



Diners at Bibo restaurant share space with street art including a wooden installation by Kaws and a moped covered with calligraphy by King of Kowloon.

HONG KONG NOW

**HOW CREATIVITY AND COMMERCE
HAVE TRANSFORMED A CITY OF BUSINESS INTO THE
WORLD'S NEWEST ART CAPITAL.**

by TONY PERROTTET
photographs by GRANT HARDER



Curator Johnson Chang has nurtured generations of Hong Kong artists at his Hanart TZ Gallery.

JOHNSON CHANG KNOWS HOW TO THROW A PARTY. THE LEGEND- ARY ART CURATOR IS CELEBRATING THE 30-YEAR ANNIVERSARY



OF HIS GROUNDBREAKING HONG KONG ART GALLERY, Hanart TZ, in the city's equally legendary restaurant and bar, the China Club. When I step from the elevator, I'm blown away by the visual splendor. The club feels like a luxurious opium den from the Jazz Age, except that every wall is decorated with contemporary artworks from mainland China that reflect the radical changes the country has experienced over the last three decades. The pieces were collected by Johnson (who also goes by his Cantonese name, Chang Tsong-zung, the "TZ" in his gallery's name) when the artists were young unknowns. Many of the paintings toy with classic images of Communist propaganda, such as an irreverent pop art version of Chairman Mao alongside Whitney Houston, called *With Love, Whitney*, by Yu Youhan. Other works, created in the new capitalist era that began in the 1980s, explore more individualistic styles. There are haunting family portraits; figures in business suits with raw, bloody skin; and pink-faced men maniacally laughing, as if on the verge of madness. The pieces focus on the pressures of living under authoritarian rule, as well as the anxieties of leaping from a controlled socialist economy into a capitalist free-for-all.

The China Club's top floor is crammed with power players from throughout the Asian art world. Renowned mainland artists such as Fang Lijun and Zhang Xiaogang have flown in for Johnson's party tonight, along with top international curators, academics, and collectors. I meet Indian poets,



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**KACEY WONG,
ON HIS PERFORMANCE ART PIECE
PADDLING HOME**





For his *Sleepwalker* project, artist Kacey Wong, left, built a bunk-bed tricycle that he pedaled through the city while dressed in pajamas. Angela Su, right, reimagines human anatomy in video and intricate drawings.

Japanese painters, directors of New York's Guggenheim Museum, and two polo club owners from Mongolia as the kitchen parades out a Chinese feast of roast suckling pig, sesame prawns, and "assorted fungi." "This is *the* place to be in Asia right now," I'm told by Doryun Chong, a dapper Korean American who left his high-flying career at New York's MoMA to become chief curator at M+. A museum envisioned as the centerpiece of Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District, M+ will feature space-age exteriors and cathedral-like interiors when it opens in 2017. "If you'd asked me just a few years ago, I would have said nothing was going on [in Hong Kong]," Chong says. "It's a huge transformation."

Johnson, 63, has seen it all. Raised by a well-to-do Hong Kong family, he studied at Williams College in Massachusetts, then returned home in 1977 to set up a gallery dedicated to classical Chinese art. In the mid-1980s, as a new generation of Chinese artists began to reinterpret 4,000 years of

tradition for the modern era, he also began collecting contemporary work, riding along with military convoys into Tibet to track down artists in remote colonies and visiting other artists in their studios in Shanghai and Beijing. By the early 1990s, Johnson was curating the first exhibitions of China's post-Tiananmen art, which introduced a new crop of artists working in movements such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism. The exhibitions toured Australia, Europe, and the United States (one had the catchy title *Mao Goes Pop*) and launched Johnson's reputation as a leading Chinese art authority. Tonight, Johnson moves through his party wearing the austere uniform of a Confucian scholar—cotton jacket with mandarin collar and handmade leather slippers, his trademark homage to Chinese tradition—effortlessly mingling in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English.

For years, Johnson practically *was* Hong Kong's art scene, almost single-handedly introducing a new contemporary expression and explosion of creativity to the West as China

opened its doors to the outside world in the 1990s. Tonight, the crowd that has gathered to celebrate him also celebrates the rise of his hyperactive city. "Hong Kong is pretty much the center of the art world at the moment," says a U.S.-born art restorer, Dawne Steele Pullman, who spends half the year in Hong Kong. "There is an energy here that you just don't feel in New York or London or Paris."

I wanted to know where that energy was coming from. "You really must come back during the art fair," Johnson says. "I think you will quite enjoy it."

