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The Shanghai Convention Center during ShContemporary



Overlooking the "Best of Discovery" hall



The stand of Dusseldorf's Hans Meyer, at ShContemporary

THE CHINA PRICE

by Ben Davis

From a culinary perspective, we are told, Beijing is a city of big, shared portions, while Shanghai prefers more European-scaled servings. Similarly, while Beijing is the center of China's sprawling art world, with a thriving underground and many far-flung art districts, Shanghai's comparatively modest scene is host to **ShContemporary** (pronounced, apparently, "S-H-Contemporary"), Sept. 10-13, 2008, the People's Republic's play at a swanky, **Art Basel**-style art fair. (Meanwhile, **Art Beijing**, Sept. 6-9, 2008, just finished when I was there, was described caustically by one participant to me as "the worst fair ever, anywhere.")

ShContemporary, of course, has European organizing smarts behind it, backed by the folks at **BolognaFiere**, of Italy's **Bologna Art First** fair. This year, some 150 dealers came to the giant **Shanghai Exhibition Center** -- a vast, wedding cake of a building (originally the "Palace of Sino-Soviet Friendship," a gift of **Stalin** to **Mao**) -- despite reports that at last year's debut sales had been somewhat flat.

On deck were New York heavy hitters like **James Cohan** and **Pace Wildenstein**, fresh from opening spaces in Shanghai and Beijing, respectively; **Lehmann Maupin**, displaying the usual digital loveliness from **Jennifer Steinkamp**; **Jack Tilton**, who devoted his booth to a single hideous sculpture of a nude giantess by **Xiang Jing**, priced at \$750,000; as well as **Max Protetch**, looking comfortable, **Moti Hasson** and a host of other galleries, with a big bias towards spaces from around the Pacific Rim.

It's a funny moment for the commercial art market in China. While Western fairs like **Art Chicago** and **Art Cologne** are seeing their prestige eroded because of lack of international attention and as a result spend their promotional energy flying in collectors, Shanghai has the opposite dilemma. International money is well enough represented, but the foreign dealers who make the pilgrimage to ShContemporary come to build relationships with the mythical Chinese collectors who may -- or may not -- be slowly emerging from the woodwork.

Psychologically, this coming-out process is probably not helped along by the fact that since the last ShContemporary, the once-explosive Chinese stock market has wilted, losing about two-thirds of its value. The *Shanghai Daily* refers to the unwinding of a "China equities bubble." It also reports that this year's **Millionaire's Fair**, Oct. 10-12, a get-together targeted at Chinese new money, is changing its theme to focus on philanthropy instead of the luxury goods lifestyle. "A recent survey showed that Chinese millionaires were paying closer attention to wealth management than to luxury goods," **Zhong Gang**, the fair's chief, told the paper.

Considerable effort is being put into trying to make these Chinese collectors feel comfortable at ShContemporary. Most productively, this involves the "Best of Discovery" section, a massive hall full of stand-alone projects selected especially to introduce new artists --



Sculpture by Xiang Jing at Jack Tilton [back] and photos by Seb Janiak at Frèches



Outside the café at ShContemporary



A guard in ShContemporary, with Ma Jun's Car (2008)



Dealer Mirta Demare, with sculpture by Sophia Tabatadze in "Best of Discovery"



Sculptures by Wang Zhiyan in "Best of Discovery"

and by extension, the pleasures of hunting out new artists -- to the Chinese audience. This time around, the "Discoveries" on hand ranged from Georgian artist **Sophia Tabatadze's** large embroidered wall meant to invoke Soviet-era apartment blocks -- an object of subtle intrigue -- to monster-sized, neon-studded fiberglass panties by **Wang Zhiyan** -- objects of not-so-subtle intrigue. The latter ranged in price from €30,000 to €150,000 for a really big pair.

Beyond this, ShContemporary also wooed local heavy hitters by offering two full days just for VIPs, Sept. 9 and 10. Accounts of the fruits of this extraordinary effort were mixed. "To be honest, it has been a bit sparse," said **Thorsten Albertz**, New York director of Korea's formidable **Arario** gallery, holding court in his gallery's spacious booth at the end of the second day.

