

# Dreams of modern China

A new private museum hosts an impressive collection of contemporary Chinese art, writes Ashleigh Wilson

**O**N the third level of Sydney's new, privately funded museum, 12 photographs hang on the wall, depicting with a graphic but reflective tone the mental cycle of the artist, Chen Lingyang. Nearby, an installation called *Mini Home* shows a cramped urban slum that one Chinese visitor says could be described as relatively opulent in some parts of his country.

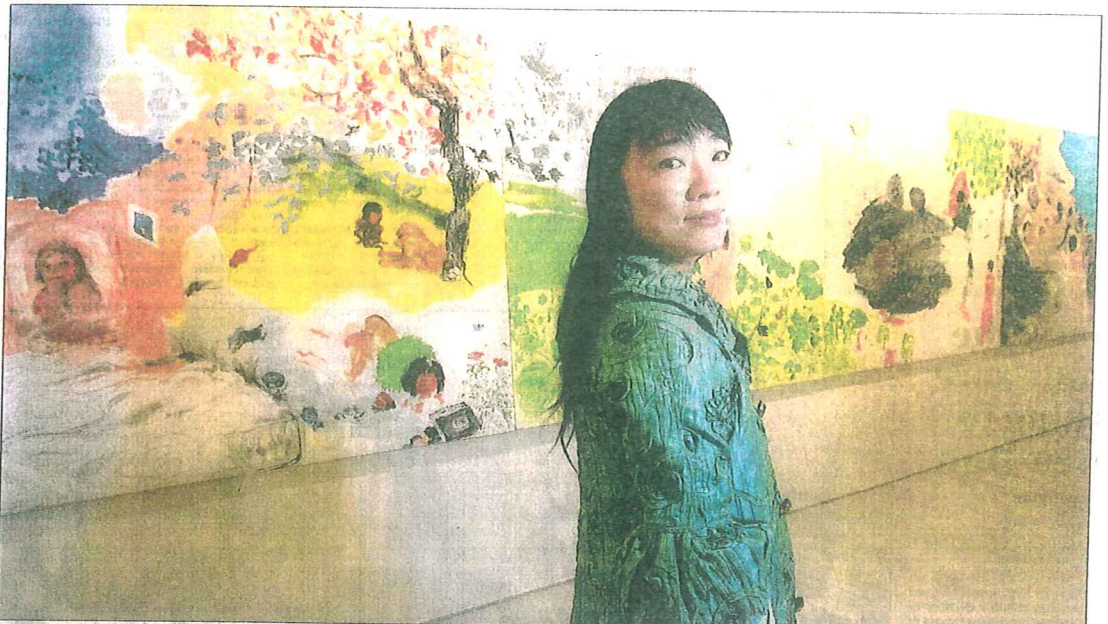
Down a level, a series of drawings shows headless human bodies hanging from meat hooks alongside animal carcasses, while a multimedia work reflects on propaganda in a projected image of the artist talking to the media. And on the ground floor, beside the entrance of this elegant new space in Sydney's inner west devoted to contemporary Chinese art, is a 35m pair of fibreglass pink underpants with the words: "Diamonds matter most."

The artist responsible for the underpants, Wang Zhiyuan, has a close relationship with the other works displayed in the gallery as well. During the past few years the 52-year-old has helped Sydney's wealthy Neilson family tap into some of the more intriguing and challenging modern art to be found in China, and he finds the resulting collection inspiring. "I think it's fantastic," he says, stepping outside for a quick smoke. "Like a dream."

With more than 400 works by 160 artists, the White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection is one of the nation's largest, most ambitious and eagerly anticipated privately funded art museums. The collection is dedicated to contemporary Chinese art and only works produced since 2000. It is displayed across 2000sq m of space, reportedly developed at a cost of about \$10 million, on four levels. The publicly material describes it, with some justification, as one of the most significant collections of contemporary Chinese art anywhere in the world.

Edmund Capon, director of the Art Gallery of NSW and a specialist in the art of China, says the collection is a significant addition to the cultural infrastructure of Sydney. He says the works capture some of the essence of contemporary China, where tensions remain between maintaining social order alongside a "degree of liberty" for citizens.

"Everything here, however dramatic, different, energetic or global it might be, has some subtle nuance, some subtle stamp, that says 'Made in China,'" Capon says. "There is this subtle battle between freedom and authority. It's absolutely an indelible part of contem-



International Journey: Artist Bingyi with her piece, *Six Accounts of a Floating Life*, at the launch of the White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection in Sydney yesterday. Picture: James Croucher

rary Chinese life and I think it's manifested in the works here."

