

Art Basel Hong Kong: our critics give their first impressions

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Our critical first look at Hong Kong's art extravaganza

This year's Art Basel Hong Kong looks a little less loud and flashy, perhaps reflecting the rather unsettling times we are living through (news of the terrorist attacks in Brussels came through just before the fair doors opened).

As usual, the tone of the two halls is set by the large installations called "Encounters".

These are arranged in strategic spots to break up the low rows of gallery booths, to encourage the anticipated 60,000 visitors to pause and just look. There are fewer of them this year – 16 instead of 21 – which the organisers say is intended to give each work more room to breathe.

As Marc Spiegler, Art Basel fair director, says, "less is more" these days, after a period of rapid expansion of the contemporary art fair market. Some of them, at least, are also too subtle to shout "stop" at the jostling crowd.

Take Tintin Wulia's *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories*, for example. A well-meaning installation made for Hong Kong, it features scavenged cardboard bundles ready for recycling that are covered with drawings of weighing centres, the source of a feeble income that so many impoverished elderly people still rely on. Well meaning, but not fascinating to look at. The paintings are difficult to see, so they really do look like bundles of used cardboard.

Charles Avery's *Tree No 5*, on the artificiality of our world, is a great comment on the convention hall environment, but again, it is easy to walk past.

Yellow Structure, by Richard Maloy, ought to be a classic art fair landmark. But it is misplaced. The inner plumbing of the fake, yellow rock greets most fair visitors first since it faces the entrance, so the conceit is wasted. We are supposed to be tricked into thinking it is a monolithic, heavy structure and then discover it's all made of cardboard.



Still, the "Encounters" section has some real gems. The two exquisite embroidery works by South Korean artist [Kyungah Ham](#) and American artist Pae White are beautiful. The former shows glowing chandeliers against a black background, all embroidered by North Korean textile workers who smuggled their work through the border at the artist's behest. White's gold and silver tapestries are based on Japanese fabric that she's collected. One of them is 12 metres long.

Visually not as stunning, but Isa Genzken's *Schauspieler (Actors)* is worth a close look. A group of oddly-dressed mannequins have very unusual details that are not obvious at first.

Tromarama's Private Riots is certainly one work that, because of its sheer size and bright colours, is impossible to avoid. Two groups of placards are arranged in circles, with the larger one suspended from the ceiling. While symbolising the power of the people, the images on the placards are deliberately childish and not at all angry.

There has to be some audience participation in the "Encounters" section. This year, it is provided by Zhang Ding's 18 Cubes, a collection of gold-plated cubes which visitors are encouraged to carve graffiti onto their smooth surfaces, with gloves and sharp implements that are provided.

Elsewhere, patrons are embraced by colours. Not the murky or muddy kind of colours but bright, vibrant, rainbow kind of colours.

There is Scheinbogen by Ozlem Gunyol and Mustafa Kunt; Anselm Reyle's Untitled, a mixed media on canvas; Damien Hirst's Spectrum (Oil Paints Studio Colours); Liam Gillick's Projected Projections; and Zhu Jinshi's Bach 2 . Even the sneaky birds featured in Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg's A Thief Caught in the Act are colourfully painted.

If last year's Art Basel Hong Kong was a "bling bling" edition, with gold-coloured works on display everywhere to attract mainland buyers, then 2016 is more subtle. Blatant materialism is out. In comes harmony and positive energy. One actually feels quite uplifted, walking down the main hall, being drawn to an array of colours. Belgian artist Fabrice Samyn's beautiful glass installation, The Colour of Time, is poetic and calming.

It might have something to do with the new lighting in the venue. Li Zhenhua, the Beijing and Zurich-based multimedia artist and producer, who curated this year's film programme, says the lighting makes the artworks less glaring and colours more easy on the eye.

Or it might have something to do with the sluggish market as there are already murmurs of "things being slow".

Perhaps the colourful art on show will help lift that darkening mood and encourages sales in the next few days?