think it's about trade, but they don't know that auction houses play the role of a cultural investor," Chang says. "We can break new boundaries in

terms of how people appreciate art." Another initiative is the Christie's Art Forum, a programme of lectures on collecting and the art world, the first edition of which was also held last autumn. While both the ceramics exhibition and the forum were well attended, they were overshadowed by the massive buzz surrounding the sales. As one art journalist says after the evening auction, "It's difficult to ignore the amount of money passing through these doors." ①

เสียงหนึ่งดังขึ้นจากด้านหลัง "หนึ่งล้าน!" ผู้คนส่งเสียงอึ้งด้วยความตื่นตะลึง พลังทั้งหมดนำไปมองเจ้าของเสียง นี่คือการประกาศในยามเย็น ณ ห้องประมูลของบริษัท คริสตี้ส์ ในฮ่องกง ที่กำลังจัดงานประมูลสำหรับงานศิลปะร่วมสมัยแห่งศตวรรษที่ 20 ขึ้น ราคาของงานชิ้นนี้เริ่มที่สี่แสนเหรียญฮ่องกง ทว่าใช้เวลาไม่นาน ราคาพุ่งสูงถึง สี่ล้านสองแสนเหรียญ เรียกได้ว่าเป็นราคาที่สูงที่สุด ที่ศิลปินท่านนี้เคยได้รับมาเลยก็ว่าได้

งานประมูลของคริสตี้ส์ มักมีมูลค่ารวมหลายพันล้านเหรียญ นับเป็นลำดับสามของโลก รองจากนิวยอร์กและลอนดอน แม้ว่าคริสตี้ส์จะมีส่วนแบ่งทางการตลาดมากที่สุด ทว่าการแข่งขันก็เพิ่มมากขึ้นเรื่อยๆ ในฮ่องกง นอกเหนือจากงานศิลปะแล้ว งานประมูลก็มีหลากหลายประเภท เช่นงานประมูลเครื่องประดับและไวน์ ที่ดึงดูดนักสะสมจากนานาชาติ โดยเฉพาะจากประเทศจีนและไต้หวัน

บรรยากาศในห้องประมูลยังคงดุเดือด ด้วยราคาชิ้นงานถัดมา ได้รับการประมูลสูงถึง 28 ล้านเหรียญแล้ว ทว่า นี่ยังไม่ใช่อันดับสูงสุดของงานที่คริสตี้ส์จัดประมูล งานบางชิ้นราคาสูงถึง 45 ล้านเหรียญเลยทีเดียว

การจัดงานประมูลไม่ใช่เรื่องง่ายเลยก็ว่าได้ แม้ว่างานแต่ละชิ้นจะขายได้อย่างรวดเร็ว ทว่าการเสาะหาชิ้นงานที่นักสะสมอยากได้ใช้ครอบครอง อาจใช้เวลานานนับเดือน งานบางชิ้น ใช้เวลาเสาะหาเจ้าของถึงห้าปี เนื่องจากเป็นชิ้นงานที่หายากมาก และเจ้าของไม่ยอมขาย ทางคริสตี้ส์ ต้องใช้เวลาติดต่อเจ้าของเดิมหลายครั้งหลายรอบ แต่บางครั้งก็ง่ายเสียจนน่าตกใจ เช่นเมื่อครั้งที่เจ้าของงานศิลปะ เดินเข้ามาขายชิ้นงานที่ลุดแสนหายากด้วยตัวเอง

แม้ว่าความสนใจในศิลปะในฮ่องกงจะเพิ่มมากขึ้น และทำให้คริสตี้ส์จะขายชิ้นงานได้อย่างมากมายในปีที่ผ่านมา ความสนใจในชิ้นงานจากศิลปินพื้นเมือง กลับดูไม่สู้ดีนัก ทางคริสตี้ส์หวังว่า จะมีส่วนช่วยในการสนับสนุนงานศิลปะพื้นเมืองของฮ่องกง เช่นการจัดงานนิทรรศการขึ้น เพื่อเป็นการแนะนำงานศิลปะใหม่ๆ ให้แก่ผู้สนใจ