

Every vote counts in cyberspace, especially the public's

Two online art contests mean more art is making it to the internet. But is that a good thing, asks **Joyce Hor-Chung Lau**

The internet is considered a poor medium for viewing, judging and buying art. Monitors do no justice to texture or scale, colours are muted and details are lost. This is particularly problematic for artists such as Tsang Kin-wah, one of the 30 semi-finalists in the Sovereign Art Foundation's online art competition. On a computer screen, Tsang's entry looks like a lovely floral/paisley pattern. Had you seen the work hanging at the Hong Kong Art Biennial, however, you'd have noticed Tsang's miniscule florets and leaves are actually letters spelling out offensive, vulgar messages with repeated use of the "f" word.

But despite the rather crude way art translates into online digital images, two groups are launching online art competitions: Hong Kong's Sovereign Art Prize and Macau's Public Art Collection Scheme both allow the public to click in

votes online and, at least to some degree, determine the winners.

This is significant in a conservative art world in which promoters rarely reach out to ask what kind of art the public likes. Traditionally, competitions are judged by experts; curators decide what goes into museums; and gallery owners decide what goes into galleries. Art is like a multi-billion-dollar international industry with no market research arm – but that is beginning to change. "Our goal is to reach as many people as possible," says Tiffany Pinkstone, Sovereign (Hong Kong) PR and marketing manager.

The Sovereign Art Foundation (SAF) received entries from 172 artists in February, loaded them online and received 1,000 votes in the first few weeks. The top 30 will be shown in an exhibition at Pacific Place mall this week, where the public can also cast

their votes. From the semi-final stage, the voting is two-tiered. The top two prizes, of US\$10,000 and US\$4,000, will be awarded by a panel of five art experts. The third prize of US\$1,000 will be determined by popular vote.

"It's a way of getting a larger audience involved," says Claire Hsu, founder of the Asia Art Archive and a judge on the SAF panel. "I see the third prize as sort of a nice gesture."

"There's been talk of doing public contests or voting on art in Hong Kong, but nobody's done it before, to my knowledge," says Christina Chu, chief curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art and another SAF judge. "It's a fun idea."

Chu is less enthusiastic about the use of the internet. "This is the first time I've ever judged anything on the web. It was tough. Any distortion of size, tone or colour can change a whole piece. It was OK for picking the top ones, but I'm really looking forward to seeing those 30 pieces again, live, for our final selection."

The pundits and the public will certainly be looking at the art from different perspectives.



Tsang Kin-wah's entry appears innocuous viewed on the net, but could offend some viewers up close

Though the judges are supposed to clear their minds of all prejudice, they know who's hot and who's not, who sells and who doesn't. This is a big deal in an industry in which a painting by an established artist can sell for a hundred times more than a similar one by a newcomer. Although the semi-finalists are similar in terms of medium and size, their estimated values (what they would probably sell for in a commercial gallery) range from

\$2,500 to \$80,000. The irony is that the public might choose the least critically acclaimed piece.

"It will be interesting to see what the outcome is, to see whether what the public chooses and what the experts choose will have any correlation," says Chu. "We cannot expect the average voting person out there to have our sort of art background. That's not the point. They will be voting based on a direct sensory response – what catches their eye

on the website, or in the mall. Our response would probably be more thought out, and more based on what moves us intellectually."

Another attempt at online public judging of art forms part of the Macau government's "Cultural Heritage Protection Year" project. The Comuna de Pedra will be holding a competition in which Macau residents can submit ideas, plans and sketches for public art and where it should be – whether it's a new sculpture for the Leal de Senado, paintings to brighten up the waterfront walkway, or a multi-media piece for a park. The public can post ideas online, and vote for others' proposals.

"While we expect most submissions to come from the art world, we have no set rules that entries must come from professional artists," says Comuna de Pedra co-ordinator Jane Lee Ioi-chon. "We will then let the public choose the art. Since this is public art, it is really for them."

The most popular choices will be presented to the Macau Cultural Institute. If things go according to plan, construction of the works will begin in 2005. "This

is the first time we're using the internet," says Lee. "We're not sure how it's going to turn out ... But we're hoping to reach as many, and as wide a selection of the population, as possible."

Both online art competitions are in the teething stage. The Comuna de Pedra's is still under construction. Sovereign's first website featured an unwieldy 172 pieces, a problem the foundation rectified in early March when it re-designed the site to display the top 30. It hasn't decided whether to sell the works online – or the logistics of such a plan.

"Only time will tell if public online polls like this are actually relevant and whether they can be seen as a measure of typical Asian tastes in art," says Chu. "It will be interesting to see who voted online, where they are from, and what they think."

To vote in the Sovereign Art Prize, go to www.sovereignartfoundation.com. The exhibition will be held at Pacific Place, Admiralty, Thursday to April 6. Public art proposals should be uploaded on www.pedra.org.mo in May.