

China

The long march to a stable market

LONDON. For about a year and a half, the art market has been obsessed with China. But if you walk around the fair, the country's art scene is virtually invisible, except for Vitamin Creative Space of Guagzhou's (F32) sleeping girls and the one-man show of paintings by Zhou Tiehai at Art + Public—Cabinet P.H. (D18).

"There's an active local market but the gallery system has not emerged properly," explains Frieze Art Fair co-director Amanda Sharp. "China is very interesting, but it's important not to rush in. I'd be happy if there were three or four Chinese galleries next year or the year after, but we're not going to include any out of tokenism."

One of the major problems involves the market tactics of many Chinese artists, who commonly refuse to engage in the sort of exclusive arrangements that underpin

the Western art system, frequently selling work to collectors directly from their studios and churning out multiples of popular works. "Many artists don't understand the value of a gallery's long-term work," says Amelie von Wedel, a specialist in Chinese contemporary whose Allsop Wedel space in north Kensington opened on Monday. "You need to educate them on issues like placing work with museums and raising prices slowly. And you see too many pieces showing up in auction that were never even shown in a gallery."

Speaking of auctions, this weekend's three contemporary art sales are rammed with more than 50 Chinese pieces, particularly painting. On Sunday, Christie's features eight works from Chinese stars Wang Guangyi, Yan Pei Ming, Fang Lijun and Zhang Xiaogang, who has the

two highest-estimated works: the 1995 painting *A Big Family Series* at £320,000 to £400,000 (\$595,000 to \$743,000) and 2005's *My Dream Series: Little General*, at £150,000 to £200,000 (\$278,500 to \$371,300). The house's day sale on Tuesday includes 21 more Chinese pieces, including the cover lot, *Paper Bride*, by Zheng Chuanxing, a 2006 painting with an estimate of £18,000 to £22,000 (\$33,400 to \$41,000) being resold with three other 2006 pieces from a "European collector".

Phillips de Pury, meanwhile, features six Chinese works in its inaugural sale at Howick Place, the most notable being a massive four-panel painting by Fang Lijun from 2002 and estimated at \$250,000 to £350,000 (\$464,000 to \$650,000). The Sotheby's evening sale on Saturday has a mere five Chinese lots, most notably an untitled 2005 painting by Yue Minjun at \$80,000 to £120,000 (\$148,500 to \$223,000), but its day event on Monday features 12 Chinese works, including Zhang Xiaogang's 2005 work *Boy With Eyes Closed*, with an estimate of \$100,000 to £150,000 (\$185,600 to \$278,500) that ties it for top price in the sale.

Given the spotlight thrown on the sales by the Frieze fair, the results could have a bellwether effect. Auction results for Chinese art have



At Christie's: Zhang Xiaogang, *My Dream Series: Little General*, 2005

been excellent, with artists regularly setting records, but potential problems have also revealed themselves. Roughly a third of September's Sotheby's blockbuster sale of Asian Art did not sell. "Some key pieces were bought in," points out von Wedel. "There were too many works and the estimates were too high."

"The Chinese contemporary

scene is pretty mad at the moment," agrees Monaco-based art advisor Josephine Hsieh. "Despite the guerrilla type of business conduct we deal with currently, I think the market will go through a consolidation and filtering phase in the next five years. Only the fittest artists with strong works will survive."

Marc Spiegler

Symposium

Are prices inflated?

At a recent symposium in Shanghai arranged by Pearl Lam's Contrasts Gallery, which has London and Shanghai spaces, collector Bonko Chan said that the market is clearly overheated and that the risk of market manipulation remains high: "You've definitely reached a danger point when the same work is being auctioned three or four times a year. The market for many artists has far exceeded their value."

Veteran Chinese contemporary collector Uli Sigg concurred, saying that mediocre Chinese art is over-priced next to similar works from elsewhere, adding: "I see what happens with some Japanese or Korean art at auction and I think: 'If only the artist had a Chinese passport...'"

Real estate developer Dai Zhikang, whose Zendai Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai's booming Pudong district is undergoing a massive expansion, seemed sanguine about the situation: "For markets to develop, you need bubbles, because without bubbles there are no profits to be made." **M.S.**