

Sun Furong, *Nibbling-up series – tomb figures*, 2008, cloth, mixed-media, 500 x 800 x 180 cm overall, courtesy the artist and White Rabbit Collection, Sydney. Photograph David Roche. © The artist.

White Rabbit: Contemporary Chinese Art Collection

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Three years in the making, White Rabbit is the latest addition to the Sydney art scene – a private museum showcasing contemporary Chinese artworks produced after 2000. Realised by husband and wife Kerr and Judith Neilson, and managed by their daughter Paris, the space is a converted knitting factory gloriously restored. While private philanthropy buoys much of the European and American art markets, it is a relatively new but rising phenomenon on our shores. By their very nature, private collections reflect the particular tastes and biases of their owners, and White Rabbit is no different; Neilson herself has commented that the expensive endeavour is essentially about sharing her love of the genre with the general public. However with 2000 square metres, four floors and over 160 Chinese artists working both in and outside China, its claims of inclusiveness and eclecticism are not mere lip service.

Works bright, loud and brash greet visitors as they enter. There are grand centrepieces: Chen Wenling's *Valiant struggle no.11*, 2006, a shiny red car with a long protruding tongue and hanging golden pig stretches almost the height of the entire building; Wang Zhiyuan's giant pink underwear scrawled with the neon-lit text 'diamonds matter most' and underscored by its own soundtrack would certainly challenge Mao Zedong's famous rejection of art for art's sake. Yes, there are artists in this collection that adopt, appropriate, mock and challenge the gaudy style synonymous with art coming out of China of late. The animation of Bu Hua is populated by characteristic personified animals and small children as brave protagonists. He Jia's canvases mimic the cutesy and kitsch style that has come to be recognised as distinctly 'Asian', even though much is borrowed from the flat surfaces and bright colours of American advertising material.

The vibrancy and humour of these works vie for attention, but it is their juxtaposition with quieter, more subtle pieces that makes White Rabbit especially worth visiting. Chen Lingyang's *Twelve flower months*, 1999–2000, are traditional-looking and mesmerising still-life photographs arranged around her menstrual cycle. Their aesthetic beauty is coupled with issues of female subjugation and the artist's longing for a feminist voice, considered an indulgent realm of the western world. Jin Shi's *Mini home*, 2005, reveals the squalid conditions suffered by the large numbers of rural peasants who



migrate to China's cities in search of prosperity. From the rusty stove top to the sodden bedding, every object in this mixed-media installation is scaled down to one third of its actual size, emphasising the cramped living quarters and awful quality of life endured in the name of progress.

Perhaps there is an unspoken expectation that the work of Chinese artists, no matter their age or personal history, should be politicised in some way, and there are indeed works that reference the country's complex and oppressive history. China's controversial one-child policy instituted in 1979 is alluded to in Shi Jinsong's black and dangerously spiky sculpture *Baby stroller – sickle edition*, 2007–08. On the top level, Sun Furong's installation *Nibbling up series – tomb figures*, 2008, is one of the most touching pieces in the collection. It consists of rows of dull-coloured *zhongshan* or Mao suits, very recognisable attire that became mandatory for the proletariat class after the Communist Revolution. These hang off an army of headless steel frames, full of loose threads and tears as if ravaged by a flock of hungry birds. A trained seamstress, the shredded effect is actually the result of Furong's own hand, an expression of anger and rebellion against the time and ideology these anonymous figures conjure.

With curatorial consultation from artist Wang Zhiyuan, Neilson's collection importantly provides a dedicated space for younger and lesser-known artists rather than just the expected superstars who gain high auction prices and are already championed by influential collectors like Charles Saatchi. In the past two post-Tiananmen decades, China's path has been greatly influenced by reformist policy and the country's inclusion in the World Trade Organisation. A trend towards modernisation also entailed extolling personal rights and freedoms – notions that Chinese artists are now exploring with glee. Their idiosyncratic hopes and dreams are finally fair game. The symbolism of the rabbit is an ancient one, celebrating rebirth and renewal. Whether China holds the promise of the new New York or London remains to be seen, but a new China is already here.