

Metal cubes, N. Korea handcraft highlight Hong Kong art show

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HONG KONG (AP) — Gold-plated metal cubes, tapestries embroidered by unknown North Korean artisans and bales of cardboard waste are among the highlights of the Art Basel Hong Kong fair kicking off this week.

The latest edition of the global art fair threw open its doors to media and VIP collectors Tuesday in the southern Chinese city, which has become Asia's main art trading hub.

Some 239 galleries from 35 countries and territories are exhibiting works at the show, which opens to the public for three days starting Thursday.

Organizers shrugged off concerns about whether China's slowdown and a shaky world economy are dampening global art demand.

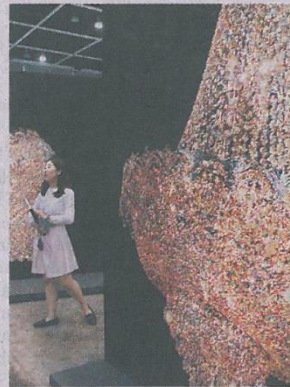
"Maybe I think collectors will ask a lot more questions before they agree to a sale, but I think generally speaking it just feels like everyone is very excited about the art world," said Adeline Ooi, Art Basel's Asia director. The show is an offshoot of the annual contemporary art fair in Basel, Switzerland. It's expected to draw tens of thousands.

Chinese artist Zhang Ding attracted curious visitors with his "18 Cubes" installation, which consists of 18 large steel boxes plated with 24-karat gold to give them a mirror-like finish.

In a twist, Zhang invited fairgoers to scratch whatever they wanted onto the surface, using anything they are carrying with them, or black crystal shards provided for the purpose.

Coco Li, who runs a Shanghai company buying art on behalf of corporate Chinese clients, scratched the Chinese characters for "interactive art" onto one cube.

"This kind of art is better than 'quiet' art," said Li, gesturing to paintings displayed by a nearby gallery.



A woman walks past an artwork "Chandeliers for Five Cities" created by South Korean artist Ham Kyung-ah during the VIP preview of Art Basel in Hong Kong, Tuesday. AP-Yonhap

South Korean artist Ham Kyung-ah presented "Chandeliers in Five Cities," the latest in her series of embroidered works crafted with the help of unidentified North Korean workers. Ham settled on chandeliers as a reference to political power after she noticed one in a picture of world leaders meeting to divide the Korean Peninsula into north and south at the end of World War II.

She said she sends materials and digital images of her designs to the unidentified North Korean artisans through secretive middlemen who travel through China. It can take up to a year before she gets one back.

Ham said she was inspired after she found a North Korea propaganda flyer in front of her parents' home in 2008.

"I wanted to send back these kinds of fliers in a very artistic way," she said.

Indonesian artist Tintin Wulia's collection of cardboard bales is the result of her yearlong investigation into a recycling micro-economy involving scrap collectors and Filipino migrant domestic workers.