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by FRED KOUTZMAN-KARAVASSOFF



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**CHINA'S ART IN FLUX –  
MILLIONAIRE ASIA**

# China's art in flux

The economic crisis saw Chinese contemporary art prices fall dramatically, leading naysayers to forecast the fall of the scene. But are these negative opinions reflecting the real situation, or just flash in the pan comments that can be safely ignored? Seeking to understand if we can expect a return to greatness, or a terminal state of decline, **Peter Sabine** asks a panel of experts about the state of Chinese art, prospects for recovery, and the future



INGRID DUDEK  
*Senior specialist of Asian Contemporary Art,  
Christie's, Hong Kong*

"Following the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the ensuing global economic crisis, the art market, like every other market, has been going through a restructuring. The Chinese contemporary art market certainly is no exception, but, following the extraordinary success of our spring 2009 sales in Hong Kong, and the continued growth of the Asian economies, we are confident that we will see a quick recovery coupled with long-term growth and stabilisation in the Asian market.

We saw strong bidding in our May auctions, with more than 60 per cent of our lots selling above the high estimate, and some works (like Liu Ye's *Rising Sun*) selling for nearly four times the pre-sale lower estimate. We have also seen more cross bidding – collectors from China buying Indian art for example – which points to long-term stability of the field.

The perception of the Chinese contemporary art market has been that everything happened 'overnight', when in fact the major artists of this movement – Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fanzhi, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Liu Ye, Cai Guoqiang and others – have had very long international careers and continue to be in high demand for major museum and institutional exhibitions and by collectors alike.

Their success points to the way in which Chinese contemporary artists respond to circumstances of often unprecedented social, historic and cultural change. I often liken this period to what happened in New York in the post-war years or even Paris in the late 19th century: there are moments in history, transformations of culture, economics and power, where new paradigms are set and new modes of artistic practice come to the foreground. For this reason, I think it is safe to say that we will continue to hear from Chinese artists for a long time to come." >>

## Meet the experts – Art



**MEILIN WANG**  
*Head of Chinese Paintings and Contemporary Asian Art, Bonhams, Hong Kong*

"Chinese contemporary art is not as hot as it was in 2007, but it's not at the bottom either. That said, paintings that are going now for US\$800,000 to US\$1m went for US\$4m to US\$6m in 2007, so it's quite a change. But recovery is on the way.

The financial tsunami changed the landscape, and that includes the art market. It's going to be two years or more before the market recovers, but I think Asian contemporary art will recover faster than European and American art. The bottom line is, when the economy improves, the art market will follow.

We have seen old buyers with a strong economic background keep buying – they have a vested interest as they bought a lot of contemporary art before, so they don't want the prices going down! Top line artists will continue to have the highest prices, but second and third line artists need more galleries supporting them.

In the West, the first market is the gallery, who acts as agent for the artists, and so controls prices. In China, it's the reverse; the artist gives art work to the auction house. Once the economy breaks down, the art market goes right away. So there needs to be a healthier agent system – people should buy in the galleries and re-sell at the auction house, which will keep the market steady and ensure it can solve any future financial storms."

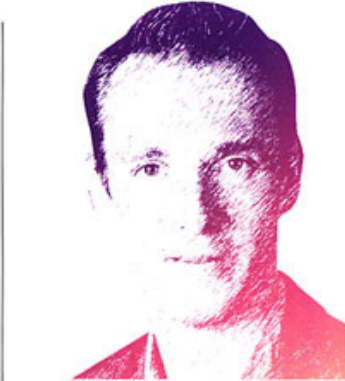


**ALEXIS KOUZMINE**  
*Director of the ifa gallery, Shanghai*

"Chinese contemporary art continues to be popular among collectors after peaking in 2003, when profit became important and art was a short-term investment. Today the serious, older collectors remain, though some of them have purchased less as the crisis impacted their finances. Many galleries closed down and others had a very hard time.

The market was very unstable before the crisis, there was not a continuous evolution of the art scene and prices were not determined by the artist's pedigree or experience – a young fresh grad artist from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute could sell a painting for several thousand US dollars at his first exhibition. In the current economy, collectors are focused on more solid investments and the Chinese contemporary art market hasn't reach the required maturity on the whole. It filtered out mediocre art and ultimately will create a healthier situation.

The market will reach a more mature level by developing collecting, creativity, consistency and less 'commercial' art. These last few years there has been a trend to see the same type of work, which destroyed the image of Chinese contemporary art. But it's exciting that the young generation is more concerned about social evolution, the confrontation between Western influence and the return of Chinese traditional identity. They have a more international vision, have access to more information and a few of them travel. The artists that have a more global vision are the ones you should look out for."



