

## ...see my treasures

What's keeping HK's big-time collectors of art from sharing their possessions with the public? What's the way ahead for the city's fledgling privately run art museum? **Chitralekha Basu** writes.

It's difficult to rationalize Hong Kong not having a world-class museum of art. Think of the homogenous crowds (over 60,000 in three days) who heaved through weather to check out Art Basel Hong Kong last March. It doesn't seem to add up.

But you wanted to re-acquaint yourself with the fluid grace of Xu Beihong's ink-and-wash horses or the guileless satire in the Minshu multiple self-portraits, maybe introduce a friend to the masterpieces yet breathtaking stream of words passing across walls and floors in installations by Hong Kong's very own Tang Ho-wah. Your chances of finding them in a city museum are practically next to nil. With Hong Kong Museum of Art closed for a major renovation until at least 2018, and the eagerly anticipated M-museum of visual culture not likely to open before 2020, Hong Kong — now the third largest market for art retail after New York and London — does not have a functional institution offering a comprehensive view of the evolution of the art scene in this part of the world.

Even as more private museums are up across the Chinese mainland and Wang Wei and Liu Yiqian — arguably China's most visible art-buying couple — got three museums (two in Shanghai and a third in Chongqing) going in just four years, Hong Kong's heavyweight private collectors do not seem that interested in opening private museums, although some, like William Lim, is known to allow limited public access to his purpose-built list in Wang Chik Hang, Hong Kong Island.

In a city perennially short of living quarters and beggared soon by already high rentals, locating a suitable, and affordable, museum space would be an uphill task. Art adviser Johan Bus of Versailles Art, however, feels paucity of land may not be an insurmountable problem, as private museums are essentially the result of the founder's "passion and commitment." Citing the example of the Mori museum, built on the terrace of a shopping center by its proprietor, in the heart of the Hongkong Hills shopping district in Tokyo, Chu says, "Many among Hong Kong's rears are capable of dedicating five or six of their best buildings to project to set up an integrated museum. It's a proven model."

Chiu Cheng Tsang, museum director of Hansa T2 Gallery, agrees. "Apart from the common knowledge that most of us have the money of powerful landlords, our government's necessary attitude towards the use of land, heritage, financing, mental, betrays the power of sophisticated culture."

From time to time Hong Kong's rears are inclined to play a social role in promoting the awareness and appreciation of art, or become like Li Ka-shing or Allan Zemanzhi plus in their support, the possibility of Hong Kong getting a private-owned, top-notch museum of art is likely to remain a pipe dream, according to Chu. "Tang Ho-wah, who managed K11 art mall, placing items from his collection as exhibits at strategic points for people to admire between shopping, is perhaps the only Hong Kong tycoon who has worked out a way of sharing his art with the

public," says Chu. "But it would be more accurate to say he has built culture into his business model, which is great but not quite the same thing."

### Leaning out

There is no dearth of museum-worthy artworks in private hands in Hong Kong, according to Chang. "Hong Kong has enough private holdings to make museum envious," he says. But then running a museum is way more complicated than building an art collection — a daunting prospect for most collectors, even if they had the money to do it. Besides most non-collectors of art prefer to admire their possessions in private, as that perhaps is the whole point of bringing a piece of art home.

"Collectors by nature, at least in Asia, tend to be a little more private," says Mark Suen, former chairman of the Asia Contemporary Art Show. "Art is very personal. It is not like buying an expensive yacht and not being bigger than years. Art appeals to a different psyche."

Both Chu and Adelaide Ooi, Art Basel's Asia director, point to the presence of collectors in Hong Kong who have accumulated a respectable stash and are known to sail across the world from them out to museums and teaching institutions. Besides Jim, the list includes Lawrence Chu, Victor Lo Chung-ting, Alan Li and Ivan Chou, collectors who are their possessions for the enjoyment of a wider audience.

"Look at Dominique and Sylvia Levy," remarks Ooi. "They have a huge Asian art collection. They are much happier losing their works and bringing them pop up in other places."

### Facilitating art education

The good taste and generosity of spirit of collectors such as them is the mainstay of Hong Kong's new-age private museums, like Sun Museum in Kwan Tong which opened about a year ago. Practically the only privately-run museum of art in town (not counting a few others catering to more niche interest areas, such as Hang VI Museum which showcases antique Chinese furniture, or T11 Museum, founded by the Simon Suen Foundation, follows the unconventional model of sourcing its exhibits from collectors and artists themselves, rather than using the space to showcase specific, ready-to-buy exhibition pieces and negligible Chinese ink and bamboo paintings owned by the Suen family).

