

An Art Exhibition Designed to Make Us Put Down Our Phones

By Marjon Carlos | Photographs by: Simon J. Nicol



Sitting on the smooth bamboo floors of “The Wonder Room,” an interpretation of a Chinese teahouse-cum-sound bath created by the architecture collective MINAX, I was faced with one of the great choices of our time: *to selfie or not to selfie*.

The urge to document my surroundings was strong, almost compulsive. The contrast of the minimalist structure, tucked in the gilded lobby of the Hong Kong Peninsula Hotel was perfectly Instagramable, but I knew that there was no way for the platform to convey its most striking quality: the smell. The room’s cedar walls curved around me to create an egg shape, but their intoxicating fragrance was by far the works most transportive element. I laid down on the floor as the sound bath began, and let the scent and the steady meditative percussion of a gong master wash over me with the promise of mind-body equanimity. After ten minutes of calm, I opened my eyes and was face-to-face with a bulbous, fishbowl mirror warping and shifting my reflection on the wall of the teahouse. The urge to selfie returned.

Even so, I recognized that it would have been nearly impossible to really document the *experience*, and that was actually kind of the point of this installation and the other three that make up “Art in Resonance,” the Peninsula’s first exhibition from its newly minted global art program. The show, which opened last week as a lead-up to Hong Kong’s Art Basel, challenges its visitors to remain present; to draw upon their senses as they perceive the original commissioned artwork from Janet Echelman, Iván Navarro, Timothy Ian Myers, and MINAX. Co-curated by art world fixtures Isolde Brielmaier (Westfield’s Executive Director of Culture) and Bettina Prentice (Prentice Cultural), “Art in Resonance” exhibits work that is, as Brielmaier describes, “more than two-dimensional work on a wall. Something you take in and move on [from].” Or, ya know, something you selfie with, post, and forget.

When you think of art within the age of Instagram, there are probably a few viral moments that immediately come to mind. Ugo Rondinone’s “Seven Magic Mountains.” Yayoi Kusama’s “Infinity Mirror’s Room.” Kara Walker’s “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby.” These works

feel almost made for social media; a departure from a past in which art museums and galleries banned camera use, and snapping a quick #artselfie aside them is as much about documenting the piece's beauty as it is about conveying one's proximity to it, indulging an experience-based economy that often privileges viewing the work over the product itself. It can appear like a shallow interest in art — that the aesthetics of art patronage far outweigh the connection one has with a piece. Don't we all roll our eyes at that one friend that drove to Dia: Beacon to "capture content"? At the same time, interacting with art via social media is an undeniable entry point for those that may find art intimidating or insular. Sharing the snap with thousands of people, with the possibility for it to be regrammed and disseminated further, can make the art accessible, immersive and community building, so "Art in Resonance" still created custom hashtags — #artinresonance and #penmoments — and Brielmaier told me that though the experience comes first, the curators welcome the interest a regram can bring.

"Obviously we have no control over how people will interpret the work and engage with the work. I think the hope is, of course, have people take photos and get the word out, and share their experiences," the co-curator explained. "I think the hope is also, say, for instance, you walk into *The Wonder Room* that for a minute you just stop and look and kind of figure out what's going on before you whip out the phone. That may or may not happen."



I kept that in mind when viewing sculptor and fiber artist Janet Echelman's piece, which was hoisted high onto the facade of the Peninsula. The Boston-based artists' kaleidoscopic work, *Earthtime 1.26* is constructed from diaphanous but resilient fisherman's netting that appears like an apparition against the glow of a custom LED lighting system. The piece's size meant the hotel had to sacrifice booking two bridal suites to provide a large enough support for the art to suspend. I couldn't help but post a video of it to my Instagram Story. Echelman said she's good with that.

"There is no dominant view, [the work is] always changing," she told me. "It's different at every angle, different every day. The concept of *Earthtime* is the things you thought were constant are not. Even the day is shifting, even timing is not constant ... I think with social media, each person becomes a co-creator of that experience and then they are inspired to share it. I think it's a very interesting amplification of what the art is about, so I embrace it." It's allowed her to see her own

work differently as well. “I get a window into the mind of each person who wants to share!” Still, she echoed Brielmaier’s hope that viewers won’t simply post without establishing a connection first. “I think you need to have the experience and then you can interpret it and share it. But you have to feel it first, because otherwise what are you sharing if you haven’t actually felt it?”

I thought about this as my Instagram DMs are flooded with inquiries about where exactly my friends and followers could find this Echelman piece I’d posted. I immediately grew worried that my bit of ephemeral content discredited the sense of wonder I had when looking up at this incredible work along the Peninsula. Had it appeared like an odd flex; a way to seek the currency that comes from posing next to an installation clear across the face of the planet? A paranoia began to surface about whether my serious appreciation showed, and about appearing disingenuous in my interests, seeing as social media is so often a curated edit of them.

But as I fielded questions that night, I started to understand Echelman’s words around the hierarchy in perspective. My digital distribution of the piece is certainly not the whole experience, but it is an homage to the moment, and in turn speaks directly to the mission of the Peninsula’s art program itself of bringing museum-grade art to the masses. Yes, the goal is for those of us who are able to see it to focus on the experience, but doesn’t the phone create a constant conversation with the piece, well after I’ve left as well? Phones are an unavoidable truth in today’s art world, but if anything, the show has taught me how to receive work moving forward. With that realization, I posted more.