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Why Photography Is Finally Having a Boom in Asia

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY VIVIENNE CHOW
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Installation view of Photofairs Shanghai, 2016. Photo by James Ambrose, courtesy of Photofairs.

While photography has been a relatively established collecting category in the West for some time, the medium is just now seeing a nascent surge of interest from collectors in Asia. Chinese collectors and others from the region have only recently shed a long-held prejudice about collecting editioned artworks. This has coupled with a growing interest among these art buyers to diversify their holdings.

Mushrooming demand for photography has most readily played out in a number of art fairs solely dedicated to—or dedicating a significant section to—the medium: Photofairs Shanghai concluded its third edition in September; earlier this month Fine Art Asia in Hong Kong's twelfth edition added a new photography section; and in January, a special curated sales platform called Photo17 will make its debut at Singapore Contemporary.

“When we launched the fair in Shanghai in 2014, the focus was very much on international names and recognizable images. Three years later, both the market and tastes of buyers in mainland China have matured,” said Scott Gray, CEO of Photofairs. “This year we have already reached out to cities including Beijing, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, Chengdu, and Hong Kong, and it was encouraging to see the appetite and interest that has been developed and enhanced across the region.”




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Nobuyoshi Araki, *PHOTO MANIAC'S DIARY*, 1991/2016. Photo courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

Andy Hei, co-chairman and director of Fine Art Asia, said the buoyant market for photography was prompted by a number of factors over the past five years. “The continued success of the Hong Kong International Photo Festival, which is in its fourth edition this year, and the recent opening of F11 Photographic Museum, the first private museum dedicated to the art of photography in Hong Kong, have helped cultivating an audience for this medium,” said Hei. Singapore also launched its own International Photography Festival in 2008 and saw the opening of photography center DECK in 2014. And galleries with a special focus on photography, such as M97 and 2902 Gallery in Singapore, and 1839 Contemporary Gallery in Taiwan, have emerged.

According to Patricia Levasseur de la Motte, curator of Photo17, it is the recent sales records achieved by photographic works that have truly gotten collectors to loosen their purse strings. “Because of auction sales and the big names in photography, people started to think that photography might make a good investment,” she said.

Among the headlining records of recent years are Andreas Gursky’s *Rhein II* (1999), which was sold for US\$4.3 million at a Christie’s New York sale in 2011, and *Spiritual America* (1983) by Richard Prince, which fetched US\$3.97 million at a 2014 Christie’s auction, also in New York. But, while the HK\$375,000 (US\$48,330) record achieved at Bonhams Hong Kong last year for celebrated late Hong Kong photographer Fan Ho’s *Approaching Shadow* (1954) is lower by a great measure from those blue-chip Western photographers, it drew many Asian collectors’ attention to photography that had otherwise overlooked its potential.

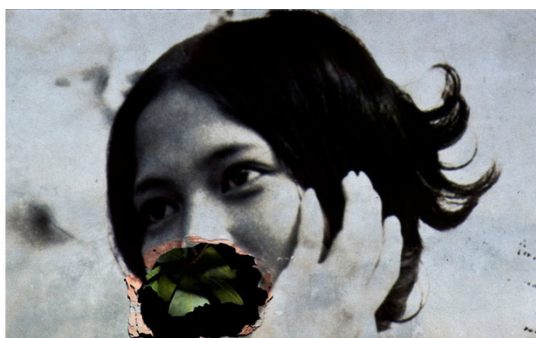
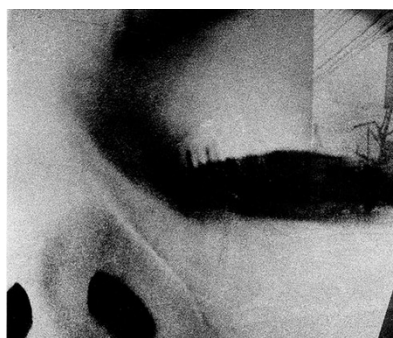
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The market for photography varies across Asia, according to Levasseur de la Motte. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have a longer history of collecting photography, while the trend has only begun in Southeast Asia. China, she said, is somewhere in between, having also been producing a great of number of great photographers in recent years.

Taka Ishii Gallery in Tokyo is one of the leading galleries showing photography in Asia. (It also has spaces in New York and Paris.) But three or four years ago, business was difficult. “I did not have any clients that collected photography,” said gallery owner Taka Ishii. “The collectors in Japan know about contemporary art and photography but it is still difficult to sell vintage photography.”





