

Frieze Los Angeles Opens Amid Attention to Asian Artists

Spurred by population growth and new patron support, artists from China, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines are getting more recognition from museums and the market.



By Robin Pogrebin

Reporting from Los Angeles

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Last year, Meeson Pae, a Korean American multidisciplinary artist, walked through the Frieze Los Angeles art fair and thought, “One day, I hope to be here.”

This year, she will be, in the booth presented by the gallerist Anat Ebgi at the fair, at the Santa Monica Airport, which opens to V.I.P.’s on Thursday and to the public on Friday.

Pae is just one of the dozens of Asian artists, gallerists, curators and collectors in Los Angeles who over the last few years have been gaining recognition and attention from the city’s galleries, museums and the marketplace. The art world’s recent emphasis on equity and inclusion is moving beyond a focus on Black and Latino contributions to include Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, who have a long history in the city but until recently have tended to be left out of any discussion of the art market, and may have experienced discrimination — even racist incidents — during the Covid-19 pandemic.

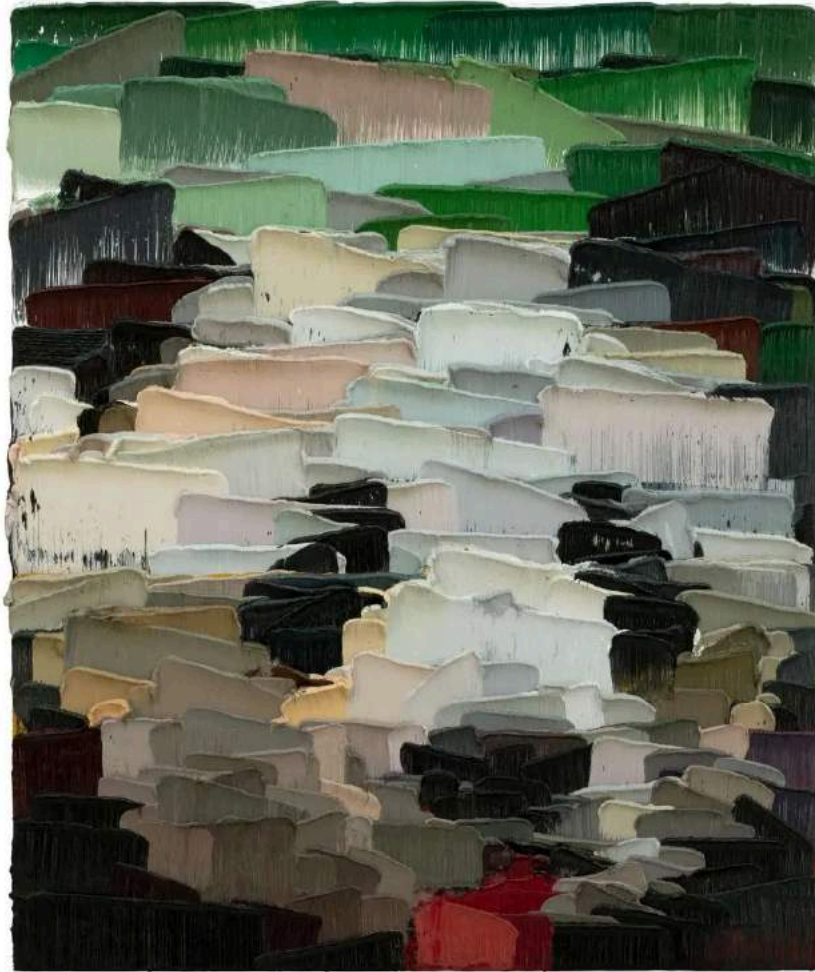
In Los Angeles, Asian Americans represent the third largest racial group, behind Latinos and whites. And California’s Asian American and Pacific Islander population grew by 25 percent over the past decade, faster than any other ethnic group in the state.

This heightened sensitivity to inclusion has been making its way into the Los Angeles art world. Of the 98 galleries in Frieze Los Angeles this year, seven are from Asia — up from only two in 2022. Three are participating for the first time.

And several U.S. galleries are highlighting Asian artists, including Lehmann Maupin, which will show Kim Yun Shin, the octogenarian Korean sculptor who just joined the gallery. Rachel Uffner will feature the mystical landscapes of Erica Mao, a Taiwanese American artist; and the Tina Kim gallery will show Jennifer Tee, a Chinese-Indonesian Dutch artist.

A first retrospective by Pacita Abad, a Filipino American artist, was recently at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, while the rising art star Mire Lee, of Korea and Amsterdam, was selected for Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall in October.

And Pace, in its booth here, will include work by the Chinese artist Li Songsong, whose thickly layered pigments will have their solo showing at the gallery's Los Angeles space in March.



Li Songsong's deeply textured painting, "Panda," 2022, at Pace Gallery Li Songsong, via Pace Gallery

"You enter any museum in any major city in the U.S. and it's full of Asians looking at art," said Isa Lorenzo, the founder of Silverlens, a Manila- and New York-based gallery that promotes Filipino art and will be in Frieze L.A. for the first time. "So why wouldn't they be able to enter a gallery or museum and see themselves?"