In a follow-up email after the fair, Albertz said that the gallery had nevertheless sold "a few things" to Chinese collectors via the gallery's Chinese staff, which is a must-have here. "It will be interesting to see which way ShContemporary takes things," he mused, expressing the hope that the fair would focus on attracting the Chinese audience and less on the international crowd. "International visitors are all faired out, and the mad China hype is over," he wrote.

Ace China journalist **Barbara Pollock** notes that foreign dealers at ShContemporary, burned by a perceived indifference last year to Western art, seem to have opted in 2008 for wares that might be more familiar to their Chinese audience (Pace Wildenstein was showing, among other things, a large **Roy Lichtenstein** pastiche of a Chinese landscape; "People keep asking if it's a Chinese artist doing Lichtenstein," a staffer said.) By most accounts, Chinese collectors still favor more traditional Chinese art, are moving slowly into Chinese contemporary, and are still only unevenly interested in the woolly world of international contemporary art.

Still, the works on view in the wide halls of ShContemporary this year were edgy enough. Beijing's **Dong Run** gallery, located just inside the entrance in the A Wing of the building, was an exception in showing documentary work -- photos by **Xiao Zhuang** made for an official news service and depicting scenes from the Cultural Revolution, priced between €2,000-€4,000. The gallery's **Winnie Ma** said that interest had been expressed by both foreigners and Chinese, but that on the whole, the works attracted "older people." "Her [Xiao's] photos remind them of their youth," Ma said.

More commonly, Asian dealers stacked their stands with art that reworks familiar icons of traditional prestige, typically giving them an ironic twist, a formula which no doubt serves a kind of mediating function for a scene straining between a new cosmopolitanism and a still-provincial taste. Thus, the **Shanghai Gallery of Art's** booth was taken over by a rambling installation by **Shen Yuan** (an artist who was seen at the 2007 **Venice Biennale**) titled *Extended Root* (2005), consisting of a Lego model of the Great Wall of China connecting several giant, knotty pieces of driftwood. According to a press release, the work reflects "the opposition between what is constructed, rational and man-made versus something that is natural," and not, as I had thought, the pleasures of a family weekend at the beach. It was \$75,000.

Similar in spirit were the fake artifacts by **Tu Wei-Cheng** at the **Lin & Keng** gallery, which has branches in Taipei and Beijing. Selections from an ongoing project begun in 2001 for which the artist fabricates archeological remains of the fictional "Bu-Num" civilization, the stone sculptures and weathered brick murals look somewhat authentic -- until you notice that the symbols relief-cut into them include multi-armed deities of cell phones and microchips. It's a cool, if somewhat empty, gesture -- but it is popular. The artist already had a fair



Roy Lichtenstein's *Yellow Cliffs* (1996) at Pace Wildenstein



Dong Run gallery's Winnie Ma, in front of photos by Xiao Zhuang



Shen Yuan's *Extended Root* at the Shanghai Gallery of Art



Lin & Keng's Shelly Wu, in front of a sculpture by Tu Wei-Cheng



amount of success last year at ShContemporary in "Best of Discovery," and was shown in the 2006 **Shanghai Biennial**. One of the choicer pieces could be had for \$60,000, number six in an edition of eight.

More fake deities were to be had at Seoul's **PYO Gallery**, which opened a Los Angeles location in July. At ShContemporary, the gallery was offering Taiwanese artist **Hou Chun-Ming's** large, black-and-white block prints, elaborate illustrations of an invented cosmology. In one, a feathery, winged cock-and-balls hovers over the head of a fanged skull. The set was \$100,000 (a group Hou Chun-Ming prints sold for \$340,138 at **Christie's Hong Kong** last year). Still, PYO's **Heidi Chang** said that most of the attention the booth had attracted was from foreigners -- or at least, it had been when I talked to her.

