



Treasure island

Uli Sigg used to be the Swiss ambassador to China – now Harald Szeemann calls him ‘the ambassador of Chinese art in the West’. Marc Spiegler visited Sigg’s unparalleled contemporary collection at Schloss Mauensee, Lucerne. Photography by Ed Reeve

From a distance, the Schloss Mauensee seems the archetypal Swiss manor house. Perched atop a small island ringed by wooden boathouses, the building near Lucerne dates from 1605. An electronic security system has replaced the bridge guards who once blocked access from the shore, yet at a distance the listed building bears few hallmarks of the modern age. Cross the broad stone threshold, however, and you are projected headlong into the churning cultural cauldron that is contemporary China. Three storeys teem with artworks that erupted from that maelstrom, each crystallising a moment in the republic’s sprint from isolated empire to crossroads of the global economy.

In the main hall is a set of four paintings by Geng Jianyi, each one showing a man’s face frozen in an expression somewhere between laughing and crying. Within Chinese contemporary art, the paintings are pivotal, evoking the period when communist collectivism gave way to greater individualism. From the ceiling in the adjoining room hangs a replica of a Chinese imperial dress. Fabricated from green plastic by seamstresses commissioned by artist Wang Jin, its mix of ancient form and modern material embody China’s cultural tension. The master bedroom juxtaposes Swiss frescos with Xie Nanxing’s almost blinding painting of a night-time highway scene, the laborious layering of paint creating an intensely bright image that is somehow also pixelated and photographic.

The attic of the house confines the toughest works, often documenting rapidly censored shows. In one, by Sun Yuan and

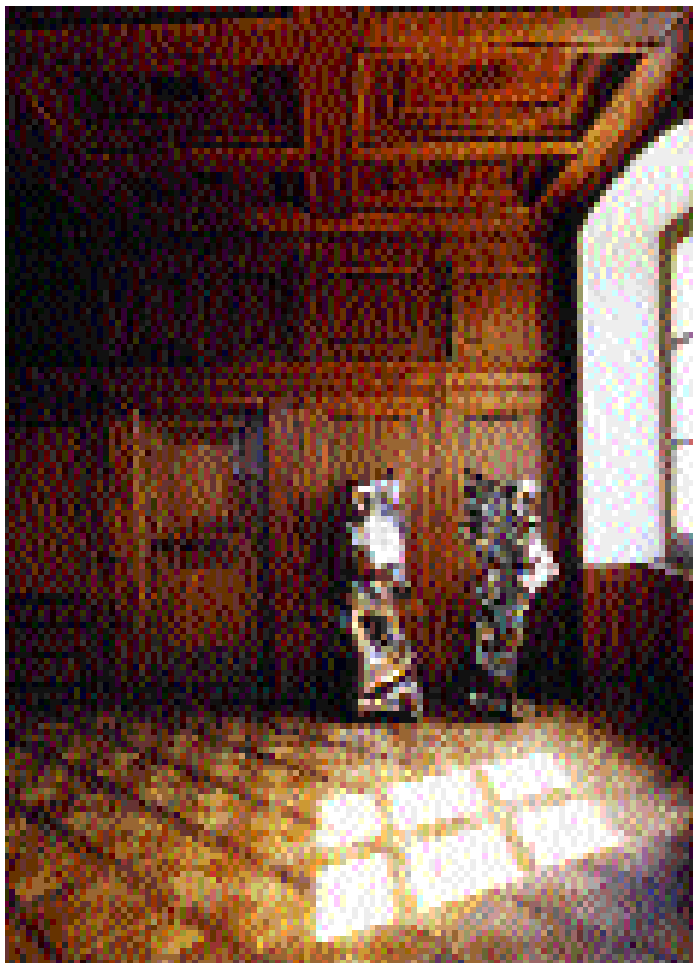
Peng Yu, a dead baby nuzzles a man’s corpse lying within a sheet of ice; another image by the same artists shows a flayed dog’s ears being seared off by sunlight focused through a magnifying glass. Even in an art world whose denizens pride themselves on their sangfroid, these works can too be much, concedes the collection’s owner, Uli Sigg. ‘Often Chinese authorities had these shows brought to their attention by Western critics and curators saying, “What kind of art are you allowing here?”’ he says. ‘The body has a different meaning in Chinese culture than in ours. There was ancestor worship, but communism and nihilism made the corpse negligible. Reactions to these pieces reflect different value systems coming into conflict with each other.’

In deciding whether to include or omit the attic when visitors tour the collection, Sigg deploys a discernment honed by decades working in tricky milieus. Now 58, he first went to China, then rapidly liberalising, in 1978 on business. ‘It was never my destiny or determination to live in China,’ Sigg recalls. ‘Coincidence brought me there. But from then onwards, I focused completely on China.’