Similarly, at the Felix art fair, a satellite gathering at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, which opens Wednesday, Fridman Gallery of Manhattan is featuring works on paper by Azuki Furuya, a Japanese artist who recently earned an M.F.A. from Brooklyn College

Some galleries in Los Angeles are now run by Asians, including Make Room, which is owned and directed by Emilia Yin. In 2022 she was named one of Forbes's "30 Under 30," as a new force in the contemporary art world.

Yin started the gallery six years ago. "I was not seeing the kind of show that I felt connected to," she said. "It's got to start somewhere."



Emilia Yin, a founder of Make Room, a gallery in Los Angeles, thought, “It’s got to start somewhere.” via Make Room, Los Angeles

Art from Asia has also become an integral part of the program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) over the last 20 years, one of many institutions increasingly highlighting shows of work from Japan, China and Korea with patrons’ support.

Its permanent Asian art collection “has grown exponentially” said Stephen Little, the museum’s curator of Chinese art and head of its Chinese, Korean, and South & Southeast Asian departments. “Being on the Pacific Rim and surrounded in L.A. by many different Asian communities, we look to Asia,” Little added.

LACMA on Sunday opened “Korean Treasures,” 35 artworks — including traditional paintings, calligraphic folding screens and ceramics — recently donated by a former trustee, Chester Chang of Los Angeles, and his son, Cameron C. Chang. It was the largest gift of Korean art in the museum’s history.

LACMA is nearing the end of a 10-year partnership with Hyundai, the South Korean auto company, to underwrite art and technology as well as Korean art scholarship, the longest and largest commitment from a corporate sponsor in the museum's history.

The Hammer Museum is bringing to town a show that explores the daring artists who emerged after the Korean War, "Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s," a collaboration with the Guggenheim in New York and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles this month opened "Scratching at the Moon," billed as "the first focused survey of Asian American artists in a major Los Angeles contemporary art museum."

"Given the Asian population in Southern California, it's pretty remarkable that there hasn't been a show like this before," said Anne Ellegood, the executive director of the I.C.A. "It feels like a bit of a moment and it's really important — there simply hasn't been enough visibility for Asian and Asian American artists in the mainstream art world."



Installation view, "Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s," at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, through May 12.
Charles White

Various other galleries have been highlighting the work of Asian Americans. Perrotin is inaugurating its Los Angeles gallery during Frieze Week with a solo exhibition dedicated to the Japanese artist Izumi Kato. Blum gallery is currently celebrating its 30th anniversary with “Thirty Years: Written with a Splash of Blood,” a survey of Japanese art from the 1960s to today.



Izumi Kato, “Untitled,” 2023. Perrotin is inaugurating its Los Angeles gallery during Frieze Week with a solo exhibition dedicated to the Japanese artist. via Izumi Kato and Perrotin

Jeffrey Deitch, in 2022, presented “Wonder Women,” featuring the work of “Asian American and diasporic women and nonbinary artists” — like Zoé Blue M. and Tidawhitney Lek — in a show curated by Kathy Huang. “What is the major innovation of the art world in the past decade?” Deitch asked. “It’s been this opening up and embracing of the art community looking at great artists who have been neglected.”

Several major East Asian collectors have over the last few years propelled the movement as they gained a higher profile in Los Angeles. Dominic Ng, 65, the Hong Kong-born chairman and chief executive of East West Bank, with headquarters in Pasadena, has just committed to a \$10 million gift toward LACMA’s expansion and future exhibitions.

Ng and his wife, Ellen, have helped LACMA build its collection of Chinese contemporary art, including buying a 12-foot-long Zeng Fanzhi painting, from 2018, for its permanent holdings.

The piece by Zeng, “who is considered by many to be China’s greatest living artist,” Ng said in a statement at the time, “contributes to the ongoing cultural exchange between the East and the West.” LACMA recently announced that an exhibition of new works by Zeng, “Near and Far/Now and Then,” will open during the Venice Biennale this spring in an installation by the architect Tadao Ando.



Dominic Ng at the East West Bank in Pasadena, Calif., in 2019, with a sculpture by Zhan Wang and painting by Cui Jie. via East West Bank

In 2007, East West Bank bought a \$2-million collection of Chinese contemporary art for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Today there is an East West Bank Gallery at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures because of a \$5 million gift, and an East West Bank Art Terrace at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco (named after Ng made a \$5 million gift).

“My approach is, whenever there is an opportunity to support an art exhibition that helps give exposure to East Asian art, we’re going to step up,” Ng said in a recent interview.

(Other collectors include Miky Lee, the Samsung heiress, vice chair of the South Korean media conglomerate CJ Entertainment and executive producer of the film “Parasite,” who serves on the board of the Hammer and as vice chair of the Academy Museum.)

But many Asian artists say they just want to be known and recognized for their work, not their ethnicity. Greg Ito, a fourth-generation Japanese American artist, whose grandparents met in an American internment camp, was born in Los Angeles. He said his work “is not about the Japanese American experience,” but instead explores universal themes such as love and loss.

“Do I want my art to be about me being Asian? No,” added Ito, who has a solo show opening at Ebgi’s New York gallery in March. “It’s more about the current state of the human condition.”

Robin Pogrebin, who has been a reporter for The Times for nearly 30 years, covers arts and culture in California. More about Robin Pogrebin

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