To be fair, some of the Western art on view specialized in the same ironic fun with symbols -- though in more than one case this had to do less with riffing on the prestige of Western culture and more to do with commenting on its faded glory. After ShContemporary 2007 saw a surplus of **Andy Warhols** for sale [see "**ShConsumer ShConfidence**," Sept. 20, 2007] -- apparently with less than spectacular results, sales-wise -- this year, Madrid's **Max Estrella** brought giant fake print-outs of Warhols by **Javier Arce**, streaky, crumpled one-to-one black-and-white copies. A Marilyn could be had for €11,000; crappy paper Elvis was €14,000.

High-production-value eye candy, of course, is a style that is almost universal. **Michael Lin** -- Taiwanese by birth, Shanghai-based and trained at **Art Center** in Pasadena -- looked good at the booth of Taipei's **Eslite**, which offered an installation-like hang of six of his paintings, each a solid blue field with cartoony flowers peeking into it, against a background of bright, flowery wallpaper. The paintings were €34,500 each. Also slick was a groovy hologram of a woman's face titled *Android* (2008) by **Hung Tunglu**, tucked away in the booth of **Han Ji Yun Contemporary Space** and priced at \$30,000.

At London and New Dehli's **Vadhera Art Gallery**, on the second day of the VIP opening, when I asked how things had gone, the woman smiled slyly at her cohorts and said that sales had been "excellent" both days, and that they had already sold "almost everything" in the booth. If this is true, then it would be one of the few examples I heard at ShContemporary of the kind of smashing opening success you hear about at the fairs in London, Miami and New York.

Admittedly, Vadhera had some catchy material. Best of all was **Biju Joze's** *Swastik Knife*, here just \$4,000 (part of an edition of 18). Displayed in a small plastic box on the wall, with instructions nearby, the piece offered a Swiss Army knife, the various tools in shapes meant to evoke symbols from Indian mythology.

Back at Arario's stand, a similar work by another Indian contemporary star, **Reena Saini Kallat**, caught my eye. On offer for \$65,000, the work is an oversized marble sculpture of an iron, the business end studded with a dense thicket of different swords, sickles and tools, in traditional Indian forms.

Thorsten Albertz explained that the piece was meant as a commentary on women's plight in India. What struck me, however, was how similar its mode was to Joze's, and, in turn, how similar that mode is to the now-familiar style of the Chinese contemporary stars, a sort of wedding of the tropes of consumer culture with clever riffs on tradition. Maybe this is the style most appropriate to such mercurial markets, so interpenetrated with international collectors.

Works by Hou Chun-Ming [right] at PYO Gallery



Heidi Chang, vice president of PYO



Works by Javier Arce at Max Estrella



Paintings by Michael Lin at Eslite



Kim Changkyum's *Water Shadow -- Four Seasons* (2006-2007) [front] and Hung Tunglu's *Android* (2008), at Han Ji Yun Contemporary Space

At the same time, perhaps the fact that Indian contemporary art represents a familiar strategy makes it the ideal gateway vehicle for the Chinese audience towards the international emerging art scene. It's a thought. (Of course, Albertz also said that the Kallat had failed to sell at fair's end.)

ShContemporary has certainly become China's most glamorous art fair -- by a long shot. It looks great. The Convention Center is a terrific location for an art festival, its vast Stalinist spaces, meant to crush the individual, now giving plenty of room for the aggressive spectacles of the globalized art world to assert themselves (a fine metaphor for China in general, actually.)

As I exited the fair, the cuisine theme reasserted itself. As I passed through the outdoor lounge just beyond the swanky **Sky Vodka** cocktail bar, there stood an elegant, slim table, wrapped in white linen with a gold ribbon, loaded with the remains of a fast food feast -- a bucket of **Kentucky Fried Chicken**, and **Pepsi** and **McDonald's** cups. Based on what you see on the street here at least, this is now as traditional a Shanghainese meal as any. The image nicely summed up the moment. Provincial no longer, Shanghai is still growing into its tony new profile as a mature art market.

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Biju Joze
Swastik Knife
2005
Vadhera Art Gallery



Arario New York director Thorsten Albertz with Reena Saini Kallat's *The Ironing Board* (2008)



Leftovers on the terrace at ShContemporary