HONG KONG'S CULTURAL "coming out" took place in 2013, when the world's most prestigious art fair, Art Basel, which hosts exhibitions in Switzerland and Miami, began holding an annual event in Hong Kong. At Johnson's suggestion, I returned for the 2014 fair in May, four months after the China Club party.

The official heart of Art Basel is the Convention and Exhibition Centre on the Wanchai waterfront, a vast hangar-style building filled with 245 booths, about half of which were from the Asia-Pacific region, including 25 galleries from Hong Kong itself. It was a dazzling and slightly overwhelming experience, as I took in beds made of television screens by South Korean artist Nam Jun Paik and pop art skateboards created by

Indonesian art duo Indiegueerrillas, alongside Andy Warhols and Giorgio di Chiricos. The centerpiece was Gu Wenda's *United Nations* project, national flags woven from human hair gathered from people around the world and hung as a surreal conceptual tapestry.

Johnson was there in his Hanart TZ booth, greeting visitors and putting the final edits on a catalog coming out this October. An overview of his Hanart 100 art collection—100

key works from his own trove of Chinese art—the publication also presents the ultimate insider account of how Chinese art has developed since the 1980s.

Johnson suggested that after taking in the convention hall, I should check out the satellite events throughout the city. He quickly sketched out an art tour that would take me far from the harbor into a parallel universe of creativity. My first stop was the financial district, bluntly named Central, which on the surface seemed like a tropical Dallas, filled with office towers and designer clothing stores. The ground floor of the Pedder Building, a rare neoclassical survivor, is filled by an Abercrombie & Fitch store, but the upper floors house blue-chip international galleries such as the Gagosian (headquartered in New York) and Johnson's own Hanart TZ.

At Hanart, I ran into Gu Wenda himself, who was showing stone sculptures inscribed with retranslated Tang Dynasty poems. He said that the crowds made exhibiting in Hong Kong more satisfying than showing his work in Beijing or Shanghai. "Hong Kong has a strong middle class, which is becoming a serious audience for art," he said. "You don't get this sophistication in mainland China." In this way, Art Basel is a natural extension of what Hong Kong has always been about: commerce. In recent years, the city has been flooded with wealthy art collectors from mainland China taking advantage of Hong Kong's efficient shipping as well as the lack of sales and export taxes. The city is now ranked just behind New York and London as a world art auction center; Christie's and Sotheby's have both set up lucrative offices here.

But money alone can't explain the city's creative blossoming. Credit for that also goes to Hong Kong's artists themselves. In my conversations with Johnson, he had explained that in the 1980s, Hong Kong was still a British colony devoted entirely to making money, a place where art was little valued and artists operated underground. "The trouble was," he said, "nobody really knew about the local artists, because they had no platform to show their work." Today, Hong Kong has 70 galleries and many more creative spaces. Over the next few days, I crossed the Harbor to Kowloon and the New Territories to meet some of the artists Johnson called the young Turks.

"Start with Warren Leung," he advised. "He is one of our most important artists."

My taxi driver took me to an area called Fo Tan, a gritty enclave with 200 resident artists. From a desolate street I cautiously entered the warehouse. A corridor lit by flickering

EXPERIENCE HONG KONG'S ART SCENE

Where to Stay

THE UPPER HOUSE

Hong Kong architect André Fu not only designed the interior, but also chose the artwork throughout this tech-savvy hotel. At check-in, it's not unusual for guests to get a guided tour of the minimalist stone sculptures in the foyer. From \$580. Pacific Place, 88 Queensway, Admiralty, 852-2918-1838, upperhouse.com

THE RITZ-CARLTON, HONG KONG

Look up when you enter the lobby to find three paintings from Chinese artist Yuanming He's "Horse Galloping Across the Sky" series. The world's highest swimming pool is on the 118th floor, as is a wall of digital art showing underwater scenes. From \$606. International Commerce Centre, 1 Austin Rd. West, Kowloon, 852-2263-2263, ritzcarlton.com/hongkong

MIRA MOON

Dutch designer Marcel Wanders is behind the Chinese folklore motifs and intricate detailing found throughout this year-old, 91-room boutique hotel. From \$399. 388 Jaffe Rd., Wan Chai Causeway Bay, 852-2643-8888, miramoonhotel.com

Where to See Art in Hong Kong

ART BASEL HONG KONG

The next art fair takes place March 15–17, 2015. artbasel.com

CATTLE DEPOT ARTIST VILLAGE

A former slaughterhouse has been transformed into a cultural hub of artists' studios and galleries including 1a Space, Artist Commune, and Videotage. 63 Ma Tau Kok Rd., To Kwa Wan, Kowloon

