

Home is where the art is

Foreign artists are moving to Beijing to take advantage of lucrative commissions and low production costs and rents, writes **Mark Graham**

Book hawkers at the Beijing weekend market at Panjiayuan were incredulous. Using rudimentary Putonghua and universally understood gestures, the foreigner was offering to buy their entire stock of several thousand used books.

Their puzzled disbelief quickly turned into beaming smiles when Jayne Dyer counted out the banknotes and began to discuss arrangements to collect the books, which were in various languages and states of disrepair. The hawkers would be even more taken aback if they discovered where the books ended up – as key elements in a piece of installation art in a swanky new Tsim Sha Tsui shopping mall.

Dyer is among an increasing number of foreign artists who are basing themselves in Beijing for artistic and pragmatic reasons. The capital already has a thriving colony of homegrown artists and a buzzing gallery scene. Now scores of overseas artists are relocating there to take advantage of cheap studio space, relatively low living costs, easily available – and affordable – craftsmen for making scale models of more ambitious works, and to pick up lucrative corporate commissions.

Dyer, a plain-speaking Australian whose installation work includes pieces for the K11 Art Mall mentioned earlier, is candid about why she is based in the city.

“There are more commissions offered here in China, Hong Kong and Taipei,” she says. “The market here is extensive, which means more work. And it pays much more.”

“I moved here to live full-time three years ago. I like being in cities and countries where I am a foreigner. I think Beijing is a place of slippage, if you are in a place where you speak the language fluently and hear every single conversation around you then you are much more integrated into the culture. My projects are about that kind of slippage, that kind of anonymity really infuses my work.”

Since moving to Beijing, the corporate commissions have kept coming in for Dyer, allowing her to create ever grander projects. The more ambitious the installation, the more planning is needed beforehand; and that’s where Beijing comes into its own.

“To try out ideas, even on a small scale, can be hellishly expensive in Australia. But you try it out to see if it has got legs,” she says.

“For example, I have been commissioned to do a project at the Today Art Museum which will feature world-famous skyscrapers suspended upside down. They will be seven metres high; but before you can build them, you have to do a scale model.

“In Australia, it might take two months to make; a big one might take a year, and it would cost a fortune. Here it is much quicker, the resources and materials and people are so much more readily available; it means ideas can be generated, and implemented, much quicker.”

With her tousled hair and all-black outfit, Dyer looks the bohemian artist. But she clearly has the business savvy to sell whimsical projects to conservative, blue-chip companies. Recent clients have included Swire Properties, the Mandarin Oriental in Macau, a major Taiwan bank and, for New World Properties, the K11 mall project in Tsim Sha Tsui.

“For that, they wanted something edgy so I came up with the idea of the books,” says Dyer. “I think there are a total of 3,000 books, about 200 new ones from Hong Kong; the majority from the market in Beijing. When I said I wanted to buy the lot, the stallholders didn’t believe me at first. When they realised I was talking cold, hard cash they changed their minds. I bought them at an incredibly reasonable price for me, but they were also very happy. They closed their stalls and took a few days off!”

Tony Scott, a fellow Australian artist, moved to Beijing for similar reasons. The rent for a cavernous suburban studio is just HK\$40,000 a year, a fraction of the cost in Sydney or New York. But he acknowledges there are downsides to life in the



capital, such as choking pollution, brutally cold winters and gridlocked traffic. “I am not someone coming in and finding Chinese culture exotic, or intoxicating or enticing,” says Scott, who visited regularly before relocating full time.

Since moving to Beijing, he has developed medical conditions such as gout and high blood pressure which he attributes to the environment, pollution and MSG and salt in the food.

“But I do a lot of work for Hong Kong and in China itself and this is home for me now. Beijing provides me with everything I need as an artist and as a lifestyle. There is dynamism in the art world here and dynamism in the people I am meeting and collaborating and working with. Beijing is a city in enormous transition, moving at a very fast pace, which makes it exciting to live here.”

His latest work, The Health Project, which is unveiled this month, is partly inspired by his own

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Jayne Dyer, artist living in Beijing

recent medical problems, and incorporates personal records and items, including X-rays and even collapsed dental bridges. It also features life-sized acupuncture dummies, marked with the key pressure points, and scary-looking vintage sets of surgeons’ scalpels.

“Instead of sitting in a studio in a traditional way as a painter, my work is now installation and sculpture; I find objects in the market or in towns and incorporate them into

my work,” Scott says. “I don’t see myself as using Chinese cultural practice specifically to make my work; it is about my journey here, my place here and observing what is going on around me.”

Judas Arrieta’s oeuvre is to bring a smile to people’s faces whether it is through a cartoon, a painting, a video or a blow-up plastic doll.

Like the other artists, he made exploratory visits to Beijing before returning for an extended spell in 2005. By a happy twist of fate, he won a €30,000 (HK\$301,000) prize in an art competition. The windfall allowed him to set up the Manga Art Studio in the capital although most of his work is sold on the internet or in Spain, where his work is exhibited at galleries in the northwestern Basque region.

“Some people thought I was crazy to come [to Beijing], but I think working here is a great opportunity. When people ask where I am from then I say I am Chinese but I am a five-year-old Chinese, as that is the

amount of time I have been here. The first thing my father told me when I went to China was: don’t live like a foreigner. If you live like a foreigner your life in China will be very short.”

Arrieta took that advice literally and married a local woman. Besides his cartoon-style paintings, which are generally priced by the metre, Arrieta is involved in fun projects such as limited-edition inflatable toy dolls with fierce expressions that sell for around HK\$900.

“I am here because I want to become Asian; I know it is impossible but that is my goal,” he says. “Art is the place where your dreams can come true and for me that is the most important thing