



Monumental artworks revive ancestral traditions at Art Basel Hong Kong

‘There’s been a huge move to material practice and a real shift to recognizing Indigenous sovereignty,’ says Alexie Glass-Kantor, the curator of the fair’s sector dedicated to outsized presentations

By Skye Sherwin | Mar 11, 2025 | 4 min read



The first work visitors will see within ‘As The World Turns’, this year’s edition of ***Encounters*** at **Art Basel Hong Kong**, will be impossible to miss. Set against a theatrical backdrop of shocking pink and yellow fabric, with a purple vinyl floor, the late ***Pacita Abad***’s three abstract ‘trapunto’ works – enormous painted, quilted, and embroidered textiles – are over five-meters tall.

‘They never made it to her retrospective exhibitions [most recently at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and MoMA PS1 in New York],’ explains her nephew, the artist Pio Abad, who manages her estate. ‘Museums barely have five-meter-high walls.’ What’s perhaps most striking about Pacita Abad’s presentation though, is that she is one among a significant number of artists showing in Encounters this year who draw on the traditions and ancestral wisdom of what are often marginalized cultures.

The Encounters in Hong Kong is dedicated to monumental artworks and known both for its physical and conceptual ambitions. It’s ‘a benchmark for excellence and experimentation’ says its curator Alexie Glass-Kantor. For the past 11 years, she’s helped artists develop works up to 10-meters tall, which despite not being in dedicated rooms, manage to distinguish themselves from the bustle of the show floor. As such, the sector is a conduit for some major artworld currents. ‘There’s a huge move to material practice,’ she says. ‘In the past decade, there’s also been a real shift to recognizing Indigenous sovereignty. Artists are working in transhistorical modes of production, and looking to intergenerational forms that pass on inherited knowledge.’



Portrait of Pacita Abad. Courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate and Silverlens.



Portrait of Pio Abad, 2024. Courtesy of Silverlens.



Alexie Glass-Cantor, curator of Encounters at Art Basel Hong Kong 2025.

Pio Abad describes his aunt's presentation for Encounters as 'materially the most omnivorous work she made.' The three textiles were created while she was based in Jakarta in the 1990s, and incorporate batik and ikat fabrics which she constantly collected from markets in the Indonesian capital. Yet it is her connection with multiple cultures that makes the work of the Filipino émigré particularly distinct. Having fled to America in 1970 from the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, she not only drew on her personal heritage in her work, but also identified (sometimes as a fellow immigrant) with the diverse people she encountered in the 60-plus countries she visited, sitting outside the so-called developed world. 'She had a willingness to take on the positions of the communities that she spent time with, whose material language she fell deeply in love with,' reflects Pio, who adds that the surging interest in her project speaks to our times. 'We're experiencing the repercussions of not thinking about Indigenous histories or how that knowledge can actually help us find a way forward. Her work has always drawn knowledge and solace from these communities.'

Artists whose work Glass-Cantor is showing alongside Abad's under the theme of 'passage', include Betty Muffler, the Aboriginal Australian artist known for her monochrome canvases, and Nadia Hernández, a young Venezuelan-Australian. Having left the authoritarian regime of her birthland as a child, Hernández says her art was first motivated by the need 'to maintain a connection to my family across distance, to hold onto a sense of hope.' Her exuberant practice, taking in bold, bright painting and textiles with a rough-edged immediacy, as well as music and performance, looks to '*cotidianidad*': everyday depositories of Venezuelan cultural experience from graffiti to family recipes, folk songs and pop music. Her new textile and sound installation *El Segundo Verso* (2025), includes both recordings and weavings where fragments of protest songs are

reimagined in new poems to create what Hernandez describes as 'a lyrical landscape of resilience, memory, and collective voice.'



Betty Muffler, Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country), 2024. Courtesy of the artist, Iwantja Arts and Ames Yavuz.

Betty Muffler photographed by Rhett Hammerton. Courtesy of the artist, Iwantja Arts and Ames Yavuz.





Nadia Hernández, *El Segundo Verso*, 2025. Photograph by Simon Strong. Courtesy of the artist and Station Gallery.

The question of how to create a cultural continuum as a displaced person, to assert communal identity and belonging, is also fundamental to the work of Muffler, a senior woman of the Pitjantjatjara people from the central Australian desert and a respected traditional healer and artist. As a child in the 1950s, her community was forced from its land by British nuclear testing. Her paintings, pulsing with intricate swirling circular shapes and patterns in soft black and white, have a healing dimension, channeling her country's geography and ecological networks. These will be installed on structures inspired by the painting sheds at Iwantja Arts, an Indigenous owned and governed Aboriginal art center in rural Australia. It's an acknowledgment of the essential role Indigenous centers of this kind play in nurturing and disseminating Australian aboriginal art, which has become a crucial tool for cultural affirmation. As Glass-Kantor reflects, 'these artists all found forms of resilience, persisting in contexts where the opportunity to make art may

not have been the first thing available to them, but it's the thing that they have to do, that is necessary.'

Pedro Wonaeamirri, an artist from the remote Melville Island in Australia's Northern Territories, where he is a respected cultural leader of the Tiwi people, has been exhibiting his work in museums since the 1990s. His installation for Encounters uses an isle-like oval of sand in which he has embedded Tutini poles. These are gently bent, segmented, carved timber poles, which have been painted with geometric patterns in earthy hues by a deceased person's relatives a few years after their death; they are used in Pukumani funeral ceremonies, which feature singing and dancing as part of saying goodbye. 'On the Tiwi Islands we still make poles for ceremonies, but these are different,' he explains. 'We also make them as art to share our culture with the world. Pukumani is a mourning ceremony, but also a celebration. Maybe this artwork is a celebration too.'



Vajiko Chachkiani, *Lower than the sky* (still), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and SCAI The Bathhouse.

Aboriginal habitation of Australia can be traced back 60,000 years, making it one of the oldest continuous cultures on the planet. The pigments Wonaeamirri uses come from his island home, 'White ochre from near the beach, yellow from inland, and red made from yellow by burning on the fire.' They are a testament to his work's deep connection to place and nature. 'It is important for the world to hear us and our stories, to celebrate our old culture that is still here today,' he says. However, as his own practice which has expanded to include filmmaking and digital recordings underlines, it is far from static. 'It's always changing, moving forward.'

The resonance of the ancient past, including the myths that speak to timeless human concerns, have long occupied Georgian artist **Vajiko Chachkhiani**. His film installation, *Lower Than the Sky* (2022), captures two shipping trawlers carrying refugees. Filmed on apparently peaceful waters, the boats never come to shore, while their human cargo eyes the viewer in an unsettling 'them and us' dynamic. Finally, they travel away, recalling the eternal quest for home in Homeric poetry. Grouped with Chachkhiani and Wonaeamirri's presentations under the heading 'The Return', Movana Chen's installation, *Dreconstructing* (2004–2008), is a further meditation on journeys and endurance. Where the other works emphasize borders, be that between land and sea or life and death, the Hong Kong-raised, Lisbon-based artist literally shreds them. For her project *Beyond the surface* (2024–) she transforms old passports – the documents we must use to cross the boundaries that nations impose on nature – into weavings, an age-old, global and traditionally female craft. Meanwhile, the latest work in her series 'Body Container' (2012–) will see the artist and dancer Francisco Borges perform within a sculpture knitted from maps.

'Polyvalent' is the word Glass-Kantor reaches for to describe this year's transglobal array of artists whose practices have emerged in response to diverse and distinct situations. 'Every context has its own depth, agency, and histories,' she says. 'Let's celebrate that and let's do it with awareness.'