

# ForbesLife

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**F**ASHION  
GOES PREP

**ONE SPICY  
CHINESE  
ART MARKET**

**A SOLAR  
AIRPLANE  
READIES  
FOR TAKEOFF**

**IS GOLF  
GOING GREEN?**

**ANGLING  
IN MONGOLIA**

**IVY  
STYLE**





# The Cultural Evolution

China's art market comes of age.

**I**t is a truth universally acknowledged that when a nominally Communist country becomes rich overnight it must be in want of building cranes and boatloads of homegrown contemporary art. China is no exception.

During its March 2007 sale in New York, Sotheby's auctioned off \$25 million of freshly minted Chinese paintings—and the sales-room was filled with Chinese. The top lot was *Bloodline: Three Comrades*, an oil by 49-year-old Zhang Xiaogang depicting sad-eyed survivors of China's self-destructive past. It sold for more than \$2.11 million.

"Just a few years ago this market was absolutely dormant," notes Dutch-Scottish art dealer Michael Goedhuis, who shows Chinese art at his galleries in New York, London and Beijing. "Now it's galloping. It's an erratic market, but as more new buyers enter the bidding, the prices will shoot higher."

The market for Chinese art began to rise three years ago with auctions in Hong Kong, the People's Republic and finally abroad. In 2004 Christie's only sold about \$18 million worth of postwar and contemporary Chinese art; in 2006 those sales hit \$120 million. And the increase wasn't just due to volume; individual artists started developing their own international followings. In 2003, for example, a portrait by the aforementioned



Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline: Three Comrades* was the star of a recent Sotheby's auction.

Photograph: courtesy of Sotheby's



Zhang Xiaogang sold for just \$76,500 at Christie's Hong Kong; in 2006 the same painting was auctioned at Christie's London for more than \$1.4 million. By 2007, all the auction houses were scoring big-time.

"Today there are really two art auction markets in China," says New York-based art dealer Martha Sutherland. (Full disclosure: Sutherland is married to the author.) "One is for traditional brush-and-ink painters who come out of a centuries-long tradition of scholarly painting and poetic contemplation of the sublime landscape. The other is the contemporary scene, where the big prices—and artistic egos—have full rein."

In spite of the growing whispers of an auction price bubble, the art scene in China is still expanding. "There is an almost volcanic eruption of creativity in China today, from art and film to design and architecture," notes Goedhuis. "Market concerns aside, it is a very exciting new world."

INTELLECTUALLY, THE NEW Chinese art boom began in February 1989, when the National Art Museum in Beijing held a watershed exhibition called "China Avant-Garde," which was soon shut down by the government. Just four months later came the Tiananmen Square uprising that left hundreds dead. At that time, the only people able to afford art were expats, diplomats and Westerners.

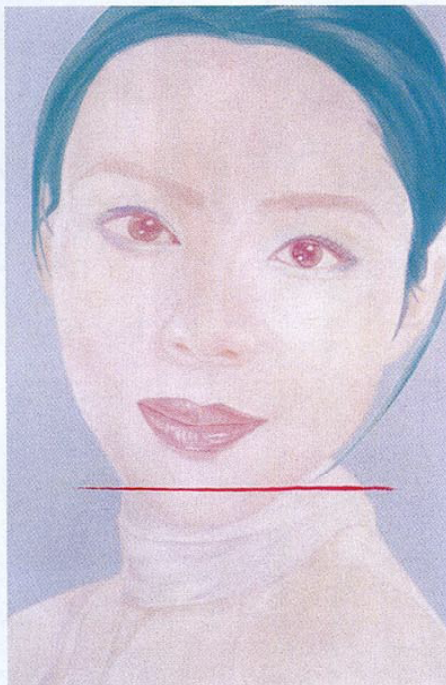
Almost two decades later, the growth of China's art market is reflected in the lively gallery scenes of its two largest cities, Beijing and Shanghai. In the 1980s, Beijing's artists established themselves in a crumbling factory area called Dashanzi, also known as the 798 District. Galleries and restaurants soon followed. "Up until 2004, there were only three strong commercial galleries in Beijing and many artists couldn't get representation," says Australian Brian Wallace, who founded Red Gate Gallery in 1991, Beijing's first foreign-owned gallery. "Now there are about 20 top galleries and hundreds of others ranging from shop fronts to artists' co-ops."

