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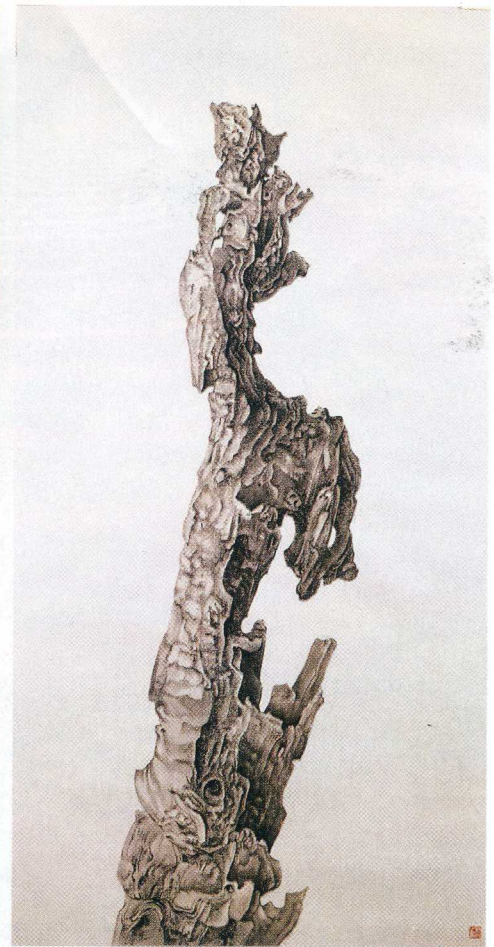
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The Chinese-Art Craze

What's up in the contemporary-art market? Anything new from China.

Combine the social commentary of contemporary art with the beauty and mystery of the Far East, and what do you get? A red-hot market. Chinese contemporary art is burning up the auction block in New York salesrooms, flying off the walls at galleries in Chelsea and topping acquisitions lists at major museums. Western collectors may stumble over names like Zhang Xiaogang and Cai Guo-Qiang, but they are nimble enough with their checkbooks, buying almost half of the Chinese contemporary works offered at Christie's and Sotheby's in the past year and causing prices to rise exponentially.

The buzz is fresh, but the art dates back to the late 1970s, when, after a long period of isolation, China reopened its doors to Western influences. Energized by "new" movements like Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Conceptualism, Chinese artists in the 1980s began a feverish round of creation, often in response to the political climate of the day. After the events in Tiananmen

Edited by *Sarah Medford*

Square in 1989, artists began to address more personal concerns, including the role of the individual in a rapidly changing culture. Now up to speed on today's leading art movements but drawing on references and techniques that are traditionally Chinese, artists are producing work that is arresting and startlingly new.

New York and London dealer Michael Goedhuis was one of the first to champion Chinese contemporary art. He points out that, historically, rapidly changing social climates, like that of China, have produced rich artistic harvests. "China is like Europe in 1900," he says. "There is such creative ferment there, so much new work being produced."

New, yes, but with thousands of years of history behind it. Calligraphy infuses the work of Wenda Gu (born 1955); Liu Dan

Above: Zhang Xiaogang's *Sailor (Girl)* (2004) at Sotheby's inaugural Contemporary Art Asia sale last March; a Liu Dan painting that will be on view at New York's Chinese Porcelain Company from March 19 to 31.



This month, New York gallery Barry Friedman Ltd. will feature *Beijing-Kowloon* (1994), a photograph by Wang Jin.

Learsy says. "It displays a wide aesthetic; it's unique. In five or ten years nobody will be calling this work Chinese—it will just be part of contemporary art."

While Europeans have been buying since the early nineties, recently collectors from mainland China have been making up a noticeable (though still minor) segment of the market. The American scene reached critical mass just this past year: in 2006 both Christie's and Sotheby's hired specialists to organize Chinese contemporary-art sales in New York. Specialty dealers like Christophe Mao, of Chelsea's Chambers Fine Art, have opened their doors, and leading galleries, including Tilton, Barbara Gladstone and Max Protetch, have taken on Chinese artists. Museums, too, are interested; last year the Guggenheim hired senior curator Alexandra Munroe specifically to build its collection of modern and contemporary Asian art.

Prices are rising steeply. In May 2005 Sotheby's Hong Kong sold a triptych from Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline Series for \$69,239. Last fall, at Sotheby's New York, a similar work brought \$688,000. No work by Li Songsong had sold at auction before, but in November of last year, *The Decameron* (est. \$30,000 to \$50,000) sold at Christie's for a whopping \$273,600.

Of course, what goes up can always come down, but contemporary-art mavens believe Chinese isn't just the flavor of the month. Michael Goedhuis points out that "as the Chinese economy develops, there will soon be many, many more mainland buyers." Those eager to identify tomorrow's stars today might want to emulate Bucksbaum and Learsy, who, says Learsy, "look for what is new and different, a step beyond what has already been done," and to brush up on their Chinese art history. Few books in English have been published on this topic, but check out *Made in China*, published this month by Denmark's prestigious Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name (through August 5; louisiana.dk).

ANN E. BERMAN

(born 1953) employs the ancient art of ink painting. The snarky characters created by "cynical realists" Yue Minjun (born 1962) and Fang Lijun (born 1963) are a unique blend of East and West.

All of this makes a nice change for American collectors accustomed to pickled sharks and stainless-steel trolls. "People respond to Chinese contemporary art because it has aesthetic beauty as well as political and social meaning," says Janine Cirincione, director of New York's Tilton Gallery. "It is based on the Chinese idea that art should be beautiful—and the decorative impulse in the culture also works its way in." As does the high level of skill demonstrated by its practitioners, a number of whom have also mastered traditional Chinese painting and drawing techniques. These days their work is finding its way onto living-room walls from Fifth Avenue to Tribeca to Laurel Canyon. Husband and wife Raymond Learsy and Melva Bucksbaum, both on the board of the Whitney Museum of American Art, own the work of ten Chinese artists and say many fellow collectors are also buying. "This art has enormous vitality,"

In November, Christie's sold Li Songsong's *Decameron* (2004) for \$273,600, more than five times its high estimate.