Over the next two decades he would launch the nation’s first joint venture with a Western business – the Schindler Elevator Company, build several factories, and eventually serve as the Swiss ambassador to China from 1995 until 1998. Today, he remains active there, helping to shepherd other people’s projects – such as Herzog & de Meuron’s Olympic stadium – through the complexities of the country’s etiquettes and officialdoms. ►



This page: on wall, from left to right, Luo Hui, *Untitled*, 1999, oil on canvas, 98 x 80cm; Yang Shaobin, *Portrait (No. 16)*, 1998-99, oil on canvas, 230 x 180cm; Li Yongbin, *Untitled*, 2000, airbrush on canvas, 150 x 190cm. On floor, from left to right, Ai Wei Wei, *Whitewash*, 1995-2000, neolithic vases, industrial paint, dimensions variable; Ai Wei Wei, *Map of China*, 2003, hard wood from a destroyed Qing Dynasty temple, 145 x 198 x 50cm



◀ Long before he went to China, Sigg had developed a penchant for art. He grew up in a home stocked with archetypal Swiss painters such as Ferdinand Hodler, yet his contemporaries captivated him. Especially drawn towards ‘meditative’ works, he collected artists such as Gerhard Richter, Rachel Whiteread and Gotthard Graubner. In China, that interest grew into the consuming drive that has made him a unique figure on the art world’s landscape.

As Sigg began exploring Chinese society, he naturally surveyed its contemporary art scene in the process. But he would not start buying for more than a decade. ‘Contemporary art had just begun to exist in China when I arrived,’ he explains. ‘Until 1978’s reforms, art production was limited to Socialist Realism in style and content. After that ended, the artists at first didn’t really know what to do with their newly found freedom.’ For a period, they rehashed styles such as Impressionism, Expressionism and classical modernism. For Sigg, accustomed to Europe’s avant-garde, it was hardly compelling stuff.

But by the late 1980s, Chinese artists were creating work distinctly different from what was happening halfway round the world in New York or Cologne. ‘The Chinese artists had found their voice,’ Sigg explains. ‘They had reached a degree of sophistication that made their production interesting.’ Satisfied that something significant was finally afoot, Sigg stepped in as a collector. The communist milieu complicated matters for him: galleries did not exist, and in official museum shows paintings hung cheek-by-jowl, one per artist. To see more, Sigg had to track down the artists themselves. For several years, he rigorously researched the various mini-movements emerging. On his myriad business and then ambassadorial trips across the republic, he shoehorned atelier tours into his official itineraries.

‘Contemporary art had just begun to exist in China when I arrived. At first, artists didn’t know what to do with their freedom’

His perseverance paid off. ‘I often feel embarrassed talking to Uli, because I never paid such close attention to various exhibitions and movements as he did,’ says Beijing artist, curator and gallerist Ai Wei Wei. ‘Every Chinese artist knows him because he visits more studios than any curator or gallerist. No one else shows that same discipline.’

Today, Sigg owns more than 1,200 works by Chinese contemporary artists including many iconographic pieces. ‘In the first phase of my collecting, I chose works that I, with my Western-educated eye and a preference for edgier work, found personally interesting,’ he explains. ‘But in the mid-1990s I realised that nobody – neither individuals nor institutions, not from China and not from abroad – collected contemporary Chinese art in even a half-systematic manner. That realisation changed my focus: I started collecting works that documented something important in Chinese society or a preoccupation of Chinese artists. Whether I thought the pieces were great art became secondary.’

Sigg has often run into obstacles imposed by the long absence of any formalised art world in China. Tracking down pieces from 1989’s seminal exhibition ‘China Avant-Garde’ at Beijing’s National Gallery, the collector was given leads by a curator he had once assisted.

That tip led him to one artist featured in the show, Wang Luyan, who had grasped the exhibition’s cultural importance and bought whatever paintings he could afford to prevent their dispersal. ‘I finally saw the paintings in 1995,’ Sigg recalls. ‘Wang Luyan had the foresight to collect them, but he did not know how to preserve them. They had been taken off their stretchers and kept in his apartment, where it was 35 degrees centigrade with 100 per cent humidity in summer and freezing cold in winter. Some were rolled on the floor, others stacked on top of each other.’ Sigg’s searches have not always been so successful: other important works have been damaged beyond restoration, or have simply disappeared.

Beyond buying their work, Sigg has also played a key role in bringing Chinese artists to the West. In 1998, he established the Chinese Contemporary Art Award, a biennial contest staged with the express purpose of exposing its judges – many of them key international curators – to the vast production of China’s studios. That tactic proved particularly successful with legendary Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, whose 1999 Venice Biennial is still nicknamed ‘The Chinese Biennial’ for spotlighting China’s art. ‘What I liked in the Chinese artists was their new iconological impulses, their style of subversion and how they reacted to their own history,’ Szeemann explains. ‘That was the right ▶

Top left: Hong Lei, *After the Song Dynasty painting ‘Quail and Autumn Chrysanthemum’* by Li Zhongan, 1998, colour photograph, 102cm diameter **Top right:** Zhan Wang, *Untitled*, 1998, stainless steel, 154 x 65 x 45cm each **Right:** Wang Guang Yi, *No. 2 Materialist*, 2001, polyester, millet grains, 180 x 140 x 80cm; on wall, Zhu Fadong, *Sunshine*, 1998, ink pen on parchment, 178 x 76cm



‘Uli Sigg doesn’t just collect Chinese art,’ says Nicholas Serota. ‘He’s deeply engaged in the entire society of China’

◀ moment to show these Chinese artists – not as an exotic element, but rather as autonomous contributors on the same level as Western artists.’ Sigg was heavily involved, lending his own works and using his network to ease onerous logistics on the China end. He also played a role in ‘Inside Out: New Chinese Art’, the 1999 US show that set the stage for the ‘Chinese’ Venice biennial.

