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A Cultural Revelation, Chinese Contemporary Art Hits the Mainstream

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The Financial Factor

In November 2006, a US collector paid more than US\$9 million for a set of 14 paintings by Cai Guoqiang, smashing the record sale for a contemporary Chinese artist. To art experts this came as no surprise; China's breakneck economic transformation is now dramatically manifesting itself in the country's flourishing and increasingly lucrative contemporary art scene.

In some cases popular Chinese artists have seen a tenfold increase in the sale price of their work over the space of just a few years, as with Zhang Xiaogang or Cai Guoqiang. The ten most successful auctions of contemporary Chinese art have been recorded over the past twelve months, and last year more than 30 percent of the Chinese contemporary artworks sold at auction went for more than US\$100,000.

With auction sales of US\$23.6 million in 2006, Zhang Xiaogang, the most famous and sought after contemporary Chinese artist, was second in ArtPrice's ranking of the 100 top-selling artists. He was far from alone on the chart; however, there were 24 Chinese names listed in 2006, up from almost none five years ago.

Thanks to a dynamic market, Hong Kong Sotheby's recorded Chinese contemporary art sales of US\$21.9 million in 2006. It is a similar story at auction houses in London and New York, many of which only recently started offering modern Chinese work. During the first auction of Chinese contemporary art in New York last April, so many bidders called in that Sotheby's had to bring in more telephones.

Underground to Overseas

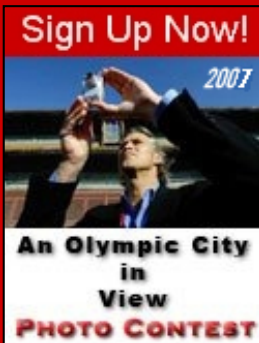
Chinese avant-garde art has to be viewed in the light of the tremendous social and economic upheavals that have taken place in recent decades; a large number of works specifically reflect the tension between the socialist ideals and a wave of consumerism that has swept the country as a result of the reforms.

As China's economy continues to boom, and interest in the country's nascent art scene builds momentum, so a growing number of international profit and not-for-profit organizations are looking for ways to establish a presence in the Chinese art market. Overseas collectors are eyeing China hungrily, and increasing numbers of knowledgeable



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Current Issue



Chinese art lovers are looking to augment their collections with pieces from beyond the mainland.

All the World's a Stage

Helping to facilitate the flow of international and Chinese art was last September's Shanghai Art Fair (SAF), also called "ShContemporary 2007." The SAF was organized by the Geneva gallerist and collector Pierre Huber, together with Lorenzo Rudolf, former director of Art Basel, and Bolognafiore, an Italian fair organizer which already has offices in Shanghai. It involved about 120 international galleries from around the world.

Explaining the rationale behind the SAF, Lorenzo Rudolf explained, "Even if you go to important art fairs nowadays, it's hard to discover genuinely new things, but this is really what every collector wants to do. At SAF we tried to present the entire creativity of this continent, and there are a lot of new things that are not known in the international market. With the rising importance of Asia and the Chinese contemporary art scene that wants to be an important future player in the market, we really have the opportunity to discover and have access to works and to new rising stars. We want to help these artists break into the international market."

Also assisting with organization of ShContemporary 2007 was Zhou Tiehai, one of China's leading contemporary artists. Zhou graduated from the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University, and won the Contemporary Chinese Art Award in 1998. He explained, "Contemporary art and its market in Asia have developed very fast recently. However, Asia still doesn't have a quality international art fair. One unique aspect of the SAF is that we are focusing on works instead of galleries. Pierre Huber has travelled widely in Asia to discover artists; we brought them all to the fair so that the Asian art scene was truly represented."

China's international art scene will receive another boost when the Centre Pompidou in Shanghai opens in 2010. Carried out under the auspices of the legendary Paris art institution, the project will involve renovating a 98-year old villa, and the construction of an entirely new building, which will be finished by 2009. The entire complex, which will eventually cover 10,000 square metres, will feature French and Chinese artwork from the start of the 20th century to date. It will house a "rolling" exhibition of 100 to 150 art works from Paris.

The Beijing Olympics is also inspiring China's contemporary art scene. On display in Guangzhou's Art Academy Museum is the Gong Zhen—Sport in Art Exhibition, organized by Olympic sponsor adidas. On display are the works of 71 Chinese and overseas contemporary artists, all created around the theme of humanity and sports. The exhibition will be shown in Beijing during the Olympics. Afterward, all the art works will be auctioned off in Hong Kong, with adidas donating a portion of the proceeds to a Chinese children's charity.

Quality not Quantity

Wang Nanfei, a Beijing-based artist of growing repute, attended the five-yearly Kassel Documenta in Germany for the first time last year. Started in 1955, the Documenta is one of the world's most important contemporary art exhibitions, showcasing the most important artists from around the globe.

Nanfei comments, "Over the past five years, the Beijing art market has changed greatly; a growing number of artists are succeeding at home and overseas. Some of them are my friends; some of them are even younger than me. Despite the financial incentives, however, as a Chinese artist living in modern Beijing I believe I still have the responsibility to create high quality, individual, expressive art. I think all Chinese artists should do this."

Yan Lei, like Zhou Tiehai, is another Chinese contemporary artist who cut his teeth during Chinese art's underground period. Together with Ai Weiwei, the grandfather of Chinese art and all things creative, Yan Lei travelled to the Documenta this June to show some of his paintings. Ai was ranked 71st in ArtReview magazine's annual list of the 100 most

powerful people in the contemporary art world in 2006.

