

# WHITE RABBIT GALLERY

by KATRINA STRICKLAND



When asked by *The Australian Financial Review* back in 2007 why she wanted to open her own art gallery devoted to contemporary Chinese art, Judith Neilson said she'd simply "never been able to have something beautiful and hold it on my own". It's a sentiment expressed by many women who pour their time and energy into supporting their husbands and raising a family – in Judith's case, daughters Paris, 25, and Beau, 22.

Called White Rabbit – because it sounded friendly – her \$10 million art gallery opened in the inner Sydney suburb of Chippendale in early

August. The gallery is home to the family's contemporary Chinese art collection, about 450 works created by more than 135 artists in or after the year 2000.

It's a lot more than that, however, incorporating as it does a tea house, a theatrette in which talks, performances and video art can be staged, a library and shop, and four floors or 2,000 square metres of art designed to stimulate thinking not just about contemporary China, but the wider world.

Many of the issues that today's Chinese artists deal with – love, loss, environmental degradation, the mass media, infertility, consumerism, outsiders, the futile pursuit of happiness – are issues for artists the world over. And yet, says Judith, the Chinese do it in such a fresh, original way. "It's different," she says. "In our collection, there are no two artists who are similar and there's not one piece I think is mediocre. That's quite something over more than 120 artists."

The gallery has Judith's vision stamped all over it, but White Rabbit is very much a family affair. It is being bankrolled via the Neilsons' \$30 million foundation, of which it is one of the charitable gift recipients. Daughter Paris is the gallery's collection manager. The vast bulk of that collection has been bought in China rather than from Australian galleries representing Chinese artists, and Paris has been on many of those trips with her mother. "Dad's very interested too," says Paris. "We're a very close family, so we're all involved."

Also part of the extended family now is the stellar Beijing-based artist Wang Zhiyuan, who has collaborated with Neilson on all purchases and who, along with a number of other artists, flew to Australia for the gallery's official opening. "I wouldn't have done it, and couldn't have done it, without him," says Judith. The gallery will be open free to the public from Thursdays to Sundays, with other days added if and when demand dictates. Neilson's fervent hope is that people from all walks of life visit, particularly those who usually feel intimidated by art galleries.