

Hirst in Hong Kong: Gagosian gallery opens with 'Forgotten Promises'

Hirst's controversial works are now on show in Central, including paint-covered butterflies and that diamond-encrusted baby's skull

By Payal Uttam 18 January, 2011



Damien Hirst and his "Saint Bartholomew, Exquisite Pain."

The new Gagosian gallery opens today in Hong Kong with the Damien Hirst show "Forgotten Promises." The artist was in town five days ago and generated intense buzz for the show, a sign that Hong Kong's international art hub status has crystallized.

At Hirst's photo op, Britain's richest living artist looked slightly bewildered as he clutched the leg of his gold sculpture "Saint Bartholomew, Exquisite Pain." His appearances at

the city's various glam eateries and clubs were reportedly a big deal for scenesters in Hong Kong who vied for the limited invitations to the VIP parties.

Hirst's popularity in Asia is no surprise. Judging by revenue alone, Hong Kong is an important city for Hirst -- his "The Inescapable Truth" sold for £1.75 million at last year's Hong Kong International Art Fair.

Yet, "Forgotten Promises" is Hirst's first solo exhibition in Asia, making it one of the most overdue shows to finally arrive. It is exactly the kind of big-ticket Western contemporary exhibition which the Gagosian has the clout and ambition to bring to Hong Kong.

"Collectors in the area have traditionally been under-served and great artists from the West have traditionally been underrepresented in Asia," says Nick Simunovic, Gagosian's managing director in Hong Kong.

"Damien is the most important living contemporary artist. [His show] is a great way to inaugurate the space."

"Forgotten Promises" unveils a series of new diamond-obsessed works, gold sculptures and photo-realist paintings, some of which have never been seen by the public before.

Most controversial is the sculpture "For Heaven's Sake," a platinum cast of a human baby's skull adorned with more than 16,000 diamonds. Hirst acquired the infant's skull some years ago from a 19th-century pathology collection.

Other highlights of the exhibition include the metallic works "New Found Magnificence" and "Dreams of Magnificence," which have real butterflies ensnared in layers of shiny paint.

Asia, underlined

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In an effort to change the equation, art-empire-building Larry Gagosian has added Hong Kong to his roster of galleries in New York, London, Rome and Paris.

The dealer has had his eye on Asia for more than three years. Simunovic began scouting locations and working with Asian collectors as early as 2007 to establish a beachhead for the gallery.

It was the location, scale and colonial charm of Pedder Building that won them over. Simunovic had an enduring interest in the building and says that Gagosian was lucky that the families who owned the building allowed them in.

"I think this space will be shocking for most people who visit the gallery for the first time. We are doing our best to take the concept of an art gallery in Hong Kong to the next level," he says.

Occupying an entire floor of Pedder Building, the hotly anticipated gallery boasts four-meter high ceilings and spans approximately 5,000 square feet.

Gagosian plans to mount museum-quality exhibitions in the sprawling space. Their goal is to expose the Hong Kong audience to artists that they may only have heard of from exhibitions in New York and London.

"Whatever we bring to Hong Kong, we will always endeavor to put a new spin or curatorial impulse behind it," says Simunovic.

At present, Pedder Building is filled with factory outlets and second-hand luxury clothing shops but rumor has it that it will soon transform into a gallery hub or arts building of sorts.

In 2009 Ben Brown Fine Arts opened a gallery on the third floor and other dealers are said to be looking into the space.



Hirst strolls through his solo show at the new Gagosian gallery in Hong Kong.

Gagosian Gallery, Hong Kong

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