

## Galerie Gmurzynska's CEO on Asian Ambitions and Art Basel HK

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | MARCH 23, 2015



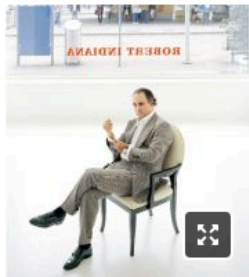
Mathias Rastorfer (right) with Joan Miro's grandson, Joan Punyet Miro

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Mathias Rastorfer

It's the last few hours of the last day of Art Basel in Hong Kong and the [Galerie Gmurzynska](#) booth is abuzz with activity. And in the midst of the flurry of activity is a surprisingly calm and composed **Mathias Rastorfer**, co-CEO of the influential Zurich-based gallery which is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. But Rastorfer has every reason to be content; the fair has been a successful one for the gallery.

[Galerie Gmurzynska](#) has exhibited at Art Basel in Hong Kong since the inaugural edition in 2013, and for two years before that when the fair was known as Art HK, but has yet to develop a permanent presence in Asia. However that could soon change as Rastorfer reveals that the gallery has

been thinking about opening an outpost in Asia, which he says would most likely be situated in Hong Kong.

As both an exhibitor at Art Basel in Hong Kong and the sole selection committee expert for the Modern Art sector, Rastorfer is more than qualified to comment on the fair. One of the positive developments, he said, is that the fair has come to a point where East meets West, West meets East, and both regions understand each other much better. "Western galleries are no longer bringing the Andy Warhol Mao paintings for an Asian audience and the Asian galleries no longer have a salon style hanging where you feel you are in a sales room or a flea market. All of that has matured tremendously," he explained, adding that what amazed him was the connoisseurship that is beginning to develop on the part of Asian collectors.

“And as far as the galleries are concerned,” he said, “I think that they have understood that they have to focus on bringing what they are known for, what they are good at, and not just what they think people will like.” But Rastorfer also admits that the one thing that might have been lost in all of this is the element of surprise – what he describes as the magic discoveries that one might have made at the very beginning of Art Basel’s engagement. “If there is one criticism,” he said, “it is that we need to try and get a little bit of that back.”

Galerie Gmurzynska’s 2015 Art Basel in Hong Kong display is a lesson in how to curate an art fair booth and maximize its potential. In 2015 the gallery’s booth featured works by the Cuban-born Afro-Chinese modern master **Wifredo Lam** and the renowned figurative painter **Fernando Botero**, both of whom appeal to both Western and Asian collectors. “Botero always sells well,” said Rastorfer. “He is an established and much-loved artist in the Asia Pacific region.”

When Rastorfer spoke to **BLOUIN ARTINFO**, the gallery had sold works by Botero to collectors from Hong Kong and Malaysia and was expecting a Chinese mainland collector to return to the fair before it closed to renegotiate two of the major Botero paintings. “It is almost a given that one sells a Botero here at this fair,” said Rastorfer, who explained that Asian collectors are attracted to the originality, uniqueness, and recognizability of Botero’s work as well as the artist’s rounded figures, which remind Asian collectors of Buddha – a symbol of wealth and happiness. The gallery’s Botero horse sculpture would also resonate with Asian collectors, many of whom would recognize the horse as a symbol of power.

The 2015 edition of Art Basel in Hong Kong was the first under the new March dates. But although the change from May to March dates was implemented to attract a wider audience, Rastorfer said that he noticed less European visitors this year. “But you have to bear in mind that in my area, which is modern and classic contemporary, we have absolutely parallel to this fair TEFAF Maastricht. So this year I think this has affected some of the European visitors who otherwise would have come here,” he explained. “But I think that this will change next year because there will be a difference of a week between the two fairs,” he added.

On the flip side, Rastorfer reveals that the gallery had a lot of visitors from Malaysia and Indonesia who he says are very strong now in terms of collecting and buying. “We also had a number of Australians, Japanese, and Koreans as well as an increased number of local Hong Kong visitors and buyers which reflects the direct impact of the fair on the local market,” he added.

By the end of the fair, Galerie Gmurzynska had placed an impressive list of works. The gallery sold a selection of works by **Fernando Botero**, including a horse sculpture priced at USD 850,000, as well as a number of works by **Wifredo Lam**, ranging from a unique ceramic piece with an asking price of around USD 75,000 to paintings priced between USD 150,000 and USD 300,000. Several works by **Allan Jones** and **Joan Miro** ranging from USD 200,000 to USD 500,000 also went to new homes while a 1940s work by **Wifredo Lam** and a 1960s work by **Picasso** remain reserved for USD 2,000,000 and USD 6,000,000 respectively. And then in the last few minutes, the Gallery also sold a Botero that it had offered at USD 1,200,000. But are the figures strong enough for Galerie Gmurzynska to justify opening a branch in Hong Kong? Only time will tell.