

John McDonald, *The highlights from this year's rejuvenated Art Basel Hong Kong*, Sydney Morning Herald, 6 April 2024

**The Sydney Morning Herald**

# The highlights from this year's rejuvenated Art Basel Hong Kong



John McDonald  
April 6, 2024 – 5.30am

Presiding over this year's Art Basel Hong Kong, like the incarnation of the Easter Bunny, was a giant rabbit called Usacchi. The creation of *Atsushi Kaga*, a Japanese artist who lives in Ireland, Usacchi featured at the Dublin gallery mother's tankstation and the Tokyo gallery Maho Kubota. He appeared in prints with Polígrafa Obra Gráfica from Barcelona, and as part of a massive stage set in the *Encounters* section devoted to large-scale installations.

If we weren't looking at Usacchi, we may have been facing his buddy, a one-legged bear named Kumacchi. Kaga's fantasy world, apparently devoid of boundaries, insinuated itself into many different parts of the fair. Most impressive was his ability to create a sense of poignancy in these cartoonish figures, so very different from the endless parade of bug-eyed, bubble-headed anime characters that hold such inexplicable appeal for Millennials.

Almost all this stuff follows in the wake of two big-name Japanese masters, Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, but their act is looking pretty thin nowadays. My eyes glazed over when I looked at the Murakamis dotted around the fair, although Nara's grumpy girl – *No Fun!* – can still raise a smile.

Kaga is one of the few artists who has done something original with the distinctive Japanese graphic style, rather than merely churn out product. His images come across as superior children's book illustrations, able to draw us imaginatively into the world in which Usacchi and Kumacchi live, a world that closely resembles our own.

If I had to nominate another artist who dominated the fair this year it would be our own Daniel Boyd, who had a huge installation called *Doan* in the foyer of high-end shopping centre Pacific Place (until April 7), a solo exhibition with Australia's STATION gallery, and work with Kukje Gallery from Seoul.

*Doan*, which was also part of the *Encounters* series, means "darkness" in the Yugambeh language of south-eastern Queensland. It's a familiar Boyd gambit, featuring thousands of small, flickering dots of light set against a backdrop that recalls the night sky. It's an old-style kinetic environment with First Nations overtones, linked to Boyd's Indigenous heritage.

I've never been convinced by these connections. Boyd emphatically denies any relationship between his dots and those of Western Desert painting, which he would not be authorised to borrow anyway, but he is essentially making a universal spectacle – a vision of the cosmos. It translates into many different cultural contexts whether we see the First Nations associations as intrinsic or incidental.

Either way, Boyd is having his moment. It can happen to an artist at any time, for many different reasons, but he'd be crazy not to grab it while he can.

Even before the doors opened, it was inevitable that the 11th edition of Art Basel Hong Kong would be trumpeted as a massive success. Not even a new round of national security laws announced shortly in advance of the fair's opening could dampen the enthusiasm of organisers, dealers and collectors who were determined to act as if the pandemic and the politics had never happened.



Atsushi Kaga's giant rabbit, Usacchi. CREDIT: COURTESY OF ART BASEL HONG KONG

With 242 galleries from all over the world taking part – up by 70 from last year – it felt like old times. The uber galleries were there in force, and quick to announce million-dollar sales. Dealers discouraged by Hong Kong's political tightening, who decided to opt out last year and show with Singapore's Art SG, were back in the fold. Although it may be Singapore's cherished desire to be a hub for the global art market, there is a cultural problem, an uptightness, that needs to be overcome. Hong Kong is a far more extroverted city, in which the art fair has been embraced by locals and by cashed-up buyers from the mainland.

If there is a difference between today's Hong Kong and the city of five years ago, when the first national security laws were passed, it's to be found in the routines of everyday life, in a greater sense of caution that influences people's words and actions. In the art fair, with its influx of foreign dealers, artists and collectors, there were no tangible constraints. Although contemporary artists love to moralise about political issues, they still seem happy to consign their works to the apolitical mechanism of the marketplace to be sold for high prices to wealthy collectors, with no questions asked about where the money was made.

One might view China's hard-line attitude as cynical or merely pragmatic, but Xi Jinping's regime is effectively calling the bluff of those artists who adopt strident political attitudes but still need to maintain a lifestyle. It's a dance I've been watching from the sidelines for many years.

There were five Australian galleries taking part: Sullivan + Strumpf, who must rank as our most assiduous attendees of international art fairs; Ames Yavuz, now firmly based in Sydney and freshly renamed; STATION, another gallery with genuine international ambitions; Fox Jensen, which has always combined local and international artists with strong abstract tendencies; and the emerging Fine Arts, Sydney, which showed a sprawling, tubular metal sculpture by Yona Lee.

STATION and Sullivan + Strumpf have outlets in Melbourne, but most of the 2024 participants are Sydney-based. This may be taken as confirmation that Melbourne, despite its more dynamic public art culture, remains commercially less adventurous than the harbour city.

Looking back over my snapshots of the fair there were relatively few new discoveries that caught my eye. Maybe it's simply down to personal taste and familiarity, but the things I most enjoyed were often by past masters rather than contemporary stars.

It was hard to go past Annely Juda Fine Art, from London, with small works by Russian revolutionary artists and paintings by Leon Kossoff. There was an unbelievable ink drawing of a Chinese cabbage by Shao Fan at Urs Meile; a densely compacted abstraction by Eugene Leroy at the Michael Werner Gallery; expressive paintings by Karel Appel at the Max Hetzler Gallery; a room of serene pictures by the late Park Seo-bo, courtesy of Johyun Gallery, Busan; two small wooden figurines by Stephan Balkenhol at Mai 36 Galerie Zurich; hilarious restagings of public statues by Tatzu Nishi at Anomaly, Tokyo; textured abstract canvases by Park Young-ha at Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul; a huge Philip Guston at Hauser & Wirth (which sold for \$US8 million, or about \$12.3 million); two utterly eccentric figure paintings by Rose Wylie, at David Zwirner's; and powerful ink works by Li Huasheng at Ink Studio, Beijing.

Were I one of Australia's 150-plus billionaires, these works might have been on my shopping list. Instead, one wonders just how many wealthy Aussie collectors made their way to Hong Kong. They seemed to be less visible than in previous years.

One indisputable highlight was the Encounters component, put together by Alexie Glass-Kantor, director of Artspace, Sydney, who has become an accomplished selector of artists able to deal with the demands of a large-scale installation. Aside from the pieces already discussed, exhibits ranged from a dramatic, sweeping seascape by Cuban artist Yoan Capote made from fishhooks to a cluster of larrakitj poles by Naminapu Maymuru-White from Arnhem Land.

The most eye-catching of the lot was probably a hyperrealist sculpture by Chinese artist Li Wei, who created a playground in which world leaders sit around in the form of small children. Vladimir Putin is especially well-imagined as a sullen, nasty-looking little brute who has turned his back on the rest of the kids. Give me the child till he's seven, said St Ignatius, and I'll show you the man.

Art Basel Hong Kong 2024 took place at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from March 28-30. John McDonald was a guest of Art Basel Hong Kong.