

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Agenda



Song Chao

PI LI The curator Pi Li (photographed with the work of the artist Liu Wei, whose solo show he is mounting this spring) is best positioned to build the artistic careers that will keep Chinese contemporary art aloft after the first bubble bursts. [More Photos](#) >

By FRANCESCO BONAMI
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Recently I received an e-mail message from a curator friend inquiring about a painter and sculptor named Liu Wei. I had included his work in a show I organized in Turin called "AllLookSame?" that featured pieces by young Korean, Chinese and Japanese artists. "Do you believe that Liu Wei is just a good artist or a very good artist that will be famous in the future like Zhang Xiaogang?" my friend asked. (Zhang Xiaogang is a Chinese art star whose paintings fetch six figures.)

I am a curator, but I am not a clairvoyant. The word on Chinese art right now is "Buy!" but I'm not convinced that we Westerners really understand what's going on there. Ten years ago, a few Chinese artists, like Chen Zhen or Huang Yong Ping, appeared on the West's radar screen, satisfying a certain outdated "Orientalist" craving among some collectors. People like Uli Sigg, the former Swiss ambassador to China, who counts some 1,500 pieces of Chinese and Asian art in his collection, and another Swiss citizen, Lorenz Helbling, who opened his gallery, ShanghART, in China more than a

decade ago, are reaping the profits of their foresight. But now Western collectors and dealers are descending on China like a swarm of annoying and aimless flies. Actually, today's burgeoning Chinese art world depends very marginally, if at all, on the gallery establishment in New York and London. Huge crowds may jam the Miami Basel and Frieze art fairs, but those numbers are nothing compared with the potential size of the art market within China itself.

All of these things make it hard for me to answer my friend's question about Liu Wei. But the real difficulty has less to do with the dangers of market speculation than with the fact that I haven't quite figured out how a Chinese artist thinks, creates and produces a work of art.

A studio visit to an artist in Beijing is often like 10 studio visits in Brooklyn. In China, you don't find a painter, and a sculptor, and a video artist, but rather one artist who is working on painting, sculpture, photography, video and (why not?) performance all at the same time. When I visited Liu Wei in Beijing to select works for my show in Turin, he offered me not only beautiful cityscape paintings but also architectural models of famous buildings, like St. Peter's Cathedral and the Empire State Building, made from the same rubber used to make fake dog bones. (I chose a painting.) In Europe, an artist that looks for inspiration in both a pet shop and the early work of Gerhard Richter would most likely be dismissed as lacking a consistent point of view. But in China the same criteria do not apply.

European artists often develop different bodies of work. Many Chinese artists seem to develop different bodies for each work. A great chaos under the sky was supposedly an excellent sign for Chairman Mao Zedong, and the same may be true for today's Chinese artists. Complexity and change is part of Chinese philosophy. To favor one medium over the others would be to impose a silly constraint. If all is possible in contemporary art, why limit yourself?

Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts currently receives applications from some 17,000 aspiring artists annually. Maybe a third of these will be accepted. But even if only 10 percent of those succeed in some way, there will be plenty of Chinese art to collect. What and by which ones has yet to be determined. But there is less and less doubt that the future, in some form or shape, will belong to the Chinese — not only as producers of art but also as consumers of it. Their capacity to devour and digest global ideas in order to create their own new aesthetic is simply astonishing. It's happening already with architecture. After overcoming their initial inferiority complex, the Chinese are realizing that they don't need to buy into the Western star system. For every Koolhaas the West produces, they can produce 10 very good young Chinese architects able to deliver the same project, at the same level of quality, for about a third of the price. This doesn't mean, of course, that China is immune from nouveau riche posturing. Louis Vuitton and Prada bags are as avidly consumed there as they are everywhere else on the planet. But a new, more sophisticated generation of creative people and style makers seems to be taking control.

Today, even government censorship has become a sort of performance art. During my visit to Shanghai last year, the government closed down a weeklong exhibition of ambitious installations in a newly renovated factory — some of the art was said to contain pornographic content — and a mild protest followed. But it all seemed to be part of a continuing game of cat and mouse, if not even a weird new form of art marketing.

They say that if you show a video of a tiger running in the jungle, a person from the West will focus on the tiger while a person from China will take in the whole image. There's no question that while Americans and Europeans are looking at individual artists or individual works of art, the Chinese are seeing a cultural transformation of enormous proportions. Some Chinese artists will no doubt get eaten by the tiger. But perhaps it's the dealers and the collectors in the West who are missing the big picture.