

# THE MAN WHO PUT HONG KONG ON THE GLOBAL ART MAP

*After he hoisted this city to the top of the art world, all eyes were on Magnus Renfrew. He tells us about what happened afterwards with Bonham's, and how he's about to launch his second act, a new Asian art fair*



ONLY A FEW people in a generation can shape the evolution of an industry. Magnus Renfrew, the founding director of Art HK and first director of Art Basel in Hong Kong, is one of those rare individuals. It's not just because he was in the right place at the right time – though that is a fact he asserts near-continuously to deflect attention from himself. But, through a combination of forcing himself out of his comfort zone and hewing to the first principles of how to create a great art brand, Renfrew has shepherded Hong Kong's ascendancy through the Asian art world – from a city once ridiculed as a cultural desert, right up to pole position.

From an early age, Renfrew was treated to an unconventional diet of art and culture. His parents, both eminent archaeologists and academics at the University of Cambridge, had spent their careers poring over ancient excavations. But they also loved contemporary art and regularly hosted artists like Antony Gormley, Barry Flanagan and Eduardo Paolozzi at home. Consequently, the young Renfrew always knew that he would do something in the art world.

Renfrew's ability to take the initiative and face down risk started early. While studying for his master's degree at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, Renfrew pursued a radically bifurcated course of study combining Italian Trecento sculpture with postmodern art and theory. Then, he persuaded the department to mark his final grade on an exhibition, rather than the standard dissertation – the first time the university had done so. "I organised an exhibition about abstract painter John McLean, I got sponsorship from the university and private patrons, and a chap called Colonel Myers. I persuaded the local art centre to put it on and marketed it. I ran around town putting posters up everywhere. We even got a review in *Modern Painters*."

After graduation, Renfrew secured a job at Phillips (now Bonhams) auction house in



Edinburgh. “[At auction houses] you handle everything from masterpieces to truly awful things,” he recalls. “When studying art history, you only get exposed to the best slice of the best artists, not their much-less interesting work when they had their off days.” After five years of paying his dues there, Renfrew landed a position in Bonhams’ contemporary art department in London – his true passion. In this role, he helped set up Bonhams’ first sale of Asian contemporary art in London, in June 2006, spending the 18 months before the show researching Asian and Chinese art. It was during this sale that he met Pearl Lam, the pioneering Shanghai gallerist, who offered him a job in gallery management almost on the spot. He gave his notice a few days later and decamped to Shanghai – even though at that point he had never visited China.

“The West had been my entire world, so that experience was absolutely transformational,” says Renfrew. “My time in China threw into contrast the logical binary nature of the Western thinking process, which is black or white, right or wrong. In China, there are third, fourth, fifth or even sixth options sometimes.”

One year later, Renfrew was headhunted to set up a new art fair in Asia. The founders of the Affordable Art Fair in Australia sought to replicate the model in Hong Kong, but Renfrew said he couldn’t be involved unless the new fair was positioned as a best-in-class, high-end event. Agreeing to follow his lead, the Affordable Art Fair reformulated its strategy into what became Art HK. Renfrew was appointed as fair director and moved to Hong Kong in the summer of 2007, where he began researching and evangelising in earnest. Crucially, he received support from the pillars of the Hong Kong art world: David Tang,

Claire Hsu and Yana Peel, among others.

“When a gallery wanted to know whether they should do the fair, they would call someone in Hong Kong [like Tang, Hsu or Peel] and ask, ‘Do you know this guy? Should I do this fair?’ If their friend said, ‘Yes, you should do the fair,’ that endorsement was pivotal.”

Besides getting important players in the Hong Kong art world on side for Art HK from the beginning, Renfrew took pains to introduce best practice to all aspects of the fair. For the first time in the Asian art industry, galleries were subjected to a selection process that was as uncompromising and scrupulous as any of the best fairs in the world. It was Art HK’s early adherence to the highest ethical and aesthetic standards that immediately marked out the fair against peers in the region and attracted the attention of Art Basel in 2010. Shortly before the fair in 2011, it was announced that Art Basel would acquire Art HK, Renfrew stayed on for the first two editions.

“I was about 31 when the first [Art HK] fair happened, and 38 when I left [Art Basel in Hong Kong]. I felt like I couldn’t just see out the next 20 years of my career there. I would have been holding on to it for the wrong reasons, like status. It’s quite dangerous to

believe that people are responding to you rather than your job title when you work for a huge company. Plus, I was tired. I had been travelling 70 percent of the time for seven years.”

Renfrew decided to rejoin Bonhams to helm its expansion in Asia as deputy chairman. It wasn’t smooth sailing, however, as 2016 brought serious headwinds for the art industry. In a radical about-face, Bonhams scuppered its plans for expansion and retrenched, with Renfrew becoming one of the casualties. “That kind of thing is character-building and takes the measure of a person. You have to dust yourself off and stand up again. I’m not here for an easy ride. Sometimes you try to build things and it doesn’t work out,” muses Renfrew philosophically.

Last year, Renfrew launched Art HQ, an art consultancy comprised of four divisions: strategy, recruitment, events and digital. Not surprisingly, the company, with a team in Hong Kong and London, is already cash-flow positive with some of the world’s top art fairs and galleries as clients. One of Art HQ’s biggest projects is launching a major new Asian art fair in 2019, the details of which are slated for official announcement this month. “We’re in start-up phase, so think Art HK year one, not Art Basel year five,” he insists with characteristic circumspection. But expect the inaugural staging of Renfrew’s new fair to reflect the global network and hard-won learnings of a visionary who has guided the Asian art scene ever upwards and onwards.

*IT WAS ART HK'S EARLY ADHERENCE TO THE HIGHEST ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC STANDARDS THAT MARKED OUT THE FAIR AGAINST PEERS IN THE REGION AND ATTRACTED THE ATTENTION OF ART BASEL*