



HONG KONG – From a quick look at its jam-packed cultural calendar this March, you might assume that Hong Kong is a well-established stop on the international art circuit. But although the city's unique history, culture and geographical location have long made it a prize travel destination for visitors from around the world, Hong Kong has emerged as Asia's art hub only over the past decade, when the first major contemporary art fairs and galleries began to set up shop and shine a spotlight on the region's up-and-coming talents. Today, with Asia Contemporary Art Fair, Art Basel Hong Kong and Art Central occurring simultaneously – and with new restaurants, hotels and shops ready to greet their visitors – March in Hong Kong has truly become a must-attend art moment, attracting thousands of serious collectors and cultured travellers eager to sample the city's abundant, multifarious offerings.

Even before the recent burgeoning of fairs, Maree Di Pasquale believed in the city's art assets. "We always thought Hong Kong had the potential to be a global art hub and rival what is happening elsewhere in the world – in Paris, in Miami, in New York," says Di Pasquale, the director of Art Central, Hong Kong's newest fair, which returns to its Central Harbourfront venue from 23 to 26 March. "Hong Kong really had the capacity to become a world player, and we are pleased to say that it has," she adds. For its second edition, Art Central has assembled a roster of more than 100 galleries. In addition to mind-bending installations and other contemporary art fare, organisers are showcasing 30 promising artists in their Hong Kong debuts. "What we really pride ourselves in presenting is a distinctly Asian edge," Di Pasquale explains. "We try to present the younger artists who might be known in their city or region but who are relatively unknown in a global context."

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OUTSIDE LAST YEAR'S DEBUT OF ART CENTRAL. THE ART FAIR RETURNS TO HONG KONG'S CENTRAL HARBOURFRONT FOR ITS SECOND EDITION, 23–26 MARCH. COURTESY OF ART CENTRAL.

For collectors seeking an immersive experience, Art Basel will deploy its expansive footprint at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from 24 to 26 March. "Hong Kong just felt like the right place for Art Basel," says its Asia director, Adeline Ooi. "It's a melting pot and one of those cities that's efficient and dynamic." These traits will certainly be evident at the fair's fourth edition, when the 239 participating galleries present a variety of mediums and talents. Look for ink art and calligraphy at Alisan Fine Arts, emerging artists at Gallery Exit, contemporary photography at Blindspot Gallery and top-notch contemporary art at Gagosian, Pace, Hanart TZ, Pearl Lam and Grotto Fine Art.



DUDELL'S, A POPULAR EVENING SPOT ABOVE THE SHANGHAI TANG MANSION ON DUDELL STREET. COURTESY OF DUDELL'S.

More intimate is the Asia Contemporary Art Show (ACAS), which gathers 80 galleries at its eighth edition, taking place 24 to 27 March in the inviting Hong Kong Conrad hotel. There, collectors can enjoy one-on-one conversations with artists, dealers and curators, something Mark Saunderson, co-founder and director of the twice-annual ACAS, takes much pride in. "Asia Contemporary is becoming a meeting point for people," he notes. For a particularly satisfying collector experience, Saunderson advises visiting all three events: "Each of the fairs offers a different character," he says, "and that really does hammer home the importance of art in Hong Kong."



THE CROWD AT PING PONG 129 GINTONERIA. COURTESY PING PONG 129 GINTONERIA.

Experiencing art may be top priority for those visiting the city in late March, but eating, drinking, shopping – even finding the best place to stay – are of equal importance. Thankfully, art-centric establishments have put down roots year-round, and not just in the Central district.

In fact, restaurant-cum-galleries and distinctive new shops have popped up in areas such as Wong Chuk Hang on the Southside and Sheung Wan at the northwest of Hong Kong Island, especially in the area around Tai Ping Shan, also known as PoHo. There, visitors can find Scandinavian watches and shoes at Squarestreet, Indonesian jewellery, clothes and bags at Sin Sin Atelier and Fine Art along with eclectic fashion and accessories at a branch of the Paris concept store Château Zoobeetle. As far as dining is concerned, an inescapable buzz surrounds Bibo in Sheung Wan. The restaurant created a sensation when it opened in 2014, with its novel combination of edgy basement location, fine French fare and walls covered in art by Banksy, Damien Hirst and Invader, and it continues to attract the in-crowd.

Bibo is not the only art-themed establishment that has emerged. Down the road, on boutique-packed Sai Street, for instance, Boom Gallery draws a devoted clientele with its mix of light dishes, serious local artists and designer pop-ups. Nearby, a whimsical Sheung Wan neighbour, The Popsy Room, recently debuted a new Central branch called Popsy Modern Kitchen, which inherited its sibling's concept of food-and-art pairings – each dish is inspired by a work of art on display in the restaurant. When time for postprandial lounging and sipping comes around, the place to go is in the still-sleepy Sai Ying Pun area of the Western District, where Ping Pong 129 Gintoneria, a renovated ping-pong hall complete with retro-chic furniture and contemporary artworks, awaits with sky-high ceilings and a long list of premium gins.

Although the unrelenting urbanity of Hong Kong's North Coast is well established, those in town for the fairs shouldn't assume the city's industriousness, inventiveness and fun stop there. As most sophisticated residents know, a flourishing art-and-design scene is also happening on the city's Southside in areas such as Wong Chuk Hang and Aberdeen. Like their peers in other art-friendly cities, Hong Kong artists, gallery owners and even restaurateurs have been turning to industrial neighbourhoods, where relatively affordable warehouse spaces are available. Exploring this budding art-and-design district will only get easier once new Mass Transit Railway stations open toward the end of 2016. But any cab will bring Southside adventure seekers to Dine Art, a private kitchen helmed by Cosimo Taddei, which exhibits well-known international artists, or to Charbon, a new multipurpose art space that houses a gallery, curio shop, cinema and library and hosts workshops and talks. Some art lovers will prefer staying in this area: since design-driven hotel Ovolo Southside opened in 2014, it's become a player in the neighbourhood's scene, thanks to street art-style murals and installations peppered throughout its public spaces.



AT THE POSPY ROOM, DISHES SUCH AS RAZOR CLAM RISOTTO WITH EXOTIC MUSHROOMS ARE INSPIRED BY WORKS OF ART. COURTESY OF THE POSPY ROOM.



AT PERENNIALY HIP BIBO, PATRONS ARE SURROUNDED BY CONTEMPORARY ART WHILE THEY DINE ON FRENCH CUISINE. COURTESY OF BIBO.

For visitors who prefer buzzy surroundings, there is the Cordis Hong Kong. Smack in the middle of frenetic Mong Kok, this newly renovated luxury hotel (formerly Langham Place) displays more than 1,500 artworks on its premises. Back in Central, The Pottinger, a 68-room boutique hotel adorned with Fan Ho's black-and-white street photography, won Asia's Best City Boutique Hotel award in 2014, though it may be a hard get. One can always try his or her luck at The Upper House, whose 117 Zen-contemporary studios and suites designed by local talent André Fu continue to please, as do its views over Victoria Harbour. Wherever they end up, art lovers will no doubt fill their eyes, minds, stomachs and suitcases with Hong Kong's innumerable treasures.

Kate Springer is a Hong Kong-based culture and travel writer.