The latest hotbed for artists and galleries is Caochangdi Village, located on the northeastern outskirts of Beijing. It was spearheaded seven years ago by one of the preeminent Chinese artists, Ai Weiwei, who built a giant studio for himself and opened a gallery called China Art

look at the art and share ideas about it."

That said, buying good art in China can be difficult for a foreigner, even for a collector or art dealer who is familiar with the culture. Many of the top artists once desperate to show their work now resist exclusive gallery representation. And then there's the language barrier. Sutherland is one of the few Western dealers outside China who is fluent in Mandarin. "It helps," she says, "to know what's going on." She opened her Manhattan gallery in 1999 to show traditional artists from China and Taiwan, but soon embraced hip young painters like Yang Mian and Chen Wenbo.

How far can prices go? Recently a 1939 oil by Xu Beihong sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong for \$9.2 million—a record for a Chinese painting. Though the artist is long dead, the painting, *Put Down Your Whip*, is politically significant, referring to the 1931 invasion of China by the Japanese. It was sold over the phone to an anonymous bidder.



Yang Mian's *Standard of Beauty No. 50*

Archives and Warehouse. The entrepreneurial Ai has recently been joined in Caochangdi by Swiss dealer Urs Meile and by Meg Maggio, an American lawyer and gallery owner who recently opened Pékin Fine Arts in a building designed by the protean Ai. A 20-year veteran of the Beijing art scene, Maggio counts the London-based advertising mogul and über-collector Charles Saatchi as one of her clients.

Meanwhile, Shanghai has long been famed for its aesthetics and enterprise, but it was a foreigner, Swiss-born Lorenz Helbling, who founded its leading gallery, ShanghArt. He currently represents more than 30 artists from all over China. "Shanghai is less money-oriented than Beijing and there is less talk about prices and marketing," he says. "You can really

WHAT GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRATS think about all these potentially subversive artists is unclear. Anything involving sex, blood or excrement—standard fare in the decadent West—seems to pass muster, but when art turns political, things get dicey. After the Tiananmen massacre, the artist Sheng Qi, now 43, cut off his little finger in protest. Two years ago the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing exhibited photographs by Sheng that juxtaposed his mutilated hand with idealized pictures from the Cultural Revolution. The government shut down the show. A painting depicting Mao sitting with Hitler and Stalin was also removed from an exhibition.

"The Chinese government has gradually realized some freedom of expression in the arts is okay," said David Tung, a young Chinese-American from Texas who serves as deputy director of the Long March Space gallery in Beijing. He cited the career trajectory of now-famous artist Yang Shaobin. "Yang arrived in Beijing in the '80s as a poor artist and began working in the language of political Pop and Cynical



Realism. The authorities harassed him. Today, he and other former outcasts are being 'embraced' as representatives of a new 'cultural industry,' which the city of Beijing is heavily promoting," says Tung. Yang's edgy paintings highlighting the dangerous work conditions of coal miners fetch several hundred thousand dollars each.

But not all of the work evokes Tiananmen or hard times. One evening I dined with Prof. Huang Du, a widely respected figure in the Beijing and Shanghai art worlds. Originally from Shaanxi Province, Huang, now 43, had studied painting at the Central Art Academy of Beijing but morphed into a curator and historian. What accounts for the burst of new imagery? "Many of the younger artists," said Huang Du, "didn't live through the Cultural Revolution. They didn't go through that period of suppressed individualism. Few scars. They paint in the present. And a number have been inspired by Western graphic tradition, including Pop and comic books."

Our dinner companions were two successful young artists who proved his point, Yang Mian and Chen Wenbo. Both in their late 30s, they had studied at the Sichuan Academy of Art and come to Beijing to "make the scene." Yang Mian is known for his series entitled *Standards of Beauty*, oil paintings of beautiful Chinese women lifted from commercial advertising; one sees hints of Warhol and Alex Katz in the enlarged faces brushed in pastel tones that mimic cosmetics. The new paintings of Chen Wenbo are in a series entitled *Pirated-Copyrighted No. 1*, which embraces the slick poetics of commercialism: eight-foot-tall paintings of CDs that glisten and shimmer with color. He has also painted golf courses, billiard balls and cocktail glasses.

Ten years ago, Yang and Chen would have each eked out a living equivalent to that of a day laborer. That's changed: Their paintings now sell for \$50,000 and higher. Chen drives a BMW 3 series, while Yang zips around in an Audi Quattro and maintains a 6,000-square-foot studio complex on the outskirts of Beijing. "I'm painting the good life in China," said Chen, winking as he hoists his glass. "Cheers."



