

Jane Ure Smith, *Art Basel Hong Kong offers encounters with tapestries, tombstones and rabbits*, Financial Times, 23 March 2024

## FINANCIAL TIMES



Collecting + Add to myFT

### Art Basel Hong Kong offers encounters with tapestries, tombstones and rabbits

Curator Alexie Glass-Kantor has drawn inspiration from a Tennyson poem for themes of journeys and separation

Jane Ure-Smith MARCH 23 2024

“I am a part of all that I have met”: this year’s Encounters, the show of large-scale work at Art Basel Hong Kong, draws its theme from Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses”. In this heartfelt dramatic monologue, Homer’s returning hero emerges as a man filled with dread by the prospect of the quiet life. Experience is all — so he decides to hand over to his son and embark on one more voyage.

“I often draw inspiration from poetry and fiction,” says Alexie Glass-Kantor, who is curating Encounters for the seventh time. “My father was a voracious reader. Books were everywhere and in every room in my childhood. Often, I will return to poems or stories I love when developing and researching exhibitions.”

The notion of reconnecting with the world chimes perfectly with this year’s Art Basel, back to full strength after the Covid years. Glass-Kantor, who curated the Australian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022 and presided over a multimillion-dollar makeover of the not-for-profit Artspace in Sydney, is eager to lay on a show that will fire the imagination of visitors.

The Encounters installations (each measuring up to 100 sq m) slot into an area between the two exhibition halls. Glass-Kantor confers with the exhibiting galleries to arrive at a list of artists, then sets about commissioning “extraordinary, memorable pieces that foreground ambition”. With a strong focus on Asia, this year 11 of the 16 pieces will be made for the fair. “When people come back to Hong Kong, they won’t see something they might see in Basel, Paris or Miami: it will be something they haven’t seen before.”

Highlights of the show include Cuba’s Yoan Capote (Ben Brown Fine Arts), who offers granite tombstones and a shimmering metallic sea — its waves formed from thousands of tiny fish-hooks — to evoke the seduction and dangers of migration. In a state-of-the art tapestry of a woman balancing precariously on a ball, Philippines-based Patricia Perez Eustaquio (Silverlens and Yavuz Gallery) subverts photography of Indigenous people dating from the time when the Philippines was an American colony.

Beijing-born hyperrealist sculptor Li Wei (Tang Contemporary Art) spookily reincarnates six western world leaders as seven-year-olds, unleashing them in a Hong Kong playground.

And in the disorientating, multi-layered “Copy of Copy of Copy of Copy”, the Hong Kong artist Mak2 (de Sarthe gallery) invites viewers to guess whether she’s presenting a dystopian vision of a future art world or a satire on representation itself.

The themes of journeys, separation and connection emerge intermittently, more noticeably perhaps in the work of Korean artist Haegue Yang (Kukje Gallery, kurimanzutto, Galerie Chantal Crousel), who uses weaving to unite disparate times and places, and Tokyo-born **Atsushi Kaga** (mother’s tankstation), who splits his life between Dublin and Kyoto. Kaga offers a multi-panel painting, within a kabuki theatre setting. All very Japanese, but there’s a twist: in reference to his experience of living in both Japan and Europe, Kaga depicts his “alter ego” Usacchi, a Pooka rabbit from Irish folklore, surrounded by foods that evoke his late mother, who taught him about art.

The 16 Encounter commissions include one free off-site work in Pacific Place, a popular Hong Kong gathering spot. Here, in a three-part installation, including a moving-image work, the Australian Aboriginal artist Daniel Boyd references Indigenous aesthetics in a constellation of “dots”, each one a lens offering a point of knowledge or perspective.

As a theme, “I am a part of all that I have met” evolved organically from earlier projects. “The line from Tennyson was echoing in my mind and felt resonant,” Glass-Kantor says. “The Ukrainian artist Stanislava Pinchuk’s work in Encounters last year was titled the ‘Wine Dark Sea’ and inspired by Homer’s *Odyssey*. Presenting that installation last year led me to into thinking more about journeys this year . . . so it felt timely.

Journeys open travellers to enriching experiences, to encounters, planned and unplanned. In Hong Kong, Glass-Kantor is inviting visitors to be alive to their own experiences as they engage with the art on show. “Everyone’s experience is unique, so how do we create a collective experience — and how do we connect and reconnect after times of separation?”

Glass-Kantor has curated Encounters since 2015 — and 2025 will be her last. “It was an invitation for two years, maximum three, if they liked me, so nine years is pretty good — and a big chunk of my life.” Projects at Artspace, Venice and beyond leave no prospect of the quiet life.

March 28-30, artbasel.com