GAGOSIAN GALLERY HONG KONG

The American art dealer Larry Gagosian's light-filled space exhibits both international and Chinese art stars. 7/F Pedder Building, 12 Pedder St., Central, 852-2151-0555, gagosian.com

HANART TZ GALLERY

Johnson Chang opened this pioneering gallery in 1983 as a place to showcase emerging contemporary Chinese artists. 401 Pedder Building, 12 Pedder St., Central, 852-2526-9019, hanart.com

HANART SQUARE

In 2010, Johnson opened a second gallery in a large warehouse space that

focuses on experimental art and installations. Hanart Square, Unit C, 2/F, Mai On Industrial Building, 19 Kung Yip St., Kwai Chung, 852-2526-9019, hanart.com

PARA SITE ART SPACE

A quirky nonprofit gallery run by independent Hong Kong artists, Para Site has shown big names such as Ai Weiwei as well as up-and-coming local talent. GF 4 Po Yan Street, Sheung Wan, 852-2517-4620, para-site.org.hk

GALLERY EXIT

When Exit opened in 2008, its goal was to present shock-inducing art. Exhibitions have included Angela Su's video installation of her tattooed back. 3/F, 25 Hing Wo St., Tin Wan, Aberdeen, 852-2541-1299, galleryexit.com

2P CONTEMPORARY ART

Tucked away on a dead-end road in the Sai Ying Pun district, 2P supports experimental artists, with an emphasis on mixed-media and performance art. Shop 5, GF Poga Building, 6-20 Po Tuck St., Sai Ying Pun, 852-2803-2151, 2p-gallery.com

 To plan your trip to Hong Kong, go to afar.com/visit/hongkong.

neon lights led to an old freight elevator that completed the *Blade Runner* atmosphere. As the elevator clawed its way up to the 18th floor, I wasn't surprised to hear the faint echo of Korean pop, but then I pushed open a metal door and found myself face-to-face with a dead pig. Unfortunately, it wasn't an experimental new art project. It was a real pork-roasting plant, with a dozen carcasses hanging from meat hooks. The three workers in galoshes looked at me blankly, then went back to hosing the bloody floor. I poked my head around a corner, a door opened, and, relieved, I was greeted by the artist and his wife, Sara Wong. Once inside, I found a refuge flooded with light. One wall looked out over jungle-covered hills where, Leung told me, tigers were spotted as late as the 1920s. "Capitalists don't care about this view, but artists love it!" he said.

Johnson had recommended Leung (who is more widely known by his Cantonese name, Leung Chi-Wo) as one of the artists who most seriously tackles Hong Kong's confused identity, caught between a British past and a Chinese future. "I feel that I am very different from mainland Chinese," said Leung over a cup of jasmine tea, "but we're coming to a new narrative. In some ways, Hong Kong is merging with the rest of China, but I think there is more conflict than sharing. The harsh reality is that Hong Kongers resent mainlanders. There is a growing insistence on keeping our unique character, and artists are a key part of that resistance."

Leung showed me an ironic piece called *A Wish List for Asia's World City*. A wall of text expressed a fantasy vision for Hong Kong, compiled by Leung from the ideas of a variety of people. It included "Mandatory Recycling," "Air-quality Controls for Factories," and perhaps less critical demands such as "Cheaper Lychee Martinis." One of Leung's best-known works, *Domestic Amnesia*, part of Johnson's Hanart 100, resembled an exploded closet, with four antique wooden walls inscribed with a Chinese code related to physical coordinates in Hong Kong. "As the Handover approached in 1997, I realized I didn't know anything about the history of my own city," Leung said. "I explored Hong Kong with a pinhole camera, photographing specific locations that showed the city's past in a concrete way. I felt a sense of discovery, and created a space where I could be apart from Hong Kong and observe it, but still call it home."

I soon discovered that speaking to local artists was a crash course in the issues roiling behind the city's economic good times. Much of their work was a meditation on Hong Kong's

volatile mix of tradition and modernity, East and West, as well as the downside of being part of the New China—pollution, overcrowding, the flood of new immigrants from the mainland, and the city's skyrocketing rents.

