

China becoming a major player in international art world

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12/04/2014 5:13 PM

12/04/2014 10:42 PM



At Beijing Commune gallery, Turria Evelin, center, and Jenny Streckeisen, right, view a piece by Hu Xiaoyuan during opening day at the Art Basel fair on Miami Beach at the Miami Beach Convention Center on Wednesday, December 3, 2014. AL DIAZ MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Lu Jingjing traveled for more than 20 hours from China to get here to the buzzing, banging, barely organized chaos at the Miami Beach Convention Center by Monday, joining hundreds of her colleagues from around the world in the frenzied preparations for Art Basel Miami Beach.

“Everyone knows the U.S. art market is the biggest in the world,” says Lu, director of [Beijing Commune](#), one of China’s top contemporary galleries. She is no stranger to the international art scene, having showcased at Art Basel fairs in Hong Kong and Switzerland. But their Miami debut is still a significant step. “It’s not always easy for Asian galleries to be here — you’re a latecomer with a lot of strong competitors,” Lu says. “I cannot wait to see what happens here.”

As China has opened up to the world and mushroomed into one of its richest and most influential countries, its art world has exploded. That expansion will be evident during Miami Art Week, from Chinese artists, collectors and galleries Beijing Commune and [Long March](#) Space at the main fair, to a major [show](#) by Chinese choreographer and painter [Shen Wei](#) presented by Miami Dade College and another by photographer Wang Qingsong at the [Frost Art Museum](#) at Florida International University.

“The speed at which the collector scene in Asia — but especially in China — is developing is impressive,” Art Basel director Marc Spiegler said in an email. That scene got an international boost with the launch of Art Basel Hong Kong in early 2013, followed later that year by the Wynwood-based Rubell Collection’s high-profile 28 *Chinese* show during Miami Art Week.

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Jeff Zou and Chen Ming Ming of Shanghai attend the VIP opening of Art Basel at the Miami Beach Convention Center on Wednesday, Dec. 3, 2014. | Al Diaz MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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“Last year, there was great interest by collectors and arts professionals from China to come to Miami Beach,” Spiegler says. This year, he says, Shen Wei and Beijing Commune are among the draws for a growing class of wealthy and internationally oriented Chinese.

“Besides the interest in our show and the events coinciding with it, more and more Chinese are purchasing property in the United States and are used to traveling [here],” Spiegler says. The fair caters to them with Hong Kong and China-based VIP managers to plan their trips. “As more of their friends have been to the show, it is easier for them to plan a visit.”

At Wednesday’s VIP opening of the main Art Basel Miami Beach fair, Lu Jie, owner of Long March, said business has grown in the four years he has shown there.

“The more you do and the more people you meet here, the more interesting conversations — and of course the more sales — you have,” said Lu Jie, who had brought 20 Chinese collectors to Miami.

“The new and younger generation of Chinese collectors is bilingual, educated in North America or Europe — they’re very international.”

The Chinese art boom has been fueled by the country’s new prosperity. China’s growing cadre of ultra-wealthy (more than 10,000 people worth at least \$30million, for a total of \$1.51trillion in 2013, according to a [report](#) by UBS and financial research firm Wealth-X) have invested significantly in real estate and art, says Christopher Tsai, a Chinese-American New York investment manager.

In Miami, Chinese nationals have spent \$25million at the Related Group’s luxurious new tower ONE Paraiso and are also buying multimillion-dollar apartments at One Thousand Museum by Zaha Hadid. Not only can high-end condos and artworks rise in value quickly, they often seem like safe havens for Chinese wary of political or economic upheaval.

“There’s a fear you need to be protective of what you own,” says Tsai, who travels frequently to China and began collecting contemporary Chinese art in 2003. He has focused on Ai Weiwei, acquiring more than 40 pieces, one of which, *Bowls of Pearls*, he lent to the Pérez Art Museum Miami for last year’s show of the dissident Chinese superstar.

