

Quality artworks might seem beyond your reach, but it's possible for new collectors to find original works at reasonable prices, writes **Bonnie Engel**

High water mark



Photographer
Russel Wong's
study of the Yu
Long river

Hong Kong's spring art season culminates at the end of the month at the Convention and Exhibition Centre, with Christie's mammoth six-day sale (May 27 to June 1) of Chinese 20th century art and contemporary art, Southeast Asian art, Chinese and Asian works of art, fine wine, watches and jewellery adding lustre to the city's reputation as an Asian art powerhouse.

At the same time, ART HK 11, the city's international art fair, now in its fourth year, attracts big galleries from all over the world, bringing in some of the best known Asian and Western art – from contemporary artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Damien Hirst to masters like Renoir and Picasso. The fair will also be held at the Wan Chai waterfront venue from May 26 to 29.

Hong Kong has emerged as Asia's primary destination for art for several reasons: the fact there are no import or export taxes on art, combined with the city's role as the financial capital of the region and its geographical location at the heart of Asia are among them. This year the city is the third-largest auction venue after London and New York.

At the same time, new artists are entering the market every year. So new collectors may feel overwhelmed by the number of artworks to see and evaluate in such a short time, and might think they are priced out of the market because of the spectacular prices fetched by

some established international artists. But savvy and informed beginners know to avoid the big auctions, especially in categories such as works of art where prices for antiquities remain high, and to wait until the end of exhibitions and art fairs to put in bids.

ART HK offers a wide range of quality art that is affordable for new collectors, according to fair director Magnus Renfrew.

"It is possible to start your art collection with less than HK\$10,000," he says. "It would be difficult to find original work by an established artist on this budget, but it may be possible to find original work by young or emerging artists.

"Works on paper – drawings and watercolours – tend to be cheaper and can often be a good way to own

a unique piece on a budget. Editioned work, such as prints, photography-based work and multiples, are often available at this level, even some by some quite well-known names."

There are 250 galleries from 38 countries participating this year so there is a great variety of choice, he adds. "Commercial galleries will be happy to help so tell them your budget and they may well be able to find something to fit. At ART HK 11 there will be the full range of prices available from work for as little as US\$1,000 right up to US\$10 million," says Renfrew. "ART HK has a section called Art Futures, which is dedicated to galleries less than five years old showing work by artists 35 or younger at the time of application. This would be a very good place to start."

Christie's says the most affordable art in the upcoming sales will be from its Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art, Asian contemporary art and even Chinese 20th century art categories, with estimated prices as low as HK\$20,000 to HK\$30,000. With a budget of HK\$50,000, collectors could buy an oil painting by Chinese realist artist Chen Danqing or an acrylic on paper by Chu Teh-chun, whose work fetched more than HK\$45 million at a Christie's sale in 2009.

Smaller auction houses have been attaching themselves to the Christie's spring sales and art fair, offering some bargains at the hotels



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MAGNUS RENFREW, ART HK 11 DIRECTOR

and other venues near the Convention and Exhibition Centre.

There is Seoul Auction, which features both Asian, especially Korean, and Western art; Bonhams, which brings in snuff bottles and other Chinese works of art usually not in the Sotheby's or Christie's sales; and a consortium of four auction houses – Japan's Asian Art Auction Alliance, K Auction of Korea, One East Larasati Auctioneers from Singapore and Beijing Hanhai Auction – called United Asian Auctioneers, who set out to bring a wider range of international modern art to Hong Kong and mainland buyers at better prices.

"We can bring new, fresh art to entice these buyers to see emerging and established artists from many countries," says president and chief executive Yoichiro Kurata of Shinwa Art Auction, the mother company of the Asian Art Auction Alliance.

Hong Kong's buzzing art market has attracted many new galleries

who promote young artists from emerging nations. Art from Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia may offer more value for money, while Hong Kong's own young art students are rising rapidly at start-up galleries dotted around Sheung Wan, Wan Chai, Happy Valley and Kowloon.

The artists themselves are good sources for less expensive art. Some have studios in Fo Tan, near Sha Tin, offering a wide range for much less than the auction houses and downtown galleries.

The Blue Lotus Gallery in Fo Tan's main art building, Wah Luen, gives young artists their first solo exhibitions and specialises in affordable art from local and overseas artists.

Good art is available for good prices. The secret is to seek out art that appeals to the buyer rather than looking at it as an investment.

A major retrospective of Chinese artist Zeng Fanzhi, sponsored by the Pinault Foundation and curated by Christie's and the Shanghai Rockbund Museum, will provide a chance to see one of the mainland's most highly regarded artists. Zeng held the auction sales record for a contemporary Chinese artist at US\$9.6 million for his *Mask Series No.6* (1996) sold at Christie's in 2008, but he was knocked off his perch in April at the Sotheby's spring sale 2011 by Zhang Xiaogang's early triptych, *Forever Lasting Love*, that sold for US\$10 million. money@scmp.com



Man with Bright Eyes, an oil on canvas by Chen Danqing

Looking for the next big thing? Go to the galleries and meet the artists

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Bargains in art only seem so after a young collector has followed his heart and bought what he or she loves, and later finds it becoming more valuable as time goes on. There is no guarantee that art will appreciate in value, but Hong Kong is offering novice collectors more opportunities to meet young artists.

New galleries such as the Above Second in Sai Ying Pun and The

Upper Station in Sheung Wan, Asia Fine Art Gallery and Galerie Huit in Wan Chai. Contemporary by Angela Li and photography specialist gallery Blindspot in Central are edgy additions to the thriving art scene, while curator Calvin Hui just launched 3812, a new gallery in Aberdeen, with his opening exhibition entitled *Time & Memory*, introducing six emerging contemporary Asian artists.

Grotto Fine Art, a gallery on Wyndham Street, has always specialised in Hong Kong art,



"Frog King" Kwok Mang-ho with some of his work. Photo: May Tse

educating buyers for a decade by alerting them to local rising stars.

The Blue Room at Fo Tan, an offshoot of the Blue Lotus Gallery, is a small space that showcases novel art from young, experimental artists. Anyone interested in political art will do well to drop into C&G Artpartment, an independent art space that showcases often humorous works by some of the hottest talent in town.

A new breed of local artist has also arrived on the scene, including Lam Tung-pang, Nadim Abbas,

Adrian Wong, Chow Chun-fai and Doris Wong Wai-yin, whose works are beyond the decorative and challenging and still affordable. Meanwhile, veteran artist Kwok Mang-ho, better known as "Frog King", who is representing Hong Kong at this year's Venice Biennale, is selling his ink paintings at (surprisingly) low prices.

Finally, the Hong Kong Arts Centre in Wan Chai, as well as the Fringe Club in Central, may point the way to the next generation of fine artists.