

FEATURE

Opportunity knocks for Hong Kong's artists

There are more galleries than ever, but local artists still need spaces with international kudos. By Payal Uttam

Ask anyone on Hong Kong's contemporary art scene where young artists get their first break and you will probably draw a blank. "There isn't one place. It doesn't work like that here," says the artist Nadim Abbas. The 34-year-old installation artist, whose career is on the rise, spent around six years showing at non-profit spaces such as Para Site and working with local galleries before gaining international exposure at New York's Armory Show and at Art Basel in Hong Kong last year. "There was a critical mass of shows in different spaces, and now [Abbas] is participating in the New Museum's 2015 Triennial [in New York], which is a huge step," says Tobias Berger, the curator of visual arts at Hong Kong's M+ museum.

Hong Kong was once considered a cultural backwater, but its contemporary art scene has evolved dramatically in recent years. "Before, there were not many chances to let people know about our work," says the artist Tsang Kin-wah, who has been chosen to represent Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale this year (9 May-22 November). "There were hardly any galleries, just Hanart [3E07] and Grotto [1B30] and a few others," he says.

Tsang had his first solo exhibition in the city at the now defunct John Batten Gallery in

2005. He landed his first major overseas show after a friend introduced his work to a manager at Yvon Lambert Gallery who was visiting Hong Kong. The French dealer gave him solo exhibitions in his Paris and New York spaces in 2007 and 2008, and Tsang went on to show at the Lyon Biennale in 2009 and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo in 2011, as a result of meeting curators who were following his work.

Gallery support

Tsang says that Hong Kong's newly graduated artists start their careers with much greater opportunities to show their work. "It's a golden period for young local artists, compared with a decade ago," says the Hong Kong-based curator Eric Leung Shiu Kee. "With the growth of the local art market since 2005, more galleries are willing to sell work by young local artists." In a city with a high cost of living and limited space, the support of galleries is essential for survival.

Despite its recent growth, Hong Kong's art scene remains small in terms of artists, and its infrastructure is still developing. "It's a fairytale that there are artists somewhere who haven't been discovered," Berger says. "It's easy to decide on the top artists. You see someone like Trevor Yeung: he shows everywhere – at Gallery Exit [1B19], Blindspot, Spring Workshop and Para Site [P4]."



Hong Kong-based Nadim Abbas and Lee Kit take part in a Salon discussion last year

"What's missing is somewhere you could have a breakthrough show"

Yeung, who graduated in 2010, says that although the support of a commercial gallery is critical, his pivotal show was held at Para Site last year. "As it was well-curated and included many great local and international artists, it drew a lot of attention," he says. Blindspot Gallery is showing Yeung's photographic installations in the Discoveries



sector of Art Basel in Hong Kong this year.

Para Site has an international reputation, but artists often still try to show in multiple spaces. "In other cities, you might have five institutions with similar missions competing for the same artists, and the artists would look forward to showing at the best two," says Cosmin Costinas, Para Site's executive director and curator. "It's different here, because each non-profit performs different roles." He believes that being an artist on such a small scene is a "privileged situation", compared with other places where it is a struggle just to get noticed. "Being associated with Hong Kong now is a plus," he says. There is a buzz helped by the arrival of Art Basel and fuelled by hopes for M+ and the project to transform the Central Police Station into a cultural hub.

Some Hong Kong-based dealers are using the fair as a platform to focus on emerging artists. Last year, Henry Au-Yeung of Grotto Fine Art showed works by the ink painter Hung Fai, who had just graduated, to complement the artist's solo show in the gallery. "Many play it safe with an accomplished artist for that period, but we gave that important space to a young local artist," Au-Yeung says. The fair has also brought an influx of foreign curators and museum directors who continue to visit Hong Kong. Tsang, for instance, was



recently contacted by the director of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, who was visiting several artists' studios in Hong Kong.

For all the hype, though, most agree that the city's scene has not yet matured enough to give artists exhibitions that launch their careers internationally. "If you are talking about game-changing shows, then it's not easy," says Arianna Gellini, the director of exhibitions at Gallery Exit. "To be able to get out and be heard, even from somewhere like Hong Kong, is hard."

Great expectations

"What's missing from the infrastructure is somewhere you could have a breakthrough show," Tobias Berger says. "You don't have M+ and the Central Police Station – institutions that are taken seriously overseas." Choi Yan-chi, a veteran artist and the co-founder of 1a Space, an experimental non-profit organisation, agrees. "If you look back at my career, that's what I was lacking. That kind of support is necessary," she says.

Although there are huge expectations for M+, which is due to open in 2019, many are also waiting for progress on the commercial front from the international galleries that have opened spaces in the city. So far, few have chosen to feature local artists in their



Trevor Yeung's *Silver Duckweed*, 2014 (opposite page, detail), Tsang Kin-wah's *The Second Seal—Every Being That Opposes Progress Should Be Food For You* at the 2009 Lyon Biennale (top), and Nadim Abbas's *Marine Lover*, 2011

programming; most are still testing the water.

Jehan Chu, a Hong Kong-based art adviser who presented a contemporary ink-painting show at Ben Brown Fine Arts (3E15) in the city last year, is optimistic. "More gallerists will take on young local artists as they become more secure in their programmes here," he says.

Chu thinks that conditions in the city will be ripe for the international launch of an artist's career in less than five years' time. Others, such as Trevor Leung, are not convinced. "There's a long way to go. Not many people in the art community have influence overseas. The local art market is too small and, most importantly, a star doesn't exist yet," he says.

SIX LAUNCHPADS: WHERE TO FIND WORK BY YOUNG LOCAL ARTISTS

Para Site (P4)

Para Site is an important launchpad for local artists. Set up in 1996, the non-profit organisation plans to hold a new, annual summer exhibition dedicated to young curators and local artists.

1a Space

Founded in 1998, 1a Space is an independent non-profit organisation in the Cattle Depot. This month, it is due to launch the 1a Space Artistic Panel, composed of seven young artists and one art critic who will concentrate on projects featuring young local talent.



Sum Wing Kiu's installation *Yeast*, 2015, at 1a space

Gallery Exit (1B19)

Exit focuses on conceptual artists from across Asia. It began to show young local artists such as Nadim Abbas as a response to a dearth of similar contemporary art spaces in Hong Kong.

Spring Workshop

This recent addition to the city has fast become a respected non-profit space. As well as organising artist-in-residence programmes, it works with institutions globally, giving artists international exposure.

Grotto Fine Art (1B30)

A pioneer on the local art scene, this gallery aims to support new graduates. Its founder offers a graduation award to students from three of the city's art programmes, including a cash prize and an exhibition.

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Although it focuses on local artists from older generations, the museum regularly gives awards to young contemporary artists and includes their work in thematic group exhibitions. P.U.