



Oil painter Ray Chow, 31, moves his painting.



Mural artist Jackie Chung, 36, who works under the name 'Pinkhead', paints in an industrial building in the working-class neighborhood of San Po Kong in Hong Kong.



Mural artist Jackie Chung, 36, left, who works under the name 'Pinkhead', paints beside local oil painter Ray Chow, 31, in an industrial building in the working-class neighborhood of San Po Kong in Hong Kong.

WORLDS APART: HONG KONG'S GREAT ART DIVIDE

As international galleries and wealthy collectors descend on Hong Kong for Art Basel, life for some of the city's creatives is still a struggle to make ends meet. Art Basel's Hong Kong edition launched five years ago and spawned a host of simultaneous shows in what has become known as "Art Month". But the glamorous artistic whirl associated with March in Hong Kong feels like a world away for some artists battling sky-high rents and lack of space.

Hong Kong mural painter Jackie Chung works out of a small unit in the working-class neighborhood of San Po Kong, away from the hustle of downtown. The 250-square-foot studio is one of 25 subdivided flats in an industrial building. Such cramped partitioned spaces are commonly lived in by residents who cannot afford spiraling accommodation costs.

Chung, 36, and oil painter Ray Chow, 31, pay HK\$8,000 per month to use the unit as a studio and have promised the landlord not to get paint on the floors and walls. Both live with their families to save on outgoings. "It's not ideal. After we moved in with our artwork and tools, it was almost full," said Chung, who paints under the name "Pinkhead" after the color of her hair. The bright unit is neatly stacked with oil paints, easels, books and paintings.

Chung has been commissioned to create giant murals around the city, including a 22-storey-high elephant, but although her works are large-scale, she practices in miniature. "The studio is tiny and the ceiling is low. I can only paint on a medium size canvas," she said. Chung has a day job as a graphic designer, painting every evening and on weekends. She earns around HK\$5,000 for a 40-square-foot mural.

Fellow artist Chow relies on freelance work including graphic design, teaching and painting commissions to pay his way—creating an oil painting takes him up to three months and he sells one or two each year for around HK\$10,000 each. "Sometimes it makes you feel so frustrated to be an artist in Hong Kong. You need to do a lot more other things to sustain your passion," he said.

“Long-term habit of appreciation of the arts”

Art appreciation

Artists must be represented by a gallery to participate in Art Basel, which runs for five days at Hong Kong's harbor front convention centre. The line-up this year includes galleries from Iran to Istanbul and some from Hong Kong with local artists on their books. Ink artist Hung Fai, 30, was born and bred in the city and has exhibited at Art Basel four times under Grotto Fine Art gallery, which aims to nurture emerging Hong Kong talent.

He believes the fair is a good opportunity to meet other artists, curators and collectors, with tens of thousands of visitors each year. But Hung hopes that in the long term, Art Basel will work more closely with local art institutions or even the public sector to build a broader creative culture in the city. "If we can transform the short-term interest of an art fair into a long-term habit of appreciation of the arts, then there can be positive changes on the local art scene," he said.

Art Basel's Asia Director Adeline Ooi said the fair tries to encourage Hong Kong galleries to present local artists as much as possible. "Our support for the Hong Kong local scene is clearly 100 percent there, but it is also the fact that we are an international art fair. So it's about trying to find the balance between these two points," Ooi said.

Enduring passion

There are plenty of galleries and exhibitions in Hong Kong year-round, but some feel the emphasis is commercial rather than aimed at a wider public and that there is a disconnect with grassroots artists. Mural artist Chung has worked at Art Basel as a volunteer and says she felt it was too driven by sales and visitor numbers. "I don't think Art Basel is that close to local artists. It seems to help local tourism more than the local art scene," she said.

Smaller-scale shows in Hong Kong can also be prohibitive, adds Chung. She applied for a booth at a week-long local art festival last year, but the HK\$20,000 entry fee scared her off. Chow admits he sometimes fantasizes about selling a painting for tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. But he says passion is the overriding motivation. "I make art because I like it," he says. "Whether it makes me successful or not, it doesn't matter."—AFP



Ink artist Hung Fai, 30, who has exhibited at Art Basel four times, poses at his studio in Hong Kong. — AFP Photos

Cezanne's maverick side explored in first-ever US portrait show

What happens when an artist who devoted most of his career to painting landscapes and still lifes turns to the people he knows best? That is the central premise of an international show of 59 portraits by France's Paul Cezanne opening Sunday at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the first ever dedicated to this aspect of his oeuvre. Of the 1,000 paintings the 19th century Provençal painter created during his lifetime, only about 160 are portraits, mostly of his close friends, family and domestic servants.

