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Art Basel Hong Kong 2023

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Hong Kong galleries thrive despite lockdowns and crackdowns

Detail from 'I Want To Live, To Cry, To Survive, To Love, To Die' (2021)

Dealers were expanding old spaces and opening new ones as the city's art market surpassed London's

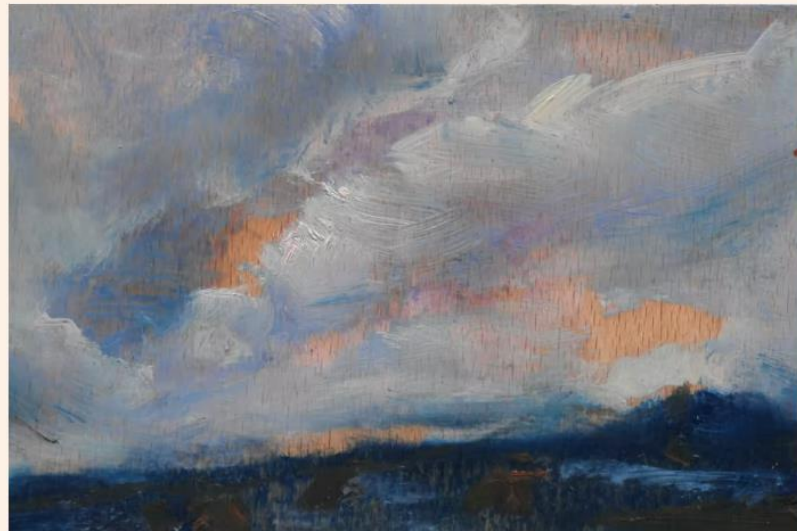


The gloom, heightened by the city's isolation from the rest of the world thanks to a ban on travellers as well as an ongoing political crackdown, felt immovable and endless.

But Fiona Ho and Natalie Ng, founders of new gallery Odds and Ends, which opened in April 2022, forged ahead. "I always see opportunities in risk . . . Because of the pandemic rent became low, and in PMQ [a mixed-use arts and design venue in Central] they had a programme of giving economical rents and more friendly rent for incubators," says Ho, adding that collector interest has remained strong. The gallery is preparing to show local artist Sammi Mak's paintings at this year's Art Central. "With the rise of commercial market in Hong Kong there is also [a rise in alternative art spaces](#)," says Ho.

Commercial galleries in Hong Kong have managed to expand despite strict pandemic rules effectively cutting off the Asian financial centre for the past three years. In the lead-up to one of Asia's biggest art fairs, with 177 exhibitors, gallerists say that while they have cut their number of shows and lost staff, sales have still been strong.

"Hong Kong still has the highest concentration of money compared to anywhere else," says Amanda Hon, managing director of Ben Brown Fine Arts in Hong Kong. "Many galleries, like myself, have expanded during these [past few] years or opened up second spaces." Ben Brown went from a 1,000 sq ft space to a 5,600 sq ft gallery in Wong Chuk Hang during this period.



'Eros The Bittersweet 4' (2022) by Sammi Mak at Odds and Ends Gallery

The city has faced a cavalcade of challenges over the past few years, with a political crackdown tearing at its civic fibre and tough pandemic restrictions undermining its status as a financial hub. Social gathering rules hampered public events and the three-week quarantine it imposed at one point caused some residents to flee for other Asian capitals.