**THORSTEN ALBERTZ**  
*Director of cultural programs for the Goethe-Institut, Tokyo*

"Chinese contemporary art is still warm; in the Western world unfortunately only lukewarm. The interest in Chinese contemporary cooled off dramatically following the decline in the stock markets and the global recession, which overall is a good thing. Art dealers and speculative collectors who jumped into the market with little to no knowledge at the height of the market got burnt. However, well-informed collectors are using this time to snap up amazing deals.

Everybody, even well respected collectors and galleries, started to speculate with Chinese contemporary. There were times not too long ago when it seemed that any Chinese person who had a first name, a pulse and owned a brush became a demanded artist and prices tripled and more overnight. What we see at the moment is a better artistic selection process – an artistic Darwinism – we start to look into quality of the Chinese works now.

Prices of good Chinese artists with a distinguishable and unique style and a clear message will very soon again rise even above their highest prices in 2007. We won't talk about 'Chinese' that much either. Artists will cross over into a very accepted international stable. I hope normalisation starts soon – getting rid of the stigma of 'being Chinese' which is intertwined with quick profit and quick loss. I also hope Chinese institutions will focus more on curating and promoting good art rather than making a profit. Chinese contemporary will then be completely absorbed into the canon of contemporary art."





**FABIO ROSSI**  
*Director of Rossi & Rossi,  
London*

"The cooling off period in buying was throughout the contemporary art market and not just the Chinese one. This was due to many factors, including, of course, the economic slowdown. What we have seen is the disappearance of the collectors and speculators who had driven the market to unsustainable levels in too short a period of time.

That said, recent auctions in Hong Kong seem to indicate that after a cooling period the interest in Chinese contemporary art is now coming back strongly with what seems a number of new collectors. Hopefully, these will be discerning and appreciate quality rather than going for just 'names'.

I think the interest will grow as long as the passion of the serious collectors and the work of the serious artists are the driving forces. If speculators come back, the risk is to drive away the interest of museums and long-term collectors. I hope for the establishment of major private and public collections in mainland China itself.

There are many interesting young artists appearing on the Chinese contemporary art scene; the big question is whether they can sustain the quality of their practice or whether they become victims of the demands of the market. There are also a number of interesting photographers – one I particularly like is Xing Dawen."



**MEG MAGGIO**  
*Owner of Pekin Fine Arts,  
Beijing*

"Chinese contemporary art is still producing high quality, innovative artworks that are always sought out and embraced by collectors. The price bubble has burst and that is a good thing. Prices have come down to planet Earth allowing more collectors to jump in.

We opened in 2005, committing ourselves to show Chinese artists alongside their counterparts from around Asia. We recognised that Beijing was firmly established as the centre of not only Chinese contemporary art but also Asian contemporary art, with the opening of art galleries in Beijing from Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Most of the world's top collectors do not acquire solely along national boundaries. Rather, they collect talent from around the world, and recognise a natural geographic synergy between and among artists from the same region.

I'm a firm believer in Chinese contemporary art and see continued growth, growth and more growth! There are so many artists who go unnoticed, young and old: Zhang O, Jin Shan, Yang Yong, Bai Yiluo, Huang Zhiyang, Marvin Mintofang are six that I represent and really respect. I also firmly believe that the greatness of artists like Wang Qingsong, Ai Weiwei, Yang Fudong, Yan Peiming, Yang Jiechang, Wu Shanzhuan, Huang Yongping, Fang Lijun, Wang Suling and others is still not fully recognised."



**NICOLE SCHOENI**  
*Owner of Schoeni Art Gallery,  
Hong Kong*

"Chinese contemporary art is still popular among serious collectors. Five to six years ago, it surged beyond anyone's expectations – and was seen as a good investment. But speaking as a collector myself, the rule of thumb is to buy art that you like and can imagine enjoying over a number of years. Investment should only be second priority. Currently, you will find less of those who were buying purely for investment or speculation in the market.

The development of Chinese contemporary art is still in its infancy, and as harsh as it sounds, I believe that history shows that true artist integrity and talent are at their best when times are tough and artists are struggling. Artists no longer just focus on what the market dictates is sellable and re-focus more on their true creativity.

I strongly believe there is a bright future for Chinese contemporary art, I have a strong attachment and interest to artists born in the 1980s in particular. I am of the same generation and as a collector there is the excitement of 'growing up' with the artists and their art works, to see how they evolve and to watch their future art career flourish. They are the 'Me Generation' of China, completely different from the Yue Minjuns, Zhang Linhais and Zhang Xiaogangs. They don't care about politics, grew up to love and take part in consumerism, and are informed by sex, violence, comics and TV. This makes them playful, cheeky, and experimental with mixed media – they are the future of Chinese contemporary art." ❧