

Switzerland hosts biggest ever show of Chinese contemporary art

Former ambassador's collection goes on display in Bern

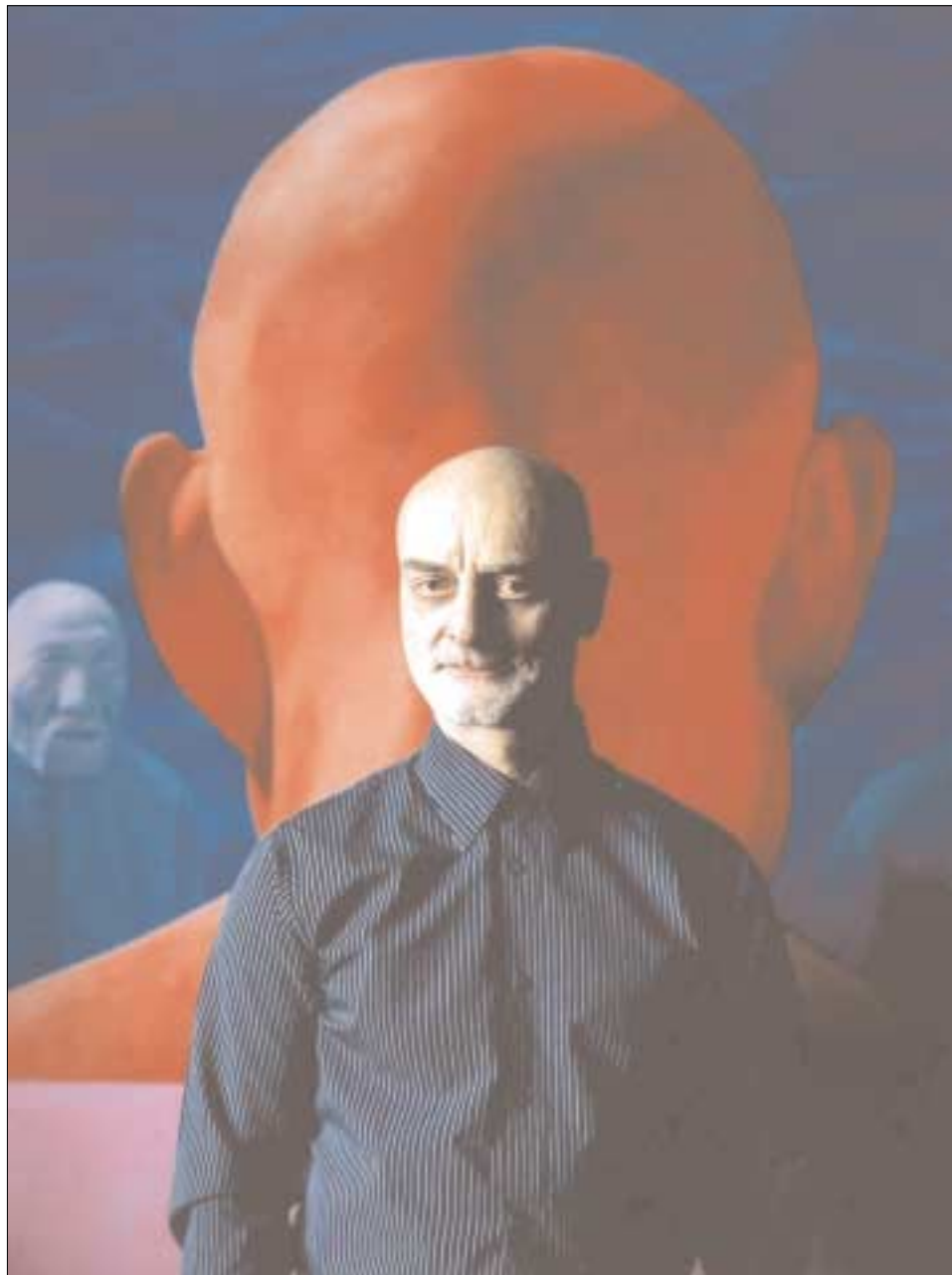
BASEL. Thousands of collectors and dealers, including a group from Tate Modern, are travelling to Bern and Zurich for a crash course in Chinese contemporary art, courtesy of Swiss collector Uli Sigg.

Spread over the two sites, "Mahjong" (a popular table game among Chinese) is a survey of Chinese contemporary art from 1979 to 2005. Mr Sigg, with the Kunstmuseum Bern's curator, Bernhard Fibicher, and Chinese artist/curator Ai Weiwei, has divided the more than 300 works into a dozen different themes, such as "Mao and the cultural revolution", "Consumerism" and "The Body as a medium."

Mr Sigg's relationship with China goes as far back as 1978, first as a businessman and then as Switzerland's ambassador from 1995 to 1998. He built his collection over more than a decade, travelling all over the country to visit almost 1,000 artists' studios at a time when there were no galleries.

After he realised that no Chinese institution was making an effort to collect and preserve these artists, he expanded his scope to include a comprehensive cross-section of China's contemporary art since 1979, eventually amassing over 1,200 pieces by 180 artists. Due to his perseverance both in pursuing contemporary work and promoting it in the West, he has become a godfather to the current scene, a situation vividly reflected in one small room at the Kunstmuseum Bern, which features works depicting the collector himself.

After leaving his diplomatic post, Uli Sigg returned home and bought a small medieval castle on a tiny island in Lake Mauensee near Lucerne and installed his Chinese collec-



Uli Sigg in front of Fang Lijun's *Untitled*, 1995

Herzog and de Meuron.

Mr Sigg played a major behind-the-scenes role in a previous phase of enthusiasm for China's contemporary artists, the 1999 Venice Biennale curated by the late Harald Szeemann, who toured China's various art

Venice), rose to international prominence afterwards, the art world's attention soon turned elsewhere.

This time around, predicts Mr Sigg, the spotlight will not move away from Chinese art because a growing number of gallery spaces is opening in Beijing now and the auction houses are continually approaching him in the hope of getting consignments. "After the Biennale, Szeemann was criticised for having pushed the Chinese too much and people seemed to think, 'This will go away; I don't need to grapple with it,' but now it's clear that Chinese contemporary art is here to stay, so people have either to learn about it or make a conscious decision to ignore it."

Given the current China hype, Uli Sigg could probably have placed this show in almost any contemporary art museum worldwide, so why did he choose the Kunstmuseum Bern? He knew his involvement would extend far beyond signing loan agreements, so proximity to the Mauensee helped: "I've never seen a collector be so involved with a show,"

says Dr Fibicher, "He did everything from selecting the pieces to working on the catalogue to being present during the installation."

Hanging the show took almost a month since it occupies the entire museum, but even that was not enough. When the Holderbank approached Mr Sigg to see if he would like to set up a second exhibition space in its private Kunsthalle west of Zurich, the collector snapped up another 10,000 square feet to display 30 more works. "This show will allow people unfamiliar with Chinese contemporary art to see for themselves that there is a whole cosmos of artists there, working across all media and styles with impressive energy," says Mr Sigg. "Often people will see a contemporary work from China and like it, but not be sure how to situate it; this will allow them to educate themselves. We are even expecting the visit of the small, core group of Chinese collectors, to whom this older material is even less familiar than it is to the West." **Marc Spiegel**



Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline series*, 1997

tion there. He still travels frequently between Switzerland and China due to his involvement in projects such as the Olympic Stadium in Beijing designed by Basel architecture stars

scenes with the Swiss ambassador as his guide. Yet while a few Chinese artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang, (curator of the Chinese Pavilion that was inaugurated last week in