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Jun 14, 2007

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China's contemporary art goes global

By Daniel Allen

BEIJING - China's current artistic renaissance has been likened to the emergence of Western Modernism more than 100 years ago. While this may be a questionable comparison, there is no doubt that something dynamic and vibrant is happening in the world of Chinese art.

The constraints set out for post-Cultural Revolution social realism have gradually fallen away, allowing increasing numbers of Chinese artists to produce work that is pushing the boundaries of

content and format like never before.

Only a decade ago there were no contemporary art spaces of note in China. Foreigners could not legally run galleries or, technically speaking, trade in art. Unofficial exhibitions were organized secretly, with no publicity, and usually lasted a few hours until being forcibly closed. Today, Chinese venues for contemporary art are multiplying exponentially, both in the real world and, increasingly, online.

Official attitudes toward art have relaxed dramatically, with the government often lending moral and financial support to exhibitions. This new laissez-faire environment has been a major driver in the internationalization of Chinese contemporary art. In

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the last few years, Chinese artists have begun to exhibit regularly in overseas shows, leaving behind the underground scene that significantly impeded their creative development, and establishing China as the new darling of the global art community.

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

Helping to facilitate the flow of international and Chinese art will be the new Shanghai Art Fair (SAF), also called "ShContemporary 2007". The SAF is being 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 will involve about 120 international galleries from around the world.

Assisting with organization of ShContemporary 2007 is Zhou Tie Hai, 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 explains, "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 traveled

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widely in Asia to discover artists - we will bring them all to the fair so that the Asian art scene is truly represented."

Zhou Tie Hai is no stranger to the international art scene. His work has featured in a range of overseas exhibitions, and one of his pieces will be appearing at the famous Basel Art Fair in June. Commenting on the increasing domestic and foreign exposure that China's artists are now receiving, Zhou says, "We are seeing growing numbers of galleries and private museums in China.

"As Chinese contemporary art has emerged from its underground status, good platforms for presentation are slowly being established, and some artists are showcasing their work abroad. However, what we still lack is publicity and funding. I mean the funding for those platforms to organize more shows and exhibitions to present Chinese art."

China's international art scene will receive a further boost when the new Shanghai Pompidou Center opens later this year. 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 whole complex, which will eventually cover 10,000 square meters, will feature French and Chinese artwork from the start of the 20th century to date.

As well as attracting international investment, China is also leveraging its burgeoning artistic reputation overseas, with a recent proliferation of contemporary Chinese art exhibitions. In addition to the Basel Art Fair, Zhou Tie Hai's pictures are also currently featuring in a Chinese exhibition at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, entitled "The Real Thing". The majority of pieces at



Ministre, by Zhou Tie Hai

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The Real Thing are either being shown for the first time outside of China, or were specially commissioned for the exhibition.

Yan Lei, like Zhou Tie Hai, 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 will be traveling to the five-yearly Kassel Documenta in Germany this June to show some of his paintings. Started in 1955, the Kassel Documenta is one of the world's most important contemporary art exhibitions. Ai Weiwei himself was ranked 71st in ArtReview magazine's annual list of the 100 most powerful people in the contemporary art world last year.

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."

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. There are now an estimated 200 contemporary art galleries in these two cities. 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, and focuses 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.

Another joint venture in China's flourishing contemporary art world is the Chinese Contemporary Gallery. Established in London ten years ago, the Chinese Contemporary collective currently has a gallery in Beijing's well-known Factory 798 art district, and also opened a new space in January this year in New York's Chelsea district. Both galleries are dedicated to displaying the work of Chinese artists from the avant garde post-1989 period, and have participated in leading art fairs such as FIAC, Art Cologne, Scope London and Miami.

As in other countries, developments in technology are affecting Chinese contemporary art in a big way. London's renowned Saatchi Gallery announced in May that it is launching a new, non-profit website 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. In addition to free postings and translations, the Chinese site will host an interactive blog, forum and chatroom.

The decision to create the Your Gallery in Mandarin website 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.

Charles Saatchi, owner of the Saatchi Gallery, is well known for spotting talent and transforming his discoveries into celebrities, as he did with the likes of Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread. These days he is fixated with Chinese artists. "There are so many artists in China who want their work to be seen," he said in a recent interview at his London home. "These students, like all the others, also want to know what's going on around the world."

Your Gallery in Mandarin is designed to be as user-friendly as possible, so that posting work will be "as easy as opening an e-mail account". So far 23 Chinese students have posted work on the site. Kang Can, a serious-looking young man in sunglasses, writes that he was born in 1982 in Chongqing, graduated from the Sichuan Fine Art Institute, and that he has already shown his work at Art Basel Miami. Among the 15 images he has posted are a series of paintings in which a sleeping infant is variously

depicted in a chewing-gum wrapper, on top of a gun, on the rim of a Kentucky Fried Chicken plastic cup and in other poses.

Another newly created website targeting Chinese artists and their work is the Shanghai-based Neocha.com,

started by two Chinese and two Americans. Jon Lombardo, one of the site's co-founders, comments, "Neocha was born out of the need to connect the growing communities of Chinese "creatives" - artists, musicians, designers, etc - who lack a centralized online platform. Neocha is trying to solve this need by offering an online community, complete with tools that empower creatives to meet, create and hopefully make money."

Lombardo continues: "The Chinese art scene is growing rapidly, but it is still relatively small. I think that now is a great time to be a well-known Chinese artist given the unprecedented global interest in Chinese art, but it is not as easy for young, undiscovered artists to book venues and sell works. They clearly stand to benefit the most from using the Web to promote their work. Artists have been slower to migrate online than musicians because they tend to think that their work loses some of its appeal over the Web. That said, I think that we will increasingly see younger artists emerge by leveraging the Web as a virtual gallery."

***Daniel Allen** is a freelance writer and photographer from London who has lived in China for the past three years.*

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***Drunk Baby**, by Kang Can*

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