



This spread: Daphne King wears a dress by Andrew Gn. Diamond earrings and ring by Margherita Burgener.

# A MASTER of Arts

Daphne King learnt how to manage Alisan Fine Arts under her mother's tutelage. Now, she's using her lifelong training to make a name for herself as an industry leader



This spread: Jumpsuit by Diane von Furstenberg

**D**aphne King is the director of Alisan Fine Arts, one of the first contemporary Chinese art galleries in Hong Kong.



**Your mother, Alice King, founded Alisan Fine Arts in 1981. What was it like growing up surrounded by art?**

Looking back, it was actually quite amazing, but at the time I didn't really appreciate it. Like most kids I didn't realise it was unusual or different. I just thought it was the norm. However, later on when I was older, I found myself in awe of artists when they visited the gallery.

I was lucky to meet Zao Wou-ki, who right now is one of the most recognised contemporary Chinese artists. One time, when I was studying in Paris, my mum and I went to one of his exhibitions. We were one of the first galleries in Hong Kong to host a solo exhibition for him back in 1993. At that time most people didn't know who he was.

I met several others over the years, such as Walasse Ting. We just finished an exhibition for him, which was his 10th solo showcase at Alisan Fine Arts.

Overall it was quite an amazing experience.

**After you graduated from the University of Pennsylvania you worked in advertising in New York and Hong Kong. What made you change career paths to work at Alisan Fine Arts?**

When I first graduated from university I wanted to get some experience rather than move back to Hong Kong to work straight

away. When I was looking for a job in New York, I was looking in the advertising and art fields. It just so happened that I found a job in advertising first.

It was a great experience for me, as advertising and marketing skills are things you can use in any industry. At university I took some marketing courses. I was fascinated by marketing and advertising, but at the same time I was also taking a lot of art history courses.

**Do you feel you were destined to take over the gallery?**

I guess my parents probably wanted me to take over but they never pushed me to do it. I have always been interested in art so I could say, in a way, it was fated.

**How has your role progressed since you started working at the gallery in 1996?**

Work has changed a lot. When I first started



This page: Dress by Max Mara

*“My mother wanted me to start from the bottom and do the filing and stack shelves. I wanted to do interesting things but she was adamant that I start small”*

my mother was quite strict with me. She wanted me to start from the bottom and do the filing and stack shelves. I kept asking her to let me do interesting things – especially because I had assistants when I worked for a large multi-national advertising agency – but my mother was adamant that I start small, because that’s how I’d learn about the gallery.

She had me sort out the library’s catalogues and read them as I went along. It was a meaningful experience, and now that I run the gallery as director I’m more understanding of people who are just starting out, which has made me a better manager.

**You have curated a number of exhibitions since you became a director in 2005. Which ones are you most proud of and why?**

The one that stands out in my mind was the gallery’s 35th anniversary last year. We held a large exhibition at Hong Kong Central Library in Causeway Bay. The exhibition showcased 35 pieces covering the gallery’s 35 years. We borrowed pieces from collectors to highlight the important works and artists we’ve represented over the years. A lot of the artists and collectors came to the opening celebration.

On top of that, we published a book featuring every exhibition we have ever done since 1981, along with all the artists we have worked with. It took over two years to complete. It was emotional going through the archives and reading the correspondence between the artists and my mother. It was also fascinating to see the progression from hand-written letters to faxes to emails.

The book, coupled with the exhibition, is my biggest achievement to date.

**Alisan Fine Arts promotes contemporary Chinese art all over the world. What’s your strategy?**

We’ve done this in several different ways over the years. When we first started there weren’t many art fairs so

we collaborated with galleries overseas. We did an exhibition in Hong Kong for Gao Xingjian, an artist living in Paris. At the time a friend of my mum’s had a gallery in New York and we held an exhibition there also.

We have done a lot of travelling exhibitions and collaborated with museums and galleries overseas.

Now we are on the art fair circuit because those events are on the rise. We do Art Basel in Hong Kong and Art Taipei. We have done Masterpiece London and are also doing Art021 Shanghai.

We also advertise in a lot of art magazines here and abroad. We use social media because in this day and age it is impossible not to. Our gallery is also featured on a lot of art websites.