Chiu, who chairs the trust in charge of the museum, covering a modest 6,000 square feet exhibition space, says they had very deep, realistic goals from the very outset. "We set out to create a platform where artists, collectors and the public can come together and appreciate and learn more about the art and culture of Hong Kong as well as the Chinese mainland," says the chairman.

The Thrive, Sun Museum's director, Vera Chung, indicates, is not so much on collecting the nicest art piece in the market, but on helping to build art lists.

"We cannot afford to put up an exhibition featuring the national flag, and we do not have such an ambition," says Suen. "On the other hand, we can put up a show



Sun Museum in Kwan Tong, which completes a year in May, depends on private collectors in a big way to source their exhibits. PHOTO PROVIDED BY CHIAU YU-CHANG

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Chloe Suen, chair, Simon Suen Foundation



Simon Suen Foundation Chairperson Chloe Suen (left) and museum director Wang Chun Tong are the pillars of Sun Museum.

### FINE PRINT

Sun Museum will reopen with its first anniversary exhibit, featuring the works of 20th century Chinese masters. QJ. Qin and Jia Lu. On May 6, the exhibition, which runs at SMA, Tower, 102 Hea Bun Road, 4th Floor, shows Hong Kong's best private collections — Deborah Wai and Miss Gokhale.

of the reproductions of these national treasures and teach the audience how to approach them."

Such orientation sessions are usually oriented across different platforms, featuring lectures, slide shows and replicas. Suen, who usually makes these presentations, says, "By taking an exhibition in itself, one that can speak to people. Each talk can be regarded as a thematic exhibition that lasts just two hours."

In less than a year since its inception, the museum has registered over 6,000 footfalls, including visitors from the mainland. "We sometimes fill reminder notes left in the donation box," quips Yeung and Taiwan.

Particularly keen to attract a young demographic, the museum sends out publicity materials of exhibitions to secondary schools, and usually subsidizes the transport costs to and from the gallery.

"We try to give them absolutely no excuse not to come," says Suen. "It is a very challenging task to get them here, as Hong Kong students are forever pressed for time. Additionally, the teacher and the curator have to work together."

### Resource sharing

Suen says she would be happy to see more private museums come up in Hong Kong. "For us it is not about competition but being a part of Hong Kong's art ecosystem." She says she would like to see the privately-funded museum sector to grow as robust as the city's auction houses and art galleries already are. In fact, she would not mind building

a fraternal relationship with private museums that come up in Hong Kong in the future. In an interview given to a local paper some time back she had advocated setting up a private museum council with government support, which was misconstrued by some readers as another way of pitching for monetary backing from the government.

The idea of mixing private museums with public funds could be "dangerous," says Jehu Chu. "If private museum owners asking for government support I would say 'be careful what you wish for.' It's simpler when funds are raised privately."

Chu, who works closely with the city's non-profit partners, says two of them — Design Trust and Things That Art, who would not mind building

any public funds and are none the worse for it. "I find these to be the most interesting and most flexible organizations," says Chu. "When I talk about private museums, for me there is no excuse."

Suen says her private museum council idea was never on the lines of "we have set up a museum, now find us, but more like, we have an excellent exhibition coming up, would you consider collaborating with us?"

"A council can bring together museum professionals and promote cooperation between them. That way there will be enhanced activities and sharing in the local museum circles," says Suen, who is in favor of extending the ambit to include university museums as well. "If there is a museum council, it would be possible to make opt-

imum use of resources in terms of training of future professionals, and better dissemination of our educational activities."

And when that happens Hong Kong can enlist the support of at least one successful museum entrepreneur from the Chinese mainland. Wang Wei of Long Museum says she is eager to work together with Hong Kong museum owners and share the story of how we built a successful model with the public. She is particularly keen to have more women take the initiative in museum building. "I was just a housewife with no knowledge of art when I started. I would like to share my knowledge with more women like me and we can learn together."

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# HK FOCUS

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It's difficult to rationalize Hong Kong not having a world-class museum of art. Think of the humongous crowds (over 60,000 in three days) who braved rough weather to check out Art Basel Hong Kong last March. It doesn't seem to add up. Say you wanted to reacquaint yourself with the fluid grace of Xu Beihong's ink-and-wash horses or the guileless satire in Yue Minjun's multiple self-portraits, maybe introduce a friend to the mysterious yet becalming stream of words passing across walls and floors in installations by Hong Kong's very own Tsang Kin-wah. Your chances of finding them in a city museum are practically next to nil. With Hong Kong Museum of Art closed for a major renovation until at least 2018, and the eagerly anticipated M+ museum of visual culture not likely to open before 2019, Hong Kong – now the third largest market for art retail after New York and London – does not have a functional institution offering a comprehensive view of the evolution of the art scene in this part of the world.

