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A Witness to Transformation

By Suzanne Muchnic, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer



TIME CAPSULE: *Pei Xuehong's untitled digital panorama freezes a workday vignette in an area of change. L.A.'s DNJ Gallery is one of several in the city to spotlight emerging Chinese artists.*

LET OTHERS talk about the lure of art from China. James Elaine did something about it. He moved there.

"China is here to stay," says Elaine, an artist and curator who has organized edgy exhibitions and introduced emerging figures at the UCLA Hammer Museum for the last decade. "The culture, the art world, it's not a fad of the West that's going to fade away. China is a power."

With the help of a grant from the Asian Cultural Council -- and the windfall of the 2008 Ordway Prize, a \$100,000 award for mid-career artists, curators and art writers -- he has traded his Hammer "curator" title for "adjunct curator" and taken himself to China, where he plans to stay at least two years.

The goal is to learn more about art being made throughout the vast country and explore possibilities of exhibitions and exchange programs for the museum and the university. He spends about half his time working for the Hammer, the rest pursuing independent projects. "I want to be a bridge," he says. "I think there are a lot of opportunities to collaborate and partner for a long time ahead."

His adventure is a bold move, for him and the university, and reflects an escalating interest in Chinese contemporary art that goes well beyond Beijing Olympics fever. Chinese art seems to be everywhere this season.

At the moment, Elaine is back in Los Angeles for the opening of his first Chinese show, an ambitious installation by Sun Xun that's part of the Hammer Projects series and runs through Oct. 12. Inspired by a 1914 bilingual book, "The New China," Sun -- a 28-year-old artist who lives in Hangzhou and founded an animation studio there in 2006 -- has explored perpetually changing notions of China's evolution in wall paintings and an animated film.

In Paris, the big summer show at the Musée Maillol, featuring works by 35 artists, has an Olympics theme, "China Gold," an exception that proves the rule. This fall's attraction at the Asia Society in New York is "Art and China's Revolution." In London, the Saatchi Gallery is touting its Chinese collection with a profusely illustrated book, "The Revolution Continues: New Art From China," recently published by Rizzoli.

Southern California is fertile territory for young artists from China. Along with the Hammer show, [DNJ Gallery](#), a relatively new space on La Brea Avenue, offers "Contemporary Photography From China." DF2, a West Hollywood gallery that specializes in Chinese contemporary art, has "Shine Upon Me," a show of color photographs from Jiang Zhi's "Light Series." Morono Kiang Gallery, in downtown L.A., is showing paintings by Li Yan that link Chinese sports and politics. At UC Riverside's Sweeney Art Gallery is "Absurd Recreation," composed of nine artists' playful explorations of a country in overdrive.

In the Bay Area, two major private collections are -- or soon will be -- in the public eye. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art recently opened "Half-Life of a Dream: Contemporary Chinese Art From the Logan Collection," featuring 50 paintings, sculptures and installations from a major private holding of international contemporary art. The fall exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum is "Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art From the Sigg Collection," a traveling exhibition showcasing the work of almost 100 artists from the collection amassed by Uli Sigg, a Swiss businessman and former diplomat who has spent many years in China.



New respect within

ALL THIS art represents the period of tumultuous growth that has transpired since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. Initially, artists had to move to the West to gain recognition and earn a living. And the government crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989 brought new restrictions. But now it's possible for avant-garde artists to flourish at home and -- for a relative few -- to become wealthy.

The market for contemporary Chinese art has boomed, with a big push from Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses. Paintings of Chinese people looking stressed, depressed and hysterical by artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong, Yue Minjun and Zeng Fanzhi have brought from \$2 million to \$9 million at auction. Buyers are an international lot.

"The market is shifting," Elaine says. "A whole new generation is coming up with a new vision. Ten or 15 years ago, some of these artists didn't have a penny. Now they are wealthier than I will ever be. Young people see that you can be an artist in China. You can be respected, you can make lots of money and you don't have to do traditional Chinese landscape painting.

"I do see in this new generation, a new kind of art being made," he adds. "Maybe not new to the world, but certainly new to China. The first wave was political pop, more direct and obvious work. I'm seeing a much more introspective, emotional, psychological, sexual type of work, people investigating themselves and their identity. Sun Xun is asking identity questions about his country, where it came from, where it's going and the world's perceptions."

Not everyone embraces the art pouring out of China, which has evolved from political pop to so-called Cynical Realism and grotesque self-portraiture. New Republic critic Jed Perl blasted the new Saatchi Gallery publication as "the most hateful art book published in my lifetime" and condemned some of the artists for "getting comfortable with Mao" and rehabilitating his atrocities in their work.

Jeff Kelley, an expert in Chinese contemporary art who curated the Logan collection exhibition at SFMoMA, takes a more nuanced view in his catalog essay. Art thought to represent a jaundiced reaction to rampant consumerism or government control, he contends, "has revealed itself to be more psychologically resonant than the facade of pop iconoclasm and gestures of ironic detachment might readily suggest." The mask-like visages so frequently painted may not expose the artists' souls, he writes, but they "reenact the psychic aftermath of an era in which representations of specific human emotions were replaced with the idealized faces of the Revolution."

What young artists are doing is another story, as the Southern California exhibitions reveal. The photographers at **DNJ Gallery** shoot pictures of people riding on trains and bicycles, panoramas of city streets, portraits of miners, dwellings in an ancient farming community. "As the culture changes, you see the subject matter changing," Elaine says. "You see what is really real and what's happening."

The new wild West

A native of Dallas whose mother was born in China, the daughter of American missionaries, Elaine has spent several years learning to speak, read and write Chinese. But he didn't go to China until 2002, on a journey with his family.

"When I came back to L.A. from that trip I was just full of passion and fire," he says. "I had to learn the language. It was almost frenetic. I didn't know why I was doing it. I just had to. When I came to Los Angeles 10 years ago, I thought it was the Wild West. Now China is the Wild West. I love it."

"Things are changing at a rapid pace. There aren't any rules, in a way. I lived in the 798 complex [a former munitions factory converted into a sprawling art center] for two months, at a friend's studio, and I kept getting lost because the roads were changing. Now it looks like SoHo. But if you are a foreigner, you are in demand. Everyone wants to collaborate."

He'll soon be back in China, visiting out-of-the-way studios and art schools, poking into creative corners, eating in alley restaurants and absorbing the culture that feeds the art.

"I do stand out in China. I go to lectures and I'm the only Westerner there," says the tall, thin curator whose pointed features and mop of curly, gray hair are striking, even in Los Angeles. "I'm like a white crane."

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