

THE WAR OF THE ART FAIRS

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BY DEBORAH ISKANDAR

The rise of art fairs has been a key feature of the contemporary art world, and combined with the Internet, has allowed traditional galleries to expand worldwide to new markets. There are more than 200 art fairs worldwide, and many have evolved into glamorous events.

VIP passes are sought after and allow early viewing of the art, special exhibitions, visits to collector's homes, and of course the parties and related events. Commercial galleries pay a sizeable fee for participation and the leading art fairs operate a strict selection policy.

Art Basel Hong Kong, now in its fourth year, is considered the dominant fair in Asia. Its is a curated fair, meaning that the participants are essentially invited to attend, and the selection of art shown is vetted by a board to maintain quality. With the marketing might of the Art Basel group, many top galleries such as White Cube, Gagosian and others were able to test Asia markets before opening their own spaces in Hong Kong. Art Basel has also encouraged the growth of satellite fairs (held at the same time as Art Basel), such as Art Central and other venues that can offer a wider range of artists and gallery participation at a lower price range.

The success of international art fairs has encouraged art players elsewhere such as Japan, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia to develop their own fairs. The advantage of these new art fairs is that showcase an extraordinary diverse range of art in one place. As a new collector, this can help define your taste. It also makes the art world more transparent in terms of pricing as well, as one can see many works at surprisingly different price ranges. Art fairs also benefit the local economy, because the fair can attract overseas visitors. Singapore and Hong Kong caught on to this as art fairs attract a group of well-heeled collectors that generates revenue for the host city. Launched in Singapore in 2010, Art Stage has been promoted by the Singapore Tourism Development Board, bringing in tourists in January, traditionally a low travel month.

In Jakarta, art fairs are a new phenomenon and in the past seven years, we only had one fair, Bazaar Art. Founded by the MRA group, Bazaar Art was initially an art and design fair, combining local art and design. Bazaar Art had been successful and was primarily attended by Southeast Asian galleries from the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. However, in 2015, there was a shift and Bazaar Art became a dedicated art fair, with Casa as a separate design fair. The strategy was to attract more international art galleries.

However, simultaneously, Art Stage Singapore saw a drop in participation from Indonesians, so in late 2015 decided to launch a new fair in Jakarta. Art Stage Jakarta is timed to open two weeks



Deborah Iskandar is the founder and Principal of ISA Advisory, which advises clients on buying and selling art, and building collections. An expert on Indonesian and international art, she has more than 20 years of experience in Southeast Asia, heading both Sotheby's and Christie's Indonesia during her career before establishing ISA Art Advisory in 2013. She is also the founder of Indonesian Luxury, the definitive online resource for Indonesian's looking to acquire, build and style their luxury homes.

before Bazaar Art in August, creating significant competition to produce the best fair. Indonesia is important to Southeast Asian art circles, as it has an active domestic art scene, established collectors, and the potential of a growing economy. Hence, the foreign galleries view Indonesia as a huge market waiting to be tapped.

So now the gloves come off, with Art Bazaar and Art Stage in different corners. The biggest competition will be attracting the best galleries, and also the database to deliver potential buyers. Art Stage, owned by Lorenzo Rudolf, has the experience to bring prestigious international galleries to Indonesia for the first time. Art Stage has aligned with the Pakuwon group, and its owner Alex Tedja. As a property developer, Pakuwon can easily calculate the revenue to be earned for the newly opened Sheraton Hotel and the connected Gandaria mall.

Bazaar Art has the local and regional knowledge and a loyal following. With the power of the MRA group, it can have significant marketing advantages through its in-house media. For Indonesia, the art infrastructure isn't strong enough to propel Indonesian artists to the international spotlight. Both of these fairs can help expand an artist's reputation to overseas galleries as well as develop a stronger collector base.

Overall, when you take away the politics, art fairs are good for everyone—for galleries, collectors, artists or just interested members of the public. Now that the momentum is building in Indonesia and private galleries have shown they are willing to invest, it is time for the Indonesian government to join the party. It can keep the momentum going by easing taxes on the importation of art and aiding in the promotion of Jakarta as an art venue. A government that recognizes the value of art tourism can be instrumental in building an active art community. So let's see who wins the war. Can Jakarta sustain two art fairs in August? How will they distinguish themselves and rise to the challenge? Will competition with Art Stage see Art Bazaar return to its roots combining the best of art and design at a time when Indonesian designers are gaining an international reputation? Whatever the outcome, it's a month to look forward to for avid collectors and an excellent opportunity for newcomers to dip their toe into the art world. **FL**