



White Rabbit

Contemporary Chinese Art Collection



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MUSEUM

白兔中国当代艺术收藏 The White Rabbit Collection

John McDonald

Within a life span of less than two years the White Rabbit Gallery has become one of the most dynamic and popular art venues in Sydney. More importantly, the works that may be seen at White Rabbit represent one of the leading private collections of contemporary Chinese art in the world today. With the progressive dispersal of Guy Ullens's holdings and the 2008 sale of the Estella collection, White Rabbit is perhaps second only in importance to the works accumulated by Swiss collector, Uli Sigg.

The crucial difference is that Uli Sigg, a former Swiss diplomat, began collecting in the 1980s, when artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun and Yue Mingjun were struggling, unknown artists. White Rabbit founder, Judith Neilson, began collecting seriously in the period following the year 2000, and made a rule that she would buy only works made in the twenty-first century. She has stuck to that rule with great determination, although not so doggedly as to miss out on the occasional important piece made prior to the turn of the century.

By policy or good fortune, the year 2000 rule has meant that White Rabbit has tapped into an extraordinary third phase of contemporary Chinese art, acquiring a collection unparalleled in its breadth and depth.

We understand the first phase of contemporary Chinese art as coinciding with the period of the '85 New Wave, when the official insistence on Socialist Realism was relaxed and artists found themselves able to borrow freely from the innovations of the West. This was the era in which Chinese artists restaged the entire history of Modernism in a decade, going from Cubism and Fauvism to the most extreme forms of performance art. This was also the time in which European collectors such as Guy Ullens and Uli Sigg made their most significant purchases.

The second phase runs roughly from the early nineties to the turn of the century. After the upheavals of Tiananmen Square in July 1989, artists began to re-establish contact with western collectors and curators. They tended to give their admirers exactly what was expected: visions of an exotic China that owed more to Andy Warhol's portraits of Mao Zedong than to any local concerns. Many artists of the 90s produced endless variations on Mao's face, and constant references to the Cultural Revolution, tailored to a foreign audience with only the most rudimentary understanding of Chinese history.

The third phase, which might be said to begin with the liberalisations brought about by China's hard-won entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, is marked by its emphasis on individuality. A new generation of artists had grown up in the 1980s and 90s with no memories of Mao or the Cultural Revolution. They had never known a China without advertising or a lively consumer culture. They were free of prejudices, and ambitious to take on the world. They were stimulated by the atmosphere of a society in transition, where social and economic progress were visible on an almost daily basis. Joining these younger artists were the diasporists who had left the country in the wake of Tiananmen Square. Many of these prodigals had spent a decade in exile, learning valuable lessons about the way art was made and sold in Europe, America and Australia.

For two thousand years individuality had been an almost unknown concept in China, but in the new millennium it quickly became an ideal, and then the norm. The new Chinese artists display a quality of introspection that was quite unknown in the past. They respond rapidly to the ongoing changes in society, with various degrees of celebration or criticism. They are rediscovering a cultural heritage, of Buddhism, Taoism and other beliefs that were previously almost as taboo as capitalism.

The artists of the new generation are acutely aware they are living in a state that is one of the great political paradoxes of all time: a Communist country with a thriving stock market. For most of the blood-soaked twentieth century - the era of ideologies, of wars and revolutions - it was unthinkable that China could ever emerge in this guise. In the twenty-first century it is almost taken for granted. Rising levels of personal prosperity have convinced the Chinese that it is better to enjoy the economic benefits of this new society and not ask too many questions about a political system that remains essentially totalitarian.

For many Chinese, an artist such as Ai Weiwei - recently imprisoned for his strident criticisms of the government, is viewed as a troublemaker rather than a hero. After a long period of repression, poverty and insecurity, the majority of the population has no wish to embrace more ideological mayhem, even if the issue at stake is one of fundamental human rights.

If the new China is characterized by expediency rather than ideology, it does not mean that the contradictions and tensions of this society go unnoticed. It is obvious to everyone that 'Communism' has become a threadbare ideal to which politicians pay a specious lip service. Power is the real goal, with all the secondary benefits of wealth and privilege it brings. All the old rhetoric may be summoned up at a moment's notice, but it sounds increasingly hollow. What remains intact is the Party's willingness to take violent, dramatic action to preserve its hold on power at the first suggestion of any subversive action, whether it comes from a nascent pro-democracy movement or from a religious cult such as Falun Gong.