When I met installation artist Nadim Abbas at a pop-up "art bar" he had designed for Art Basel called *Apocalypse Postponed* (a nuclear bomb shelter where the barmen, dressed as emergency workers, prepared blood-red vodka cocktails served in hospital drip bags), he explained the ways these pressures are shaping a new generation of Hong Kong artists. "The obvious cliché is that mainland Chinese artists make huge artworks because they live in a vast country, while Hong Kong artists tend to be more introverted and small-scale because of lack of space," says Abbas, who works in media ranging from sculptures made of sand to haunting audiovisual works. "But it's more complex than that. We are both Chinese, and we have always been connected, but we have two very different artistic traditions. Among other things, mainlanders went through the

Revolution, with its emphasis on Socialist Realism, while we've been a British colony, and had longer contact with Western art." Abbas is a fifth-generation Hong Konger, and on the surface his work is suffused with a poetic sense of the city's density and claustrophobia: In one piece, *Zone (1)*, a robotic vacuum cleaner incessantly pushes cast concrete balls around a prisonlike room. "There is a sense of confinement," he admits, "but I don't want the pieces to be taken so literally. They have open-ended meanings beyond Hong Kong."

Some artists rely very little on the Hong Kong context. Angela Su, whom I met at a reception in the experimental gallery Para Site, studied biochemistry in Canada before returning home to Hong Kong to become a full-time artist. She now produces intensely physical images that explore "the perception and imagery of the body" and "the pleasures of pain." They range from ornate biological drawings in pseudo-Victorian style to a video of an imaginary operation in which a patient is given an extra orifice to be used for sexual



A former slaughterhouse, the Cattle Depot Artist Village now houses theaters, artists' studios, and galleries.



French artist Paulo Grangeon's 1,600 Pandas installation takes over Hong Kong's PMQ design center, left. Artist Leung Chi Wo stands in front of two works from *He Was Lost Yesterday and We Found Him Today*, a series of photos by Leung and Sara Wong.

gratification. For one performance piece, Su had her back tattooed with 39 prayer fragments to resemble the welts left by a whip, documented by photographs and a video. Inscribed using needles without ink, the burning red lashes eventually healed, leaving no permanent scars. "The piece was very well received in Hong Kong," she says, although more conservative audiences were shocked.

More clearly engaged with Hong Kong is artist Kacey Wong, with his almost Chaplinesque sense of humor. On a sweltering morning, I dropped by his warehouse studio on the small island of Ap Lei Chau, southwest of Hong Kong Island, and chatted on his panoramic balcony overlooking a busy shipping channel. Wong, a lanky figure in designer glasses, explores the use of space in this hyper-dense city. *Paddling Home*, one of his most popular performance pieces, involved floating past the skyline of Victoria Harbor in a tiny model houseboat designed to mimic a typical Hong Kong apartment, as a commentary on the city's booming real estate. "Ads for luxury

apartments boast 180-degree views, but I had the full 360!" he chortled, showing me photos of himself dressed up in a white naval uniform, hitting golf balls off the houseboat's four-foot-by-four-foot roof. "The Hong Kong public really responded to the project's adventurous spirit, especially when I was nearly run over by the high-speed Macau casino ferries," he said. "They loved the daredevil gesture. It echoes the risky way people live and operate on a daily basis in this city."

Wong argued that he and many other Hong Kong artists, who have long tended to be apolitical, are finding themselves now forced to be more engaged in the New China. The result is a pervasive anxiety that Hong Kong will lose its unique character, that the freedom the artists enjoy will erode. At present, though, there is no official censorship in Hong Kong, which is another factor in its cultural emergence. It is hard to imagine that Swiss billionaire Uli Sigg would have donated his collection of Chinese art to the M+ museum if it couldn't display radical works by artists such as Ai Weiwei.

(One photo in the Tiananmen series shows Ai raising his middle finger at the Forbidden City in Beijing.)

VISITED JOHNSON one last time in his gallery once the dust had settled after Art Basel. "It used to be thought that becoming an artist in Hong Kong was a decision to starve," Johnson mused. "Artists would be nicknamed *mo chut sick*, Cantonese slang for someone who is hopeless, in a dead-end career. The underground was so far underground that nobody really hoped to break out. That produced some fine work, but there was little chance for it reaching a wide audience. Now, local galleries all want to represent Hong Kong artists, to offer a unique Asian dimension to international collectors. People don't want to travel all this way and find out it's just like everywhere else." ^A

Writer Tony Perrottet and photographer Grant Harder are profiled on page 24.

“THERE IS AN ENERGY HERE THAT YOU JUST DON'T FEEL IN NEW YORK OR LONDON OR PARIS.”

—DAWNE STEELE PULLMAN,
ART RESTORER