But it is perhaps in that collection that the evolution of Cezanne's individualistic, revolutionary vision is clearest, as he deconstructs space by boldly painting his wife with vanishing lips or applying layer upon layer of thick paint with a palette knife. He may have studied Old Master works, but Cezanne "exploded" traditional ways of representing space and volume on a picture plane, said Mary Morton, co-curator of the show and head of the National Gallery's department of French paintings.

Cezanne in many ways paved the way to modernism: even the pioneering Cubist Pablo Picasso, born 42 years after the French painter, called him the "father of us all." He relies on a "modernist understanding about how visual perception works... It's not stable, it's not linear, it's not from a single point, it's not coherent," Morton told AFP.

Texture was also key. In "Antony Valabregue" (1866), the artist's submission to the official Salon art exhibition in Paris critical for launching careers, Cezanne's rough-hewn style is on full display. The jury took the coarsely layered paint and the poet-sitter's defiant and inelegant pose, fists clenched on his thighs, as a slap in the face and rejected it. So roughly had Cezanne treated both the surface and the subject that one jury member commented he had painted not just with a knife but with a pistol.

Unconventional

"He is displacing the conventional place that you look for portraiture, which is the face, and that you're expect-

ing a likeness," said Morton, who received a top French civilian honor this week for her contributions to the arts. "It means that it's perhaps in the color, it's in the shape, it's coming through in an unconventional way." Cezanne's portraits of his wife, Hortense Fiquet—who unlike her husband came from a modest background and lacked advanced education—are especially confounding.

Often unflattering, the pictures show her with an angled oval face, her hair pulled back and parted down the middle. She never smiles. Some are more sympathetic, such as "Madame Cezanne in a Red Armchair" (circa 1877) — but that was painted before their marriage or shortly thereafter. In it she is shown seated on a plush red throne of a chair contrasting with a golden green and blue wallpaper pattern. In one work from the "Madame Cezanne in a Red Dress" (1888-1890) series, she sits undisturbed in a blue room, her yellow chair and the wall tilting chaotically behind her.

Co-curator John Elderfield does not, however, see Cezanne's renderings of his wife as commentary on a possible lack of affection in a couple that largely lived apart. "If (art dealer Ambroise) Vollard is to be believed, he did more than 100 sittings for his portrait. She has about 30 portraits, so that's 3,000 hours. Wouldn't you be a bit fed up sitting there?" asked Elderfield, chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

"I think that even though facially it seems she's expressionless, it doesn't mean he doesn't care about her." But Morton does not hesitate to factor in the quality of the relationship, or at least what's known of it. "There's a really tough time after they're married," she said. "I think there's tension and melancholy, and you get that in a lot of these. I don't think he had an easy time with people." The show runs through July 1 in Washington, the last stop of a tour that took in the Musee d'Orsay in Paris and London's National Portrait Gallery.—AFP



Brazil museum selling prized Jackson Pollock to stay afloat

Rio de Janeiro's Modern Art Museum is selling one of its most prized works, a Jackson Pollock painting, to help stay afloat. The private, not-for-profit museum said a sale of this type has never been done before in Brazil, although it is common in Europe and the United States. The Pollock painting in question is titled "No.16" and was completed in 1950. Proceeds of the sale will be used to create a fund to keep the museum going for another 30 years, it said.

The painting was donated by the late former US vice president Nelson Rockefeller in 1954, and is estimated to be worth around \$25 million. The Brazilian Museum Institute called on the Modern Art Museum to reverse course and try to come up with another way to raise money at a time of financial struggle for many of the South American country's museums.

But the Culture Ministry said it supports the strategy, saying the Modern Art Museum will become less vulnerable to economic crises and less dependent on donations and sponsorships. Rio de Janeiro has been mired in financial turmoil since it hosted the Olympic Games in 2016, mainly because of a fall in oil prices and as a hangover from the recession that all of Brazil endured in 2015 and 2016.—AFP



Visitors look at paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. — AFP photos