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Wu Junyong, Wait Us Rich

As the once sleeping giant of the East rises to rebrand itself, China's art scene is experiencing a re-birth. Phin Foster discovers an art market trying to balance genuine talent and huge values at auction with over-exposure and dilution of quality.

REN ★ ISS ★ NCE CHINA

Zhao Bo, Year of the Rat.



On the eve of an Olympics as politically charged as any since Moscow 1980, more attention was paid to the conflicting implications of China's emergence as a world superpower than to who the sporting heroes and villains of the next fortnight might be. Then came the opening ceremony. This was a choreographed gala event on an unprecedented scale, wowing even the most cynical of critics.

It also crystallised a paradox lying at the heart of modern China, as two men whose personal histories lie squarely outside the Chinese Communist Party's carefully constructed narrative played key roles in announcing the arrival of a new China to the world.

Cai Guo-Qiang, a politically confrontational artist who spent much of the 1980s in exile in Japan, was director of visual and special effects at the event, responsible for a fireworks display of unimaginable ambition and beauty. Ai Weiwei, a veteran of five years spent in a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution, helped create an even bigger impact. As artistic consultant for design alongside Herzog &

RECORD VALUES FOR CHINESE ART

\$9.7 million	Zeng Fanzhi, 'Mask Series 1996 No. 6'	May 2008
\$6.1 million	Zhang Xiaogang, 'Bloodline No. 3'	Apr 2008
\$5.9 million	Yue Minjun, 'Execution'	Oct 2007
\$4.2 million	Yue Minjun, 'The Pope'	Jun 2007

'WE HADN'T TAKEN ON A NEW ARTIST IN OVER A YEAR, BUT HAVE JUST BROUGHT IN TWO IN A WEEK. TAKE ADVICE, BUT ALSO TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.'

Yue Minjun, Untitled.



de Meuron, he helped deliver the event's stunning setting: Beijing's iconic Bird's Nest Stadium.

This strange marriage of convenience permeates the contemporary art scene in China. As the government loosens its grip on what is admissible, prices at auction for the country's art skyrocket. In May of this year, Zeng Fanzhi's 'Mask Series 1996 No.6' sold at auction in Hong Kong for \$9.7 million. This smashed the record for a Chinese artist's work, set only the previous month by Zhang Xiaogang, by \$3.5 million.

Quality control

However, as more galleries, artists, auction houses and investors wake up to the amount of money being bandied about the scene, the quality becomes diluted. Weng Ling, director of the Shanghai Gallery of Art, has complained that work is being sold 'like people sell cabbage'.

Nowhere is this shift more marked than in Beijing's 798 District. Previously an artist's enclave and the epicentre of Chinese counter culture, it was branded an official tourist stop during the Olympics and has been commandeered by a government desperate to showcase a progressive leniency. 'It's unrecognisable to even six months ago,' Alessandra Henderson of Chinese Contemporary tells me. 'Gallery owners may have to move away as the place becomes overly sanitised.'

Chinese Contemporary, with galleries in London, New York and Beijing, were the first dealers to exclusively import contemporary Chinese art into the western market and only the fifth to open in Beijing.

'There's certainly a lot of muck to wade through when people jump on the bandwagon,' says Henderson, associate manager at the China outpost. 'Before, you had the eight or so artists known to the art world; now it's far more complicated.'

And varied. The myriad styles, themes and movements on show make it extremely difficult to discuss contemporary Chinese art as a single category. 'It's vast,' Henderson agrees. 'However, factors such as the one child policy do have an effect. The self is often a major touchstone, as well as artist such as Zhao Bo addressing the constant clash between traditional Chinese and Western values.'

This clash of commercial and artistic values has proven to be a destructive influence for some artists. Influential critic Gao Minglu accuses some of the scene's more established stars of following the buyers rather than creating anew. 'They have big studios and often repeat work and hire someone to help them paint,' she has said. 'They're making artwork like it's an industrial production, to please the market.'

But the quality is still there. Of the new generation, Henderson cites female artists Han Yajuan and the slightly more established Wu Junyong as just two to look out for. 'While some artists have just started focusing on money, Junyong really has something to say,' she explains. 'He's already 30, not a 19-year-old upstart, and is not going to be overawed at hitting the big time.'

If you're looking to jump on this particular bandwagon, it is best to consult those that have been involved in the scene since before it started making money. Despite the aforementioned successes at auction, Henderson also suggests not putting too much stock in such records. 'It's not unknown for artist's friends or sponsors to artificially force up the price,' she explains. 'It's also a question of luck. We hadn't taken on a new artist in over a year, but have just brought in two in a week. Take advice, but also trust your instincts.' ■



Han Yajuan, Want to Fly no.2.

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