



Fairly short on flair

Visitor comments regarding Art Basel's first Hong Kong edition last month vary from it being "more serious" to "better organised" to "not as much fun" as its predecessor, the Hong Kong International Art Fair (Art HK).

This is all possibly true, a consequence of Art Basel's branding and strategic changes to tighten the organisation and overall "look" of its own contemporary art fair. The art on display was balanced and the fair's interior design gave better viewing.

Higher gallery participation fees and stricter vetting of proposed artwork had avoided the possibility of multiple galleries showing work by a single artist. As a result, there were fewer pieces by market favourites such as Candida Höfer, Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor, Bill Viola and Takashi Murakami.

However, it appeared vetting was uneven as the weakest booths were often those displaying "name" artists, including entire displays of Fernando Botero and Andy Warhol. The over-saturation of some artists' work reinforced the criticism that art fairs commoditise art.

Art Basel Hong Kong provided highlights and opportunities for younger and older, unknown and regional artists to exhibit alongside established artists to a diverse

international and Asian audience. But there were few surprises or displays of exhibitionism.

The "Encounters" section of larger installation pieces in public areas of the fair lacked frisson. In previous fairs these pieces were highlights. Although nominally curated – this year, by Yuko Hasegawa – the impetus for bold presentation came from the enthusiastic sponsorship of galleries. It didn't happen this year.

Elsewhere, Cecilia de Torres Gallery from New York presented a perfect display with a range of Latin American geometric abstraction.

The 92-year-old Argentinean artist León Ferrari received the Gold Lion award at the 2007 Venice Biennale and exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2009. But he is unknown in Asia. His *Letters to a General* series of coded writing has an underlying political message criticising Argentina's then military junta and a complicit Catholic Church concealed within his calligraphic virtuosity.

Nearby, Venezuelan artist Elias Crespin's kinetic sculptures of stainless steel rods manipulated by computer-controlled moving nylon threads floated in the air, beautifully permutating into different forms and shapes.

Japanese artist Sadamasa Motonaga, previously unseen in



A woman and child at Art Basel Hong Kong (above). Among the works on display were (clockwise from top left): post-war Indian modernist works from Delhi Art Gallery; Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo's installation *Dialogue With My Sleepless Tyrant*; Fernando Botero's *Woman Smoking*; and Marcus Coates' *Iron Prominent*, *Notodonta Dromedarius*, a self-portrait made with shaving foam. Photos: Reuters, Sam Tsang, John Batten, AFP

Hong Kong, had a generous display of beautiful abstract resin and acrylic paintings at McCaffrey Fine Art.

Similarly, the influential Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis, born in 1936, should be more visible in Asia. His single mixed-media construction complemented the tightly wrapped silk-threaded object installation *More or Less the Same* by mainland artist Lin Tianmiao at Galerie Lelong.

Workplace Gallery in Gateshead near Newcastle, Britain, is far from the gravitational influence of London's art world, but the gallery's lower overheads and regular attendance at art fairs is a strategy to promote its artists. Its presentation of Marcus Coates' self-portrait photographs – of the artist covered in shaving foam – was an unsettling chrysalis transformation within a human guise.

Shown at Kalfayan Galleries' booth, Lebanese artist Raed Yassin's ceremonial vases of "victories" during his country's civil war of 1975-1990 were in the form of traditional Chinese export porcelain, hand-painted and manufactured in the mainland ceramic centre of Jingdezhen. While echoing the ancient tradition of recording victories in battles, these vases instead depicted destruction and fear rather than valour.

The work of Hong Kong artists was prominent.

Hung Keung's interactive video display at Schoeni Art Gallery continued his explorations of the traditional ink-painting genre; his latest effort verged on techno abstraction. Meanwhile, Tsang Kin-wah's spidery text installation covered the floor of Pearl Lam Galleries' booth.

Gallery Exit impressed with Ivy



The over-saturation of some artists' work reinforced the criticism that art fairs commoditise art



Breaking the polar ice at the Venice Biennale this year

Isla Binnie

Blocks of ice from the Bahamas, cardboard bedclothes from Iraq and a thumping Vatican heartbeat should aid the 2013 Venice Biennale's attempt to capture the "unruly" world of art.

The diversity of sights and sounds at the world's largest non-commercial art exhibition are partly a result of sheer numbers, with works from 88 countries installed across the canal city. More than 150 artists are taking part in the biennale, which has been running since 1895 and attracts artists, art-lovers and collectors to Venice.

"Every two years we try to capture the world – and then the world is unruly," biennale curator Massimiliano Gioni says.

Ten countries – including the Bahamas – are participating for the first time with their own dedicated pavilions in a fair that runs until November 24. "The national pavilions are fantastic because they give us a glimpse of the diversity of the world ... a world of exceptions," says Gioni.

The Vatican is also debuting. The Holy See's pavilion is in the Arsenal, or old shipyard site. While the three rooms are based on the relatively orthodox themes of "creation", "uncreation" and "recreation", the use of video and a pervasive thumping heartbeat soundtrack add a modern element.

The Bahamas pavilion holds a surprise for anyone expecting warmth and sunshine. Nassau-born artist Tavares Strachan's show includes a 14-hour video of his recent trip to the North Pole and two freezer pods containing blocks of ice: he brought one back from the pole while the other was made to a specific formula to resemble polar ice as closely as possible.