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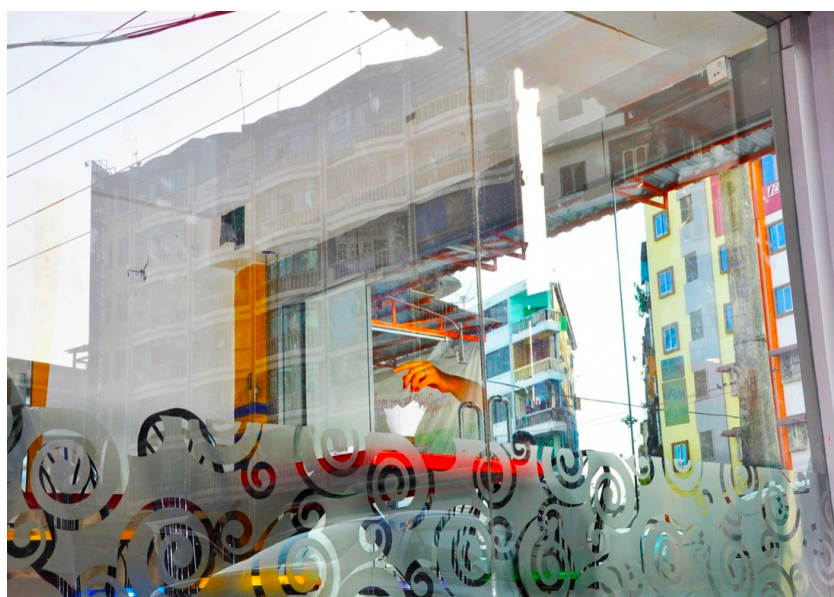
Left: Daido Moriyama, *Eros or Something Not Eros*, 1969. Image courtesy of Daido Moriyama / Nagasawa Gallery. Right: Olivia Marty, *Bến không chồng* (*L'Embarcadère des femmes sans mari*), recCollectiOn project, 2012. Image courtesy of Olivia Marty and Visionairs Gallery Asia.

Mimi Chun, founder and director of Blindspot Gallery in Hong Kong, said that overall in Asia, the photography market was quite under-developed until very recently. “People were not familiar with the edition system and were uncomfortable with the reproductive nature of photography,” she said.

At the beginning, it was very challenging just to explain the medium itself. “I was once asked at ART HK (now Art Basel in Hong Kong) whether the ‘posters’ were for sale,” said Chun. “But over the years, people’s attitude has changed, and photography has started to appeal to young collectors as they find it more affordable and accessible as an art form to collect.” Part of this shift in young collectors’ attitudes is also due to their early exposure to photography, said Chun: “Lots of young collectors were educated abroad, and therefore they have already been exposed to photography regularly exhibited at galleries and museums.”

Sundaram Tagore opened his first outpost in Asia in 2007 with a gallery space in Hong Kong and then later on in Singapore. Tagore’s was among the first international galleries to bring the works of Sebastião Salgado, Annie Leibovitz, and Edward Burtynsky to the region. He said that the lack of educational venues and availability of art-historical training at universities in Asia were among the main reasons why it took a long time before photography earned the recognition it deserved here. But other aspects of the medium also went particularly against Asian collectors’ preferences for collecting.

“Asian collectors had issues with the fact that technology was used to create this particular art form; somehow they believed that the artist’s hand had to be more fundamentally involved in creating art,” said Tagore. “It took longer to accept the idea that work produced in multiples or editions could have artistic value. But of course art practice has evolved so much: Artists such as Anish Kapoor and Jeff Koons, for example, are using engineers and other technical means and collaborators to create work. So the idea of using mechanical gadgets and technology is not longer viewed as a negative as it once was.”



Phyu Mon in HR, *It's yours!*, 2014. Photo courtesy of the artist and Intersections Gallery Singapore.



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he has sold Japanese photography to new collectors from Taiwan and Shanghai for JPY 1 million to JPY 20 million (approximately US\$10,000 to US\$200,000). Tagore said the average price for a photography work at his gallery is between US\$30,000 to US\$50,000, and works by international artists such as Salgado and Burtynsky can command much higher prices in the region. "I don't see any distinction between how much Asian and Western clients are willing to pay," said the dealer.

For her part, Levasseur de la Motte said that while some in Asia are indeed willing to pay up to US\$30,000 to US\$40,000 for a photograph, works at Photo17 will span from around US\$1,000 to US\$20,000. "We want to target young collectors," she said.

Fine Art Asia's Hei said that positive response from the fair's new photography section this year has led his team to expand the section in 2017. Nonetheless, Hei wants to see the trend continue before committing fully to the medium, "Whether we have this category as a standalone fair in future will depend on the results in the coming few years," he said.

—Vivienne Chow

Cover image: Installation view of Photofairs Shanghai, 2016. Photo by James Ambrose, courtesy of Photofairs.

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