Yue Minjun's *Goldfish* recently sold for \$1.38 million at Sotheby's.

THE QUESTION REMAINS: IS THIS stuff any good? "There is real aesthetic and cultural value to these artists," says Ingrid Dudek, a specialist in the Asian contemporary department at Christie's in New York. "And compared to prices of their Western counterparts—contemporary artists like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons—they are not expensive."

Chinese art does have a tremendous breadth, from traditional ink painters and hyper-realists to abstractionists and freakish jokers. Take the performance artist Zhang Huan, who has been photographed covered with body armor made entirely of meat, as if some slab-happy butchers decided to sculpt the Incredible Hulk out of prime rib. Then there is Wang Guangyi, who derives satiric inspiration from Socialist-Realist posters of the Mao era. The painter Yue Minjun cranks out grinning men in a cartoony Pop style; one of his works sold for \$1.38 million at Sotheby's March 2007 auction in New York.

In yet another signal that Chinese art has arrived, the rooftop terrace of the Metropolitan Museum in New York last year displayed an eye-popping artwork consisting of a 12-foot-long plastic replica of an open-jawed crocodile impaled with hundreds of steel knives, nail clippers and other sharp objects confiscated from international airline passengers by security guards. It was by Cai Guo-Qiang, a Chinese sculptor and performance artist who is the visual and special effects director of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The stadium itself was designed by Ai Weiwei and the trendsetting Swiss architectural firm

Herzog & De Meuron.

Other artists make pictures that are more evocative of daily Chinese life, like Liu Xiaodong, known for a gritty series portraying villagers displaced by the flooding of the Yangtze River. One of the few well-known female artists, Yu Hong, portrays the average citizen on the street and at home in a straightforward, painterly manner. Zhang Jian also has an offbeat snapshot eye for intimate, everyday moments, whether capturing a woman in sunglasses strolling across Tiananmen Square or a man stopping by a canal for a smoke.

Just as we today regard French Impressionist pictures of top-hatted Parisians, so decades from now we may view works by contemporary Chinese painters as windows into Beijing life in the early 21st century. Ladies and gentlemen, start your collections. •

## WHERE TO BUY

**NEW YORK:** Ethan Cohen ([www.ecfa.com](http://www.ecfa.com)), Goedhuis Contemporary, ([www.goedhuiscontemporary.com](http://www.goedhuiscontemporary.com)), M. Sutherland Fine Arts ([www.artnet.com/msutherland.html](http://www.artnet.com/msutherland.html)), Tilton Gallery ([www.jacktiltongallery.com](http://www.jacktiltongallery.com)), Max Protetch Gallery ([www.maxprotetch.com](http://www.maxprotetch.com))

**BEIJING:** Arario Beijing ([www.arariobeijing.com](http://www.arariobeijing.com)), China Art Archives and Warehouse ([www.archivesandwarehouse.com](http://www.archivesandwarehouse.com)), Chinese Contemporary Beijing ([www.chinesecontemporary.com](http://www.chinesecontemporary.com)), Courtyard Gallery ([www.courtyard-gallery.com](http://www.courtyard-gallery.com)), Galerie Urs Meile ([www.galerieursmeile.com](http://www.galerieursmeile.com)), Long March Space ([www.longmarchspace.com](http://www.longmarchspace.com)), 798 Space ([www.798space.com](http://www.798space.com)), Red Gate Gallery ([www.redgategallery.com](http://www.redgategallery.com)), Pékin Fine Arts ([www.pekinfinearts.com](http://www.pekinfinearts.com)), White Space Beijing ([www.whitespace-beijing.com](http://www.whitespace-beijing.com))

**SHANGHAI:** ShangArt Gallery ([www.shangartgallery.com](http://www.shangartgallery.com)), Shanghai Gallery of Art ([www.shanghaigalleryofart.com](http://www.shanghaigalleryofart.com))

**ART FAIRS:** Beijing sponsors ArtBeijing, September 20–23 ([www.artbeijing.net](http://www.artbeijing.net)), Shanghai sponsors ShContemporary ([www.shcontemporary.info](http://www.shcontemporary.info)), September 6–9, and the Shanghai Art Fair ([www.sartfair.com](http://www.sartfair.com)), November 15–19.