Artists have become accustomed to playing with the limits of political and cultural acceptability. Although no one has been so directly critical as Ai Weiwei, there has been an endless stream of veiled, oblique, satirical comments on contemporary Chinese society: on rampant consumerism, the rights of minorities, endemic corruption, the exploitation of poor labourers, the destruction of national heritage and the incipient violence that lurks beneath the image of a caring, paternalistic government. The need to avoid overtly confrontational statements has led to amazing feats of ingenuity and originality. Even when we may not grasp the full significance of such works, we can appreciate the humour, the quality of invention, and the ferocious energy that is found everywhere in the White Rabbit collection.

This may be manifested in exceptional craftsmanship, as in Shi Jindian's motorbike and sidecar crocheted from blue wire; sometimes it takes a more spiritual form, as in Cang Xin's animistic sculptures that refer to the Shamanistic beliefs of Mongolia. In the animations of Bu Hua, one finds an apocalyptic vision that makes most of today's video art seem utterly superficial. It is just as difficult to overlook the wit of Wang Zhiyuan or Zhou Xiaohu, or the sheer power of Sun Furong's collection of empty, tattered garments - a ghostly counterpart of the entombed warriors for a generation martyred by political madness.

In this brief overview of a collection now exceeding four hundred pieces, one catches a tantalising glimpse of the ever-expanding parameters of contemporary Chinese art. Like China's bubble economy that keeps growing in defiance of all prophets of doom, the national art boom shows no sign of slowing down. The new Chinese art, despite its reliance on local characteristics, is work of international significance. In White Rabbit, we may savour the unique experience of an Australian gallery that has been able to acquire masterworks from the very front of the queue.

BAI Yilou 白宜洛

born 1968, Luoyang, Henan Province
lives and works in Beijing
Recycling, 2008
mixed media, 320 x 250 x 200 cm

BU Hua 卜桦

born 1973, Beijing
Playing a Happy Game No. 1, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm
Beauty No. 3, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm
Beijing Babe Loves Freedom No. 1, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm
The Bhodi Is Not Proven Till There Is Universal Salvation No. 4, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm
Man-Made Fairyland No. 7, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm
Playing a Happy Game No. 11, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm
Vowing Not to Attain Buddhahood Until All Are Salvaged from Hell No 3, 2008
giclée print, 100 x 100 cm

CANG Xin 苍鑫

born 1967, Suihua, Heilongjiang Province
lives and works in Beijing
Exotic Flowers and Rare Herbs Series, 2007
7 wood sculptures, 166 to 230 cm high

CHEN Zhuo + HUANG Keyi 陈卓 + 黄可一

Chen Zhuo born 1978, Huang Keyi born 1980,
both Changsha, Hunan Province
both live and work in Beijing
China Carnival No.1: Tiananmen, 2007
c-print, 120 x 180 cm
China Carnival No.2: Wedding, 2007
c-print, 120 x 180 cm

DONG Yuan 董媛

born 1984, Huatong, Liaoning Province
Home of Paintings, 2008
59 acrylic on canvas, wood, 200 x 400 x 200 cm installed
Sketch of Family Belongings, 2008
186 acrylic on canvas, wood, 360 x 360 x 260 cm installed

SHEN Liang 申亮

born 1976, Yingkou City, Liaoning Province
This Is a Book, 2007
12 oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm each

SHI Jindian 师进滇

born 1953, Yuxi City, Yunnan Province
Blue CJ750, 2008
coloured stainless steel wire, 260 x 170 x 102 cm

SUN Furong 孙芙蓉

born 1961, Handan, Hebei Province
lives and works in Beijing
Nibbling-Up Series: Tomb Figures, 2008
cloth, mixed media, 180 x 550 x 250 cm installed

WANG Zhiyuan 王智远

born 1961, Tianjin, Tianjin Province
lives and works in Beijing
Object of Desire, 2008
fibreglass, lights, sound, 363 x 355 x 70 cm

WU Junyong 吴俊勇

born 1978, Putian, Fujian Province
Opera 2, 2007
animation, 3:28 minutes

YAN Baishen 闫柏岫

born 1977, Lanzhou City, Gansu Province
Ketchup, 2009
digital animation, 4:30 minutes

ZHOU Xiaohu 周啸虎

born 1960, Changzhou, Jiangsu Province
Renown, 2007
fibreglass, silicone, clothing, professional video camera, microphone,
tripod, DVD, 170 x 300 x 175 cm, DVD 4:30 minutes



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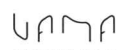
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