

Tatler Time Travel



Down to a Fine Art

By Tara Sobti

Daphne King-Yao's 2001 *Tatler* profile paints a rich picture of not only an art lover committed to bringing her industry into the 21st century, but also a devoted mother with an infectious laugh. Today, despite being one of the leading names in the Asian art world, she is just as open and forthcoming as she looks back over the magazine pages.

"I can't remember any of what happened that day, except for feeling honoured to be interviewed by *Tatler*," says King-Yao who is the director of Alisan Fine Arts. Few

would expect her to be so humble, considering her family tree reads like a who's who of Hong Kong: her mother is the respected gallerist Alice King, her uncle is the former chief executive Tung Chee-hwa and her cousin, Leigh Tung-Chou, is director of the Tung Foundation.

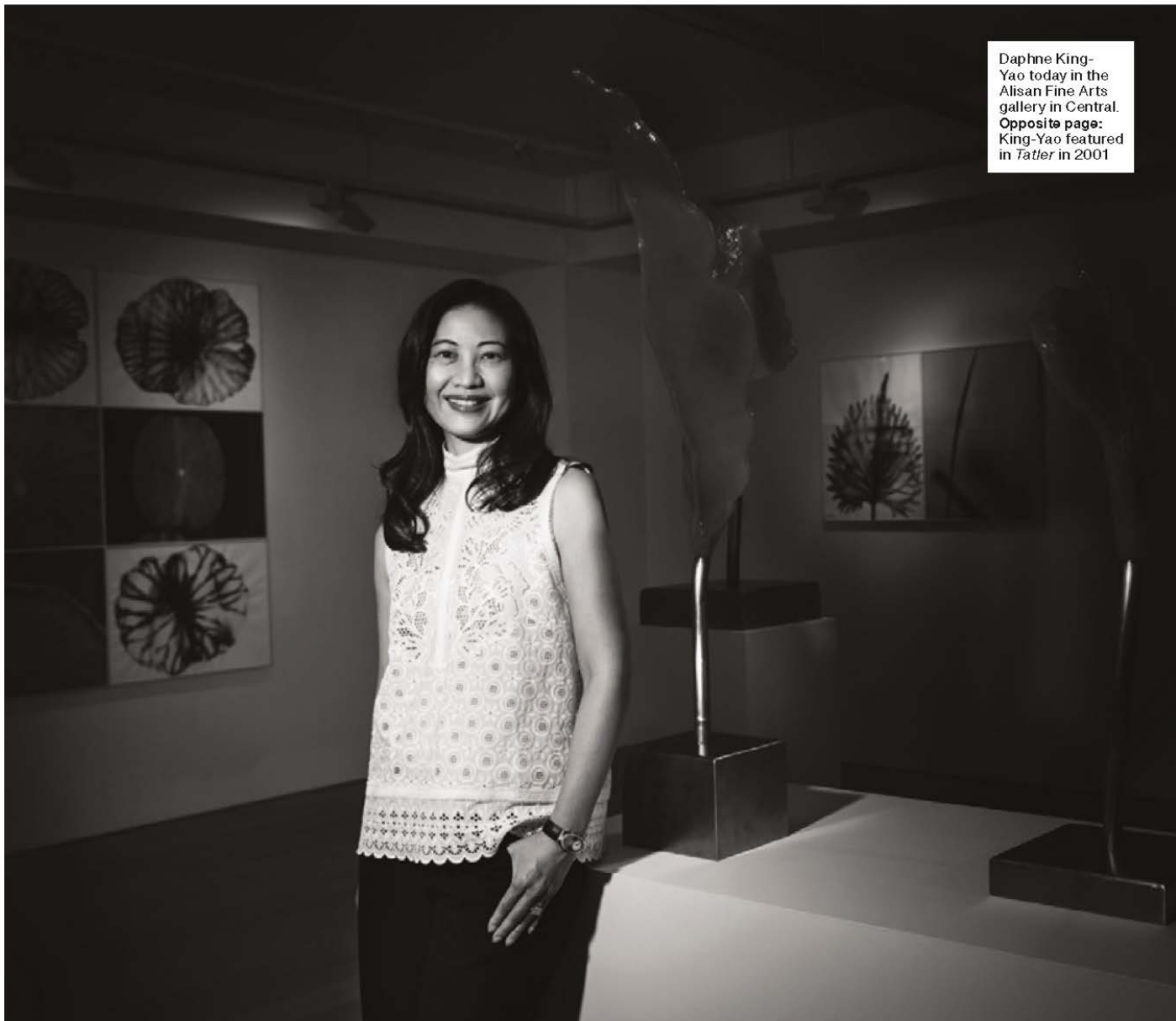
Becoming a bona fide art ace was no accident: King-Yao was surrounded by art from a young age. "As a child in the late Seventies and Eighties, I used to visit museums with my mum and attend auction house previews all the time, back

when Sotheby's Hong Kong operated out of Furama Hotel," she says. After secondary school came an internship at Christie's Chinese art department in New York—an experience that proved formative, as she got to see first hand how the auction process worked. "Nothing was computerised, and I had to record the results by hand on small index cards that were kept in box files," she says.

She left Hong Kong for the US to study at the University of Pennsylvania, but realised in her third year that she wasn't as passionate about her major in European history as she previously thought. To compensate, she began taking as many art history classes as she could. "My biggest regret to this day was that I did not major in art or pursue it further in graduate school," she says. Not that she seems to have been held back: after working in advertising in New York and Hong Kong for five years, she finally decided to join her mother's company, Alisan Fine Arts, in 1997, right before the handover.

Since then, she has watched her world change beyond recognition as digital technology has changed how people view, buy and create art. In 2001, her gallery was toying with the idea of building a website to showcase the 20 artists on its roster. Two decades on and King-Yao now works with more than 100 artists, and a strong digital presence supports her physical galleries in Central and Aberdeen. The hardest-working machine of all, however, is still King-Yao.

"I enjoy working but managing all of this means that I am constantly



Daphne King-Yao today in the Alisan Fine Arts gallery in Central. **Opposite page:** King-Yao featured in *Tatler* in 2001

Photography **Afia Chan**

switched on. There is never a break and [digital operations] require a full-time staff—something that we would not have thought necessary 20 years ago,” she says.

The art industry has grown immeasurably in recent years, though King-Yao yearns for more museums, curators, art magazines and art education in schools in Hong Kong. “I want the younger generation to appreciate Chinese art—both contemporary and classical—and to feel proud of their own culture.” In an increasingly

commercialised business, King-Yao also aspires for buying habits to go back to basics. “I wish collectors would buy for the sake of art and not as an investment,” she adds.

These days, King-Yao is focused on supporting the local art scene, and recently launched a new exhibition showcasing the works of 28 local artists until September 2020. “I want to highlight the diversity and talent of Hong Kong artists using the city’s history as a backdrop. Next year, we’re celebrating our 40th anniversary and we’ll be working

on six exhibits focusing on the major artists that have helped form the cornerstones of Alisan since the early years, including Walasse Ting and Chao Chung-Hsiang.”

With two decades of experience under her belt, King-Yao is a veteran when it comes to navigating social etiquette and few encounters phase her. “Contrary to popular belief, running a gallery is not a glamorous job,” she says. “It has taught me how to work with all types of people—from the eclectic collector to egotistical artists. I’ve seen it all.”