The collection was founded by Judith Neilson, who has made repeated trips to China to source work with Zhiyuan's help. Neilson is the wife of Kerr Neilson, founder of Platinum Asset Management, whose fortune was valued in this year's BRW Executive Rich List at \$1.6 billion, three places behind another businessman turned art investor, Kerry Stokes.

But while Stokes takes an active interest in his collection, Kerr Neilson seems to prefer a more hands-off approach. Developing, maintaining and building the collection falls to Judith Neilson and daughter Paris, who manages it.

At a preview of the gallery yesterday, Judith Neilson was reluctant to talk about the work, nominating her daughter instead. But she did say, when pressed, that she wanted the museum to be accessible to all and that she

hoped to show a different side to contemporary Chinese art to the public.

"I was wanting to show Australian and international viewers how different the art was to what they had expected," she says.

Zhiyuan, who moved from China to Sydney after the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989 before returning to Beijing eight years ago, says contemporary Chinese artists are embracing outside influences like never before. He says the White Rabbit collection has the potential to expand Western knowledge of the Chinese scene. "Judith said she wanted to make a connection with Australia and she wants to take the collection to the world."

Paris Neilson appears flustered as people come and go, dealing with last-minute preparations before the collection opens to the public next Thursday. She says the works tell the "evolving story of China", but insists they should not be seen as definitive. (The name, her mother says later, was "just a little flash that happened.") "It's things that we really respond to, that make an impact" she says of the selection process. "Some of the works are really bold and in your face, but other pieces are incredibly delicate and fragile. We have such an eclectic mix of work, it's really just about what we respond to."

White Rabbit is one of only a handful of large privately funded, non-commercial museums in the country, an exclusive set that will include, from next year, David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania. By their nature, private museums operate differently from state-funded institutions, often reflecting their owner's tastes.

Paris Neilson is at pains, though, to point out that her family's collection is far from being a fanciful exercise. "It's not like we're doing this on a whim at all. This is a serious gallery and the quality of work here is fantastic and a very high standard, but we're different from a public gallery," she says. "But I think

## North Koreans join triennial line-up

Ashleigh Wilson

ARTISTS from North Korea, Iran and Burma will feature in the Queensland Art Gallery's sixth instalment of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art.

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh has announced that the event, to open on December 5 and run until April next year, will feature new work by 100 artists and filmmakers from more than 25 countries in the region.

One of the headline presentations will be the Mansudae Art Studio project, produced by British-Chinese filmmaker Nicholas Bonner and featuring contemporary artists from North Korea.

Work also will be shown by artists from Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Solomon

Islands and Papua New Guinea, while Taiwanese director Ang Lee and Japanese director Takeshi Kitano will take part in the film component of the triennial.

Local artists include Tracey Moffatt, Raafat Ishak and Melbourne art collective DAMP.

It is the first triennial for QAG director Tony Ellwood, who succeeded Doug Hall in 2007. Ellwood says it is important for the event to explore new ideas from across the region, including work produced under repressive regimes that has remained relatively unknown to outsiders.

"This wasn't just about doing North Korea because it's a novelty and hasn't been seen before, it was legitimately wanting to add more to our understanding of Asia," he says.

we just add to the scene. We're just another cultural space that the public have access to. We're not trying to fill in gaps, we're not trying to be exhaustive. We can sort of do our own thing in a way."

She has accompanied her mother and Zhiyuan on several trips to China and says the country's art has shifted in recent years from the overtly political to the personal.

"When [Chinese art] started to take off in the 80s and 90s, it was a lot more about Mao and the Cultural Revolution and politics, and now the issues are really universal. Whether it's love or hate, or consumerism, or degradation of the environment, there are a lot more of the issues that apply to everyone."

Asked to point out a favourite, Paris Neilson suggests one artist in particular, Bingyi, whose painting *Six Accounts of a Floating Life* hangs

in the collection. Bingyi, 34, divides her time between Beijing and Buffalo, New York, and White Rabbit has brought her to Australia for the first time. She says her painting — a colourful narrative of love, tragedy and imagination, based on an 18th-century memoir and told over five panels — has experienced a similar journey, being completed in the US, transported to China, then taken by the Neilsons to Sydney. Wandering through the exhibition space, Bingyi says the collection has given her a new perspective on Chinese art. "I never thought I would see anything like this," she says. "It's completely refreshing here."

White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, 30 Balfour St, Chippendale, Sydney, will be open from Thursdays to Sundays. Entry is free.