

New York to Beijing – Worlds apart

New York used to be the art capital of the world. On one trip in the 1980s I stayed three months and found that the city could barely contain its enthusiasm for any kind of innovation. The streets were edgy and a little dangerous and people lived off the pavement, buskers, bag ladies, drug peddlers – and there was art everywhere: street art, performance art, avant-garde theatre and music.

A few months ago I went there again expecting to revisit that dynamic environment. The high end art market seemed as flash as ever. Chelsea now boasts a dozen or more major galleries on each of its main streets. In an hour you can see new shows by Sean Scully – paintings four metres high (and two tiny sketches in felt-tipped pen for US\$60,000 each) – new video works by Bill Viola, a massive sculpture by Richard Serra and so on.

But where was the new stuff? The *new* new stuff; the stuff that points forward rather than back? Even in the new arts precinct of the Lower East Side I could not find the raw energy of the eighties and although this time I was only there three weeks, it seemed that New York had gone soft, safe and a little suburban.



In Beijing a month later, I went to the Dashanzi Art District 798 and there were people everywhere; young people, smart business types, artists, locals and tourists. This is just one of seven such districts, although 798 is perhaps the biggest with more than a dozen major galleries (some bigger, internally, than any I've ever seen) and dozens of low-end commercial spaces.

I first entered the *Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art* established by the Ullens, a Belgian couple who (ironically) financed the 8000m² non-profit space by selling their collection of Turner watercolours (for more than twenty million dollars). On display was the second anniversary exhibition, *Breaking Forecast*, said to embody the current artistic thinking and vitality of Chinese art.

The first work I saw looked rather ordinary: a traditional fan of twigs attached to a long mechanical arm which projected from the floor, standing mute. Then I saw something else in the gloom at the far end of a long hall. Suddenly there was a boom and clatter and an impressive two metre wide smoke ring slowly emerged from the darkness, coming directly towards the viewers. A moment later, the fan arm began a mechanical rotation and swept the smoke ring to oblivion. Called *A Moment of Clarity*, it was the work of husband and wife duo Sun Yuan and Peng Yu and regardless of what one might feel about it, the scale, concept and technical virtuosity alone was exceptional.

Further into the gallery this same duo showed *Tomorrow*, four lifesize, lifelike sculptures that apparently represented the Beatles – wispy, white-haired decrepit old has-beens. These artists have also exhibited lifelike figures of powerful world leaders in old age playing

dodgems in wheelchairs. Last year they created a room-sized zoo-like cage in which viewers suddenly found themselves upon stepping into the gallery. Then a real tiger enters and walks around the outside of the cage looking in. In other shows they've worked with live pit bull terriers, body parts, human fat and fetuses. These artists have no interest in a consistent thematic style or direction.



The Ullens show featured seven other Chinese artists each different from one another and employing painting, the internet, video, sound and sculpture. A few more days of looking gave a very good first impression of Contemporary Chinese art, often derivative or over-prescribed, but the best of it intense and impressive explorations of life, death, body and spirit, politics and culture.

China has the fastest growing economy of the last thirty years and is about to become the second largest economy in the world after the USA. The new face of global capitalism, it has a population of 1.3 billion. Beijing's population alone is similar to the whole of Australia, (twice that of New York City) and Beijing has become a hotbed of new art, all generously funded by overseas stakeholders, local investors, collectors and the Government.

Some artists are also enjoying record sales both locally and abroad (Zeng Fanzhi's *Mask Series* diptych sold in 2008 for US \$9.5 million). Auction records for that year show that five of the top ten selling contemporary artists in the world were Chinese and China is now the third largest art market behind the UK and the USA.

With that kind of money, artists can explore the most extreme possibilities: think of an idea, no matter how large or how extravagant and someone is there to make it happen. Modern China is, no doubt, a land of possibility, of opportunity, of optimism and it will be interesting to see if this fresh new look becomes more than just that – and to see if the innovations have deeper ramifications for world culture. I saw no evidence that this new avant-garde extended to music, theatre or literature for instance, as it does in Europe and the USA.

And how will Chinese artists of the future keep this market-driven phenomenon at arm's length? Already, it is said, the shift away from painting to 'sexier' mediums is a direct response to worldwide demands.

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