**Alisan was one of the first contemporary Chinese art galleries in Hong Kong. How have you evolved to remain relevant and keep up with changes in the art world?**

I feel it’s important for the gallery to stay ahead of the game. As the industry has evolved I’ve always felt we’ve been one step ahead, which is important. When the gallery opened in 1981 there were only two or three galleries that focused on contemporary Chinese art. Now there are over 100 galleries in Hong Kong and all the big international galleries are setting up here.

We started out in Central and then opened a space in Aberdeen before any of the other galleries. We sort of led the push to move galleries there.

In terms of artists, we have been promoting ink art since the ‘90s and it is now at the forefront. Other galleries and artists are trying to catch up and get into this medium.

**What’s been the biggest challenge you’ve faced in your role as director?**

The biggest challenge has been establishing my credibility as an individual to prevent people from saying, ‘Oh you’re Alice King’s daughter. Of course you’re going to be the director.’

Maybe it was all in my mind, but I felt I had to step out of my mother’s shadow and prove myself among collectors and artists. If artists don’t respect

## *“Meeting the artists and understanding what they are doing and why they are doing it is exciting”*

you and they think you're a young girl following in your mum's footsteps then they won't necessarily want to work with you. With collectors you have to gain their trust and get them to believe in your judgment.

### **You're a board member for the Hong Kong Ballet. Where does your love for ballet come from?**

I used to dance when I was young but truth be told I didn't like it that much. I danced at the Jean M Wong School of Ballet and I have two daughters who both dance.

My daughters are already showing more promise than I did at their age, and they are really passionate about it. When your kids are interested in something it makes you want to learn about it too. So because of my daughters and my dance background I joined the board. I'm involved in fundraising and marketing, and we are trying to establish a ballet school.

### **You're also a patron of the arts, a trustee for the Friends of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, a director of Association Culturelle France Hong Kong Ltd and director of The Ink Society. Why did you get involved with these associations?**

It is important to support the arts and be involved in different associations.

My mother used to work with Culturelle France so I've followed her lead. We joined to help support Chinese artists who live in France and we believe it's important to foster cross-cultural relationships.

My mother was one of the founders of The Ink Society and we try to promote it through talks and seminars. Ink art is popular now but in the past people didn't know much about it. We were hoping to open a museum in Hong Kong dedicated to ink art because one of the founders of the movement is from Hong Kong, but unfortunately this has never materialised despite many attempts.

### **Away from the art world, what do you do to unwind?**

I like to do yoga and I meditate on a daily basis. I enjoy travelling, reading, spending time with friends and shopping. I

travel to London a lot to see my daughter who is in boarding school. I also enjoy outdoor activities.

### **You have three children. Are they also showing a love for art?**

They are! It's difficult for them to ignore it because of the environment they grew up in. My daughter, who is in England, is studying art for her GCSEs so she is always drawing and painting.

When she was young a teacher entered one of her drawings into a Hong Kong-wide contest run by the post office. The drawing was selected to be made into a stamp, which was amazing.

My oldest son is really into classical music. He plays the clarinet and piano.

My youngest daughter plays the trumpet but because she is young she hasn't really found her niche. She's in the orchestra and does ballet.

### **What's next for Alisan Fine Arts?**

In the immediate future we have an exhibition from 13 September to the end of October featuring work by Zhang Yirong and her husband, Tai Xiangzhou. The exhibition will showcase black and white ink paintings.

The next exhibition in November will feature the works of Chao Chung-hsiang. We haven't hosted a solo exhibition for him for about five years so it's a good opportunity to showcase his best work.

We now have two locations, and the long-term plan is to differentiate what we are doing in Central from what we are doing in Aberdeen.

I'd also like to work more with emerging artists. Our gallery used to be named Arts Promotion before it became Alisan Fine Arts so we were promoting artists rather than dealing art.

Because our gallery has been around for so long, a lot of the artists we have worked with have passed away. I want to develop a working relationship with emerging artists because I find that much more enjoyable than dealing. Meeting them and understanding what they are doing and why they are doing it is one of the more exciting parts of my job, and it's something I want to continue doing.

**Thank you. ☺**

Text: Andrew Scott Photos: Neville Lee Art Direction & Styling: San Wong Makeup & Hair: Esther Kwan Venue: Alisan Fine Arts



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