For years, Sigg has stayed behind the scenes, shunning the spotlight. Yet next summer he will unveil a show of 150 to 200 pieces from his collection, filling 29,000 square feet of the Kunstmuseum Bern and timed to coincide with Art Basel. Sigg hopes the show will tour to major institutions elsewhere on the continent and Stateside. Why now? ‘People kept telling me that it was irresponsible not to show the work publicly,’ Sigg says, laughing. ‘But mostly because these are great artists who should have opportunities similar to those from the West. On any group-show topic, curators could find interesting art in China, but instead you always see “NATO art” – work exclusively from Europe and North America.’ There’s an undertone of frustration here, and Sigg’s jaw momentarily tightens. It hardly seems coincidence that he prominently displays Yan Lei’s *The Curators*, a painting of the 2002 Documenta squad on a flash trip through China, when dozens of artists presented work in a curatorial cattle call.

In a sense, Sigg has shouldered a burden far beyond that of the normal collector; Szeemann calls him ‘the ambassador of Chinese art in the West’. As such, he regularly runs into museum directors questioning whether it makes sense to start including Chinese art within collections grounded upon Europe’s art history. A valid viewpoint, admits Sigg – before counter-punching: ‘Of course, that means they shouldn’t buy Gabriel Orozco’s work either.’

That said, Sigg is no art-world activist. Contrasting the Swiss with fanatical Italian collectors Egidio Marzona and Count Panza di Biumo, PS1 director Alanna Heiss observes that while Sigg clearly loves Chinese contemporary artists, it is less the love of a paramour than that of an uncle or older brother. ‘He doesn’t want exclusive relationships with the artists or to be deeply involved with their lives,’ she explains. ‘And he can be very detached in looking at their work. But by the same token, he’s not going to fall out of love with an artist and suddenly turn his back on them.’

It would be easy, considering Sigg’s dominant holdings of Chinese work and his promotional efforts, to draw comparisons to Charles Saatchi’s position vis-à-vis the YBAs. Some cynics even suggest that Sigg might be speculating on the long-term value of their market. Tate director Nicholas Serota, no stranger to Saatchi, stridently contests that comparison. ‘When Charles started buying the YBAs, he already had a taste for selling, having just offloaded the Pop art and minimalist collection he built with his first wife,’ Serota points out. ‘I can’t imagine Sigg doing that at all. And Sigg doesn’t just collect Chinese art; he’s deeply engaged in the entire society of China.’

Indeed, Sigg’s collection also includes Ming furniture, thousands of propaganda posters (many executed by famous artists) and the original painting of *Bring the Water from the Milky Way*. This Socialist

Realist image depicts young and old people valiantly striving in the snow to build an aqueduct; a poster of it once hung in almost every Chinese apartment, as omnipresent as the Marlboro Man in the West. Art brought Sigg to such humble homes, where he glimpsed the country’s hidden face. ‘The artists were totally marginal at that time, often living in harsh poverty,’ he recalls. ‘They gave me a window into the lowest strata of Chinese life, one I would never have had in my business or diplomatic dealings. And it also offered me the chance to encounter outsider thinking, often quite critical of the government.’

Today, cultural authorities realise contemporary art attracts tourists and signals a certain cool factor. Chinese institutions suddenly find themselves being asked for loans of contemporary pieces, not ancient porcelains. The incipient capitalism raging in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou has triggered a growing gallery scene. Artists with any international market can live comfortably. ‘I regret the lack of subversiveness in the younger generation,’ says Szeemann. ‘The revolt and ambiguity of intentions became aesthetics, which always means a diminution of intensity.’

Already in the late 1990s, Sigg notes, some artists pandered to perceived Western tastes by pumping out Mao paintings. Clearly, the transitional phase that first sucked him into China’s contemporary scene has ended. ‘The precondition that made Chinese art so special was isolation from Western art, and that isolation has disappeared,’ he acknowledges. ‘For the second-rate artists this situation will surely create problems. But the very best treat it as another stimulus, and dig deeper into their own culture, exploiting China’s language, history and archetypes to extend their vocabulary.’

This page, top: on wall, from left to right, Hou Tiehui, *Li Bai*, 2001, airbrush on canvas, 216 x 90cm; Zhou Tiehui, *Water-1*, 2001, airbrush on canvas, 197 x 122cm **Below left:** Xu Yihui, *Boy reading Mao books*, 1998-1999, porcelain, 51 x 49 x 61cm **Below right:** Wang Guang Yi, *Great Criticism*, 1998, oil on canvas, 149 x 149cm **Opposite page:** Uli and Rita Sigg in their garden

