

# Back in the Frame

## The New Aesthetic Movement

### London: At The Beating Heart Of Art

Thanks to the weird and wonderful workings of the art world, London – and particularly the West End – is back at the heart of the international market, says Charles Saumarez Smith

Throughout the autumn, I have been preoccupied by the changing geography of the art world, the shift in the centre of its gravity from Europe and America towards Asia and the movement of American art galleries to London.

I first went to Hong Kong about three years ago, invited by Sir David Tang, who had organised a big international conference to help the powers-that-be in their deliberations as to how best to establish the so-called West Kowloon Cultural District, a large area of reclaimed land on the seafront due west of where the ferry arrives near the Peninsula Hotel. It is due to be turned into a centre for the arts, with no less than seven different performance spaces for music, dance and theatre, as well as a museum called M+ because it is going to be more than just a traditional collection of works of art. It will include architecture, design, film and comics. I loved Hong Kong then and have done the few times I have been back since for its energy, extreme compactness, the sense of it still being an old *entrepôt* of the British, but now more wholly Chinese.

In some ways at least as interesting as what is being planned for West Kowloon is the proposal to develop the old Central Police Station on Hollywood Road in the heart of old Hong Kong with funds provided by the Hong Kong Jockey Club. Herzog & de Meuron, who designed Tate Modern, have been commissioned to add a new building to the side of the site. The idea is that it, too, should become a space for contemporary art and exhibitions, helped by the fact that it is surrounded by small art galleries and is itself a set of grand, if somewhat austere, historic buildings, easier to create as a set of gritty new spaces than creating a whole new district *de novo*.

More recently, I have been a couple of times to Singapore. The Royal Academy was encouraged by a pair of entrepreneurial art brokers, who trade under the name of Fortune Cookies, to attempt to replicate the formula of the Royal Academy's annual Summer Exhibition, not in London, but in Singapore. Twenty members of the Royal Academy were invited to submit work, and it was shown alongside the work of 20 artists from Asia. Academicians understood the benefit of their work being seen in a new market and to an audience who are not necessarily familiar with their art. Some, like Tony Bevan, have shown in Hong Kong. Tracey Emin and Antony Gormley are known throughout the

world. What was striking was how easily work by British artists sat alongside the Asian work. In fact, it was surprisingly hard to differentiate the work of a Chinese video artist from that of Tacita Dean.

I have now been to Singapore a couple of times. It's interesting, being in a city that has decided to take culture and cultural education so seriously, on government orders. The first time I went, in late February this year, the Prime Minister of Singapore had just given a speech encouraging the teaching of creativity in schools. The argument is that, now that Singapore is so successful and prosperous as a financial centre, it must turn to the arts in order to be able to compete in the softer world of art, design and marketing and in the invention of new products. It is slightly ironic that this should be happening just at the moment when the British government has taken its eye off the traditional characteristics of British art school education, which have encouraged free thinking, the development of an independent mind, and occasional creative anarchy, and have, as a result, been extraordinarily successful in attracting students from Asia. Maybe Cameron should pay more attention to what his wife has to say as the creative director of Smythson, rather than to the special pleading of the City of London, which has historically always taken the view that the British economy is only dependent on banking.

Meanwhile, the tilt of the fine-art economy towards Asia has led many of the big New York galleries to seek premises in London, because so many of the new buyers from Russia, the Gulf, Mumbai and Hong Kong travel repeatedly to London, and as likely as not have a house in Mayfair, Chelsea or Kensington, and don't necessarily want to go to New York. So, David Zwirner has opened a big new gallery in Grafton Street just opposite the top of Hay Hill. Larry Gagosian is said to be looking for space in Mayfair to complement his gallery in King's Cross. Michael Werner has opened on Upper Brook Street with an exhibition of the work of Peter Doig. Pace has opened on the ground floor of a building that the Royal Academy owns – the old Museum of Mankind – immediately opposite Cecconi's on Burlington Gardens.

So, after two decades in which the art world moved steadily eastwards away from its traditional headquarters in Cork Street, large numbers of dealers, particularly the international ones, have realised that their clients do not necessarily want to spend the day taking taxis to insalubrious backstreets in Hackney. They want to buy their art in the heart of the West End.

I would have thought that politicians of all stripes should be paying attention to this phenomenon. The trafficking in works of contemporary art is a big, international business, attracting visitors to London, encouraging them to spend money in Mayfair and Bond Street. They stay in the best hotels. They buy expensive real estate. They make London into a much richer and more cosmopolitan city than Paris, Frankfurt or Vienna.

Some time ago, I was asked to a conference held in the British Consulate in Istanbul. I was invited to speak about why wealthy Turks might choose to buy houses in London. The answer is not the weather. Nor is it the quality of our historic art galleries, since both Paris and Vienna are just as rich in museums. I don't think that one should estimate the importance of the international art market, of the big new galleries in Mayfair as well as of Frieze, in attracting international visitors to London.

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