"I grew up on an island that was 24 miles by seven miles [38.4km by 11km]. It was tiny. So if you got on a bike and you started riding, you hit the edge and you were like ... 'what else am I going to do?' Exploration was kind of a natural part of the way I thought about the world," Strachan says.

Gioni themed the 55th iteration of the Venice show on the

"Encyclopaedic Palace", a design filed for patent by eccentric Italian-American Marino Auriti in 1955 for an imaginary museum, 137 storeys high, that would house all worldly knowledge in one place. Auriti's ambition was never realised, but the biennale has set a more realistic goal, giving an introduction to art that's rarely seen abroad.

"I hope that we are going to be an introduction to Iraqi art," says Furat al Jamil, one of 11 artists in the Iraqi pavilion, which is set in a traditional Venetian apartment overlooking the Grand Canal.

"These are samples. Modest samples but genuine and sincere," says Jamil as she shows *Honey Pot*, a sculpture made of suspended honeycomb frames dripping into a broken antique pot.

Jamil's colleagues Yaseen Wami and Hashim Taaeh have furnished the apartment's bedroom in cardboard, right down to the bedclothes. Cartoonist Abdul Raheem Yassir's politically charged illustrations hang on the walls, near Jamal Penjweny's series of photographs titled *Saddam is Here*.

Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei is represented twice in Venice this year, despite being unable to attend in person. His mother came in his place to unveil his new piece, a series of sculptures called *SACRED* depicting his detention in 2011.

The setting brings another dimension to Ai's new piece, says art gallery director Greg Hilty, who collaborated on the project installed at Sant'Antonin church. "If you saw this in a museum you would appreciate the minimalism, you would appreciate the politics," Hilty says. "But the church connects it to the stages of the cross, to the lives of the saints, it gives it a more universal story or meaning."

The biennale continues to attract artists and viewers partly because of its own history, says Jeremy Deller, the Turner prize-winning artist chosen to represent Britain. "This is as good as it gets really, for an artist," says Deller, whose show starts with two huge scrolls – inscribed with lyrics of *The Man Who Sold the World* by David Bowie – hanging on both sides of the main door. Reuters

Art Basel's Hong Kong debut gave exposure to lesser known talents but ultimately lacked the thrill factor, writes John Batten

Ma's large retro-styled painting of her mother. So did the fine drawings by Wai Pong-yu at Grotto Fine Art.

Tang Kwok-hin installed 2P Contemporary Art Gallery's booth with a tight display of perspex-encased objects as if they were being sold in a stylish industrial steel-floored supermarket.

A foretaste of Lee Kit's domestic interior installation now showing in Hong Kong's Venice Biennale pavilion was also seen at Vitamin Creative Space.

The many galleries from India demonstrated the strength of their contemporary art scene. Delhi Art Gallery showed a solid range of post-war Indian modernism, including M.F. Hussein, Laxma Goud and Jogen Chowdhury, who underpinned the current market.

India's changing urban landscape is mirrored in the thousands of saint-like faces of rural immigrants shown on small steel badges of Valay Shende's travelling trunk in Sakshi Gallery.

Documentary photographs of performance artist Marina Abramovic were available in different galleries around the art fair.

Ark Galerie of Yogyakarta displayed Indonesian artist Melati

Suryodarmo's props for one of her endurance performances: a stack of mattresses. Photographs of *Dialogue With My Sleepless Tyrant* shows Melati trapped, arms thrashing, struggling between mattresses, a metaphor for a woman struggling within the conforming expectations of society.

The most impressive conceptual display at the fair was the video, photography and installation by Yuichiro Tamura at Yuka Tsuruno Gallery of Tokyo.

Tamura's trip to Hong Kong for 10 days in March was spent researching the city's history. Returning to Japan, Tamura planned his display. Using Google, he sourced views from around Hong Kong.

These images were printed as a platinum print – one of the most permanent photographic print processes, which contrasted with the temporary cyber nature of the images' sources.

Key internet search words were then carved (using a Buddhist carver of wooden funerary objects, located in Yau Ma Tei) into the wooden frames of each photograph. Despite their unusual origins, these framed photographs are now a permanent record of a momentary aspect of Hong Kong's past.

Likewise, a moment in time is captured in Tamura's *Nightless*

video – a stitched video road journey from Chek Lap Kok airport to Aberdeen sourced from Google street view images. Despite Hong Kong being famous for its night views, these were not seen because Google's images were recorded only in daytime.

Squeezed between Ho Sin-tung's videos and a drawn diary of anecdotes – her disparate history of Para/Site Art Space – and children painting in the booth of the Sovereign Art Foundation, was the smallest information booth at the fair. It had a simple message: "Basel – The cultural capital of Switzerland".

There is no hyperbole in this statement, no claims of European or world cultural domination, but from this apparent regional humility a stronger Swiss presence is now evident in Hong Kong.

The city of Basel, preparing to host the 44th Art Basel on its home turf this week, has now strategically widened its traditional association with luxury consumer products (such as watches) in Asia through its active involvement in the region's visual art market.

Hong Kong, a trading entrepôt itself, can embrace Art Basel – but must acknowledge that art is created by artists whose inspiration is not necessarily from the market. thereview@scmp.com



Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's *SACRED* comprises six sculptures based on his arrest and detention in 2011. Photo: AFP