Such investment-oriented spending has fueled speculation from Chinese and Westerners, Tsai says. “You see people coming in just wanting to buy quickly, be the first, then you see the work appear at auction in a year or less. That wasn’t the case five years ago.”

But the growth is also cultural. Shanghai and Beijing now boast vibrant gallery scenes, with more arts venues springing up around China in response to an expanding urban middle class.

“More than one billion people want culture now — every city wants a museum,” says Helen Smith, a Chinese-American New Yorker who is chairperson of Shen Wei Dance Arts. She is among a group of Shen Wei supporters, including top Chinese curator Weng Ling, coming to see *Shen Wei — In Black, White & Grey*, which combines the famous Chinese choreographer’s major painting debut with performances by his dance troupe at the Freedom Tower.

The excitement has been inspired by a modern art scene that has bloomed in a country that until the late 20th century was dominated by traditional or propaganda art.

“Contemporary Chinese artists have achieved in 25 years what Western artists have achieved in 100 years,” says Lidu Yi, an assistant professor of art and art history at FIU who curated the Wang Qingsong show at the Frost and another, by Xu Bing, one of China’s most famous artists, opening Feb.14.

Initially as dazzled by Western art and ideas as they were by cars and computers, Yi says Chinese artists have increasingly turned to their own culture.

“Because China was totally blocked from the rest of the world, once China opened in the ’80s there was an information explosion, and an enthusiastic embrace of Western

culture and imitating Western art,” Yi says. “In the last five to eight years they have begun to look to themselves, looking back to our own traditions, their own identity. ... Now they are much more confident producing their own art.”

That growing originality is a draw to Western art lovers like collector Mera Rubell. She and her husband began visiting China and buying art there in 2001, accumulating hundreds of pieces they drew from for *28 Chinese*.

Ai Weiwei is still China’s most famous artist. But in the past decade others such as Xu Bing, whose gigantic “Phoenix” sculptures were [hung at St. John the Divine](#) in New York; [Cai Guo-Qiang](#), who has had major installations at the Massachusetts Institute of Contemporary Art and the Guggenheim; and Zeng Fanzhi, whose version of *The Last Supper* sold for \$23.3million — a record for an Asian artist — at a [Sotheby’s auction](#) in Hong Kong last year, have become internationally known.

Westerners used to be the dominant buyers of contemporary Chinese work, in part because of cost. At Long March, a painting by Wang Jianwei, who had a solo show at the Guggenheim, cost \$134,000, while a work by Liu Wei, a younger artist, was priced at \$250,000.

“Most people could not afford art before,” says Beijing Commune’s Lu, who had priced one of the graceful, naturalistic wood sculptures by Hu Xiaoyuan at her booth for \$26,000. Now her Chinese clients are just as important.

“Earlier it was more important for my works to be recognized outside of China, when there were not art museums, galleries or a market inside China,” Wang Qingsong said in an email. “But nowadays, both overseas and domestic introductions of my works are equally important.”

Although the atmosphere is more open than it was, artists who are too critical or controversial still run the risk of censorship or worse from the country’s communist government, says Wang. Many of the elaborately staged photographs in his Frost show dramatize his [ideas](#) on how development and capitalism are eroding traditional Chinese life and values, the individual struggle for direction, or authoritarian oppression.

Authorities once investigated one of his pieces and confiscated the negatives; he now takes pains to conceal his process.

“In China if you touch upon politics, social issues, you are treading upon dangerous landmines,” Wang says. This week the BBC [reported](#) that the government of President Xi Jinping — who has said artists should reflect socialist values instead of “the stench of money” — would send artists to live in rural areas to form “a correct view of art.” The plan and Xi’s statements echo China’s notoriously repressive Cultural Revolution.

But Wang says that at different times, Chinese and Western viewers have interpreted his work as anti-capitalist and anti-socialist. Increasingly, he believes, his art is relevant to both cultures.

“China is now intermingled with the whole world,” he says. “So China’s issues are also part of the world’s issues.”

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