

Fair value

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By Chitralkha Basu(HK Edition)

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Visitors are welcome to sit on and even pull apart some of the artworks at Affordable Art Fair Hong Kong which opens to the public this afternoon. Chitralkha Basu reports.

This year you could take home a piece broken off a missile from Affordable Art Fair Hong Kong (AAFHK), if you like. Or perhaps a handful of shrapnels! For a token contribution a part of Glen Clarke's creative replica of the lethal weapon - made up of tiny origami sculptures from 12,000 folded renminbi banknotes - would be yours to claim. Fair director Stephanie Kelly is hoping the missile gets taken apart, cell by cell.

The idea of fair visitors dismantling a paper missile resonates with the increasingly popular Maker culture. It's about tinkering with and subverting pre-conceived notions about forms of objects. The fun lies, mostly, in making it a participatory activity, with several pairs of hands leaving their imprints and creating something new, radical and unheard of. Whatever form Clarke's installation takes in the last hours of this year's AAFHK on Sunday, those who help undo it will have endorsed the artist's anti-war message, and at the same time contributed their bit to an anti-landmine charity based in Vietnam.

Loving art is no longer about admiring it from a distance. At AAFHK you're welcome to show your love by querying, touching, sitting on and even putting your stamp on what catches your fancy. The cherry on the cake of this sensory experience is of course being able to claim ownership of the said artwork without necessarily burning a hole in one's pocket.

The Affordable Art Fair franchise, which was started in London in 1996 to cater especially to art lovers on a budget, is now a global brand with a presence in 13 cities. In its fourth edition which opens tonight, AAFHK has retained from previous years the HK\$100,000 cap on individual items in its merchandize, even as it intensifies the level of audience participation.

For instance, it's perfectly alright to sit on Ankie Fok's wooden boats with Chinese characters denoting Hong Kong - a nod to the sculptor's hometown - and gaze at the Victoria Harbour on the other side of the glass panels of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, taking in the Kowloon skyline and "some of the reclaimed land as well," as Kelly reminds us. "A lot of young artists from Hong Kong have made the environment and the impact of change and growth in property and real estate their themes. They are trying to respond to the pace of change and how we cope with it. It's about young artists trying to find space, including mental space, in a very busy city," she adds.

Boats are also central to the images by French painter Stephane Joannes, although they are quite antithetical to the playful cuteness about Fok's wooden sculptures. Joannes' featureless, corroding, gigantic horizontal rafts, etched against solid blocks of color, have already earned him a following in Europe. "We took six of these to the AAF in Singapore last month and sold them all," says Johnny Gorman, director of Quantam Contemporary Art from London. Joannes has painted a new series of his generic tankers especially for AAFHK. "As Hong Kong is a major shipping hub, we hope these will resonate with the locals," adds Gorman.

New and emerging artists

Driven as it is by the altruistic impulse to reach art in every home, AAFs have been, traditionally, wooing the first-time buyer. This year they have set up a help desk at the fair site to assist and guide the newbies who might get a little lost in a maze of 110 galleries. A group of artists and art students who go by the name Alter Modernist are offering guided tours in Cantonese. "We have an e-catalogue this year with full images and details of galleries," informs Kelly. A sizeable number of high-quality items come under HK\$10,000, and will carry tags to highlight the special price, she adds.

Promoting new and emerging artists is also on the agenda, and no less important than chaperoning the uninitiated visitor. "Ultimately the artist is at the epicenter of the art ecology. The

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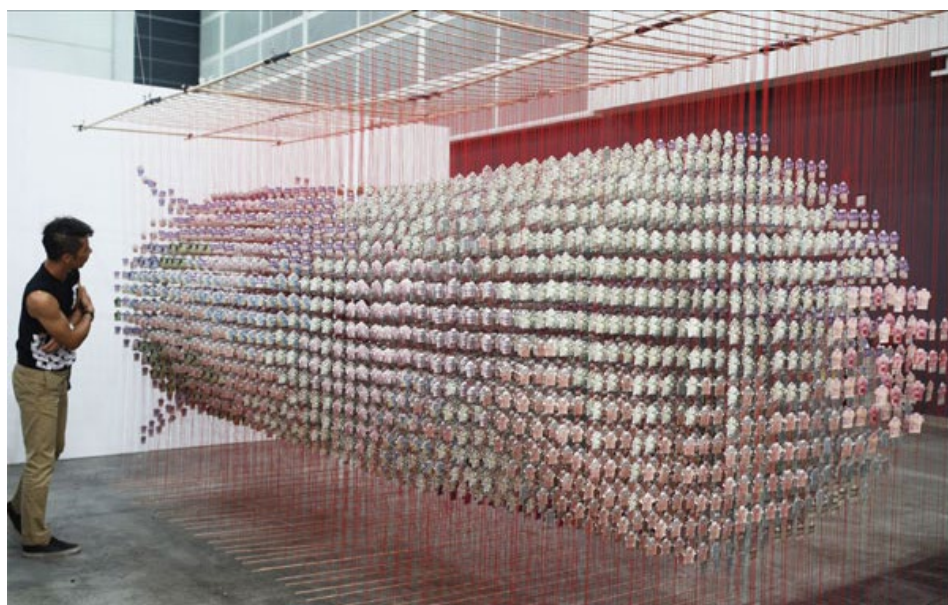
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more support we can provide to enable him to practice his art full-time the better his chances to improve his art and make a name," says Kelly, referring to the artists Vanessa Wong and Sim Chan, who began their journey with a showing in AAFHK's "Young Talent Hong Kong" category and have since found fame and collectors willing to pay serious money to acquire their works.

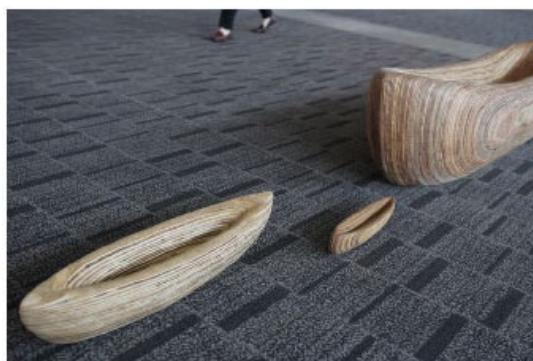
Natasha Barnes, represented by Turner Barnes Gallery, UK, is back for the fourth consecutive year with her becalming images of blooming lotuses against glassy sheets of water. "AAF is one of the art world's most-recognized and visited brands," she says. "It provides a wonderful platform to actually interact with collectors at all levels and there is something very satisfying in selling an artwork to a first-time buyer."

Once they catch the collecting bug, first-time buyers usually return, and return again, until they have gathered the confidence and accumulated enough funds to go for the big kill at high-profile events like Art Basel. Assaf Mamon picked up his favorites - a sculpture and photographs - from his visits to AAFHK in previous years and will be back again this time. He says he is more of an impulsive buyer but then he can afford to be slightly self-indulgent at AAFHK as "you can find some great pieces within a very reasonable price range with a very wide selection from all around the world".

AAFHK's growing fan base is no surprise. The fair is mounted each year on the basis of feedbacks received from 800 respondents. "We ask people what they would like to see, and what they would like us to improve. That's what the fair evolves on every year," says Kelly. This year they sorted the potential audience according to clear-cut categories: first-time buyers, returning buyers, seasoned art lovers, occasional buyers etc. and have factored in their needs. "We have really been able to look at what each of those groups want and adapt ourselves to suit their needs," says Kelly, emphatically.



Collectors can own pieces of Glen Clarke's installation made up of 12,000 origami folded renminbi notes. Photos By Roy Liu / China Daily



Ankie Fok's boat sculptures assume greater meaning when viewed against the panoramic stretch of Victoria Harbour.



Stephane Joannes' rusty gigantic tankers look particularly striking against solid blocks of red.



Natasha Barnes says she especially enjoys selling her paintings to first-time buyers of art.

IF YOU GO

Affordable Art Fair
Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre Wan Chai
Dates: May 13-15

(HK Edition 05/13/2016 page7)

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