Even as more private museums come up across the Chinese mainland, and Wang Wei and Liu Yiqian – arguably China's most visible art-buying couple – get three museums (two in Shanghai and a third in Chongqing) going in just four years, Hong Kong's heavy-

public, says Chu. "But it would be more accurate to say he has built culture into his business model, which is great but not quite the same thing."

### Loaning out

There is no dearth of museum-worthy artworks in private hands in Hong Kong, assures Chang, "Hong Kong has enough private holdings to make museums envious," he says.

But then running a museum is way more complicated than building an art collection – a daunting prospect for most collectors, even if they had the money to do it. Besides most connoisseurs of art prefer to admire their possessions in private, as that perhaps is the whole point of bringing a piece of art home.

"Collectors by nature, at least in Asia, tend to be a little more private," says Mark Sanderson, who runs the Asia Contemporary Art Show. "Art is very, very personal. It is not like buying an expensive yacht and mine being bigger than yours. Art appeals to a different psyche."

Both Chu and Adeline Ooi, Art Basel's Asia director, point to the presence of collectors in Hong Kong who have accumulated a respectable stash and are known to loan pieces selected from them out to museums and touring exhibitions. Besides Lim, the list includes Lawrence Chu, Victor Lo Chung-wing, Alan Lo and Evan Chow, collec-



Sun Museum in Kwun Tong, which completes a year in May, depends on private collectors in a big way to source their exhibits. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



weight private collectors do not see in terms of the employment of a wider audience.

"Look at Dominique and Sylvain Levy," remarks Ooi. "They have a huge Asian art collection. They are much happier loaning their works and letting them pop up in other places."

In a city perennially short of living quarters and bogged down by absurdly high rentals, locating a suitable, and affordable, museum space would be an uphill task. Art adviser Jehan Chu of Vermillion Art, however, feels paucity of land may not be such an insurmountable problem, as private museums are essentially the result of the founder's "passion and commitment". Citing the example of the Mori museum, built on the terrace of a shopping center by its proprietor, in the heart of the Roppongi Hills shopping district in Tokyo, Chu says, "Many among Hong Kong's realtors are capable of dedicating five floors of their next building project to set up an integrated museum. It's a proven model."

Johnson Chang Hong-zung, director of Hanart TZ Gallery, agrees. "Apart from the common knowledge that most of us are at the mercy of powerful landlords, our government's mercenary attitude towards the use of land, heritage or commercial, belittles the power of sophisticated culture."

Until such time as Hong Kong's realtors are inspired to play a social role in promoting the awareness and appreciation of art, or tycoons like Li Ka-shing or Allan Zeman pitch in with their support, the possibility of Hong Kong getting a privately-owned, top-notch museum of art is likely to remain a pipe dream, according to Chu. Adrian Cheng, who built the K11 art mall, placing items from his collection as exhibits at strategic points for people to admire between shopping is perhaps the only Hong Kong tycoon who has worked out a way of sharing his art with the

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#### Facilitating art education

The good taste and generosity of spirit of collectors such as them is the mainstay of Hong Kong's new-age private museums, like Sun Museum in Kwun Tong which opened about a year ago. Possibly the only privately-run museum of art in town (not counting a few others catering to more niche interest areas, such as Liang Yi Museum which showcases antique Chinese furniture, or P11 museum of photography), Sun Museum, funded by the Simon Suen Foundation, follows the unconventional model of sourcing its exhibits from collectors and artists themselves, rather than using the space to showcase the not-too-negligible Chinese ink and brush paintings owned by the Suen family.

Chloe Suen, who chairs the trust in charge of the museum, covering a modest 5,000 square feet exhibition space, says they had very clear, realistic goals from the very outset. "We set out to create a platform where artists, collectors and the public can come together and appreciate and learn more about the art and culture of Hong Kong as well as the Chinese mainland," says Suen.

The trust, Sun Museum's director, Yeung Chun-tong, indicates, is not so much collecting the noisiest art piece in the market, but rather helping to build art literacy.

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Long Museum proprietor Wang Wei says she is keen to work together with Hong Kong museum owners.

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