

On the Art Basel party scene, things are looking up

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Take Another View on Art invites visitors to The Landmark atrium to take a telescopic view of nine artworks suspended from the ceiling. Photo: Nora Tam

The first full night of Hong Kong Art Week events saw art lovers and party people gathering from Central to Sai Ying Pun and Tsim Sha Tsui.

In Central, the night started at Duddell's, where people gathered to enjoy a few drinks and catch up with friends in a more laid-back setting before the social pressure-cooker of the Pedder Building. It wasn't just people watching, there was art to be appreciated as well. The centrepiece consisted of four cakes, baked by artist Phoebe Man, with provocative political statements written on them in icing. Attendees were supposed to try some cake, then say what they thought of it, a comment on the politics as well as the taste. I tried a cake that said The Police are Open Hearted and Honest, and truth be told, it tasted like angel food.

On the way from Duddell's to the Pedder Building I followed the crowd through The Landmark atrium for a glass of champagne and to check out the Take Another View on Art exhibit, in which artworks, including pieces by Zao Wou-ki and Monet, are suspended high above the atrium floor with patrons invited to peer at them through telescopes. I do love a party willing to spend more than

HK\$100 million on what amounts to decorations, only to place them all on the ceiling. I actually quite liked the effect of looking at the paintings super close-up through the telescope.

Soon it was time to head to the Pedder Building for a kind of intensive gallery pub crawl. All of the "big galleries" are there, and people were queuing on the pavement to get inside. We started at the top at Gagosian Gallery, where guards wouldn't let you bring your champagne into the main room to look at the art, so people tended not to linger.

Then it was a just a matter of making our way down six flights of stairs, accepting champagne when proffered, soaking up the art, and making awkward eye contact with the beautiful people in the stairwell. Though I felt crowded from the moment I entered the building, everyone seemed to be saying how subdued the galleries felt this year, with fewer people and less energy. Apparently, Art Basel Miami this was not.

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Note: the Alex Prager exhibition at Lehmann Maupin was excellent and everyone should go.

After the established galleries I needed a geographic and spiritual change of scene, so it was off to Time & Space gallery in Sai Ying Pun for the opening of Sole to Soul, an exhibition by New York-based artist August Krogan-Roley.

This would prove the most pleasant and most fun stop of the evening, with the crowd of neighbourhood folks and friends spilling onto the streets and catching up over cold beers. Everyone was all smiles and good cheer. A couple showed off their newborn baby, and a very nice man asked me if I had the number for a crack dealer. We never should have left, but leave we did. I joined the artist and his girlfriend, along with the gallery owners, to check out the Artnet party at Kee Club. It was supposed to be the biggest party of the evening and it was nice to see people cutting loose and dancing a bit, but in the end we stayed for just less than one drink.

The common thread of the evening was a sense that this year's social scene is a shadow of last year's, and I heard many people wondering out loud if Art Basel Hong Kong was past its peak. I prefer to think that people are just saving energy for the big parties tonight and over the weekend. Celebrities including Gwyneth Paltrow, Victoria Beckham, Susan Sarandon, and Tom Ford, rumour has it, will be in town for the amFar dinner on Saturday night, and Dita von Teese is confirmed to perform at the Davidoff party on Friday night at the Grand Hyatt.

Things are just getting started.