Although he sees the internationalization of Chinese art as a good thing, Yan comments, "The showing of Chinese art abroad has been increasingly affected by the art market. Young Chinese artists need to be careful to preserve their identity and not to be influenced too much by this market. These artists now have many opportunities to exhibit, but it seems that the quality and originality of their works is sometimes not really taken into account."

Yan's warning hints at some of the problems that the unprecedented growth in popularity of Chinese art has caused; inflated price tags have led to factory-style mass production, hyper-commercialization and rampant counterfeiting. Indeed, the use of the Coca-Cola slogan for the Liverpool Tate's current exhibition refers to the status of art in modern China as just another product in a booming economy, subject to the same laws of supply and demand, and at times cynically marketed in the same fashion as a soft drink.

Charles Saatchi, the renowned art collector and gallery owner, recently commented, "I have been looking at lots of contemporary Chinese art in the past few years and find that a small percentage of it is world class—as good as the best contemporary art anywhere else. However, there is a huge gulf between the small amount that is world class and the majority, which is derivative and kitsch." This hasn't stopped Saatchi from recently swapping German paintings for Chinese pictures to hang in his Chelsea museum.

Helping Home-Grown Talent

The de facto legalization of foreign investment in China's art business has led to the blooming of an active commercial gallery scene, with an obvious focus on Beijing and Shanghai, with their estimated 200 galleries, but there's increasing action in other large cities such as Chengdu, Chongqing and Shenyang. This has given Chinese artists more options for displaying their work, and has also changed the dynamics for overseas galleries looking to get involved.

Co-owned by Belgian businessman Frank Uytterhagen and Ai Weiwei, China Art Archives & Warehouse (CAAW) was founded in 1993, focusing on cutting edge artists, with a spectacular hangar-like space in the Beijing suburbs. In 2003 the CAAW formed a partnership with the Lucerne-based Galerie Urs Meile, and is now dedicated to promoting high quality Chinese contemporary art under Ai Weiwei's expert artistic direction.

A growing number of Chinese galleries are thriving without direct foreign involvement.

The Artists' Village Gallery, one of the largest galleries in Beijing at more than 4,000 square metres, is located in Songzhuang in the capital's eastern suburbs. There are more than 500 contemporary Chinese artists living in villages around Songzhuang, each hoping to break onto the national and international stage. Sally Liu, who owns the gallery with her husband, says, "Of course we are trying to make money, but at the same time we want to give back to the community by helping Chinese artists promote their work, especially the ones living around us."

Wei Ding, executive director of the Songzhuang Art Center, comments, "The aim of the Artists' Village, and more specifically this Center, is to provide a platform for communication between Chinese and international artists. To sustain and promote China's flourishing contemporary art scene we need to foster more exchange between East and West."

The Digital Dimension

Only a couple of years ago, many Chinese people would simply stereotype an artist as a painter, a sculptor, a calligrapher, or a print-maker who creates attractive images with conventional media. Today, as a result of their country's rapid technological progress, many Chinese artists are turning to DV cameras, creative software and the internet in their artistic experiments.

New media art works by Chinese artists, ranging from video art, digital art and animation to flash art and sound art, have emerged in contemporary art exhibitions both at home

and abroad.

Stephen Danzig is founding director of iDAP, a wide-ranging digital media exhibition incorporating digital video, installation and interactive works, and photo media from Chinese and Australian artists. In autumn 2007 iDAP ran concurrent shows at the Beijing Film Academy and the Songzhuang Art Center. Last year 22 Chinese new media artists participated in iDAP's China exhibition, including QingQing, Cui Xuiwen, Song Dong, Aniu, Bu Hua and Wang Jinsong.

Danzig comments, "We are currently witnessing an amazing re-identification in so many elements that make up China's social fabric: none more so than what's happening in the arts currently. You only need to see what's happening in Beijing to realize the pace of change. The 798 Art District in Dashanzi has remained the primary focus, but now we're seeing several other new districts being built, supported by international galleries that are taking up residence. From the western perspective many major Chinese exhibitions are now opening around the world, such as the one in the new Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane."

Work on the Web

Technology is also affecting the way Chinese contemporary art is presented and promoted. The Saatchi Gallery announced last May that it is launching a new, non-profit Web site in Chinese to allow artists in China the opportunity to present their work to a global audience. "Your Gallery in Mandarin" will be part of the overall Saatchi Gallery site, which is the largest interactive art gallery site in the world with more than four million hits a day. In addition to free postings and translations, the Chinese site will host an interactive blog, forum and chat room.

The decision to create the Your Gallery in Mandarin Web site was made after it became apparent that Chinese students were already putting their profiles on the general Saatchi Gallery site, despite the fact that they spoke little or no English. "We began noticing that Chinese artists were posting their work and seemed really keen to show their art and communicate with other students and artists. The language barrier was obviously a problem though," says Kieran McCann, Head of Creative Development for the site.

"Our goal is to break down language and cultural barriers," says Neeraj Rattu, who is leading the site's technology team. Having compiled a considerable amount of data, the team estimates that 20 to 30 art schools operate in China; that about 10,000 students will graduate from such schools in 2007; and that some 14,000 artists in China are represented by galleries. "That leaves roughly 10,000 unrepresented artists," says McCann.

Stephanie Tung, a Chinese-American Harvard University graduate newly arrived in Beijing, was one of the first to post work to Your Gallery in Mandarin. She comments, "From what I've seen so far, I think the current art scene in China is just incomparable to that of other cities. The conditions in Beijing are ripe for artists, but the support infrastructure of galleries and museums is still developing. The next five years will play a crucial role in development and sustainability, as the first generation of artists and art critics who have grown up with the a notion of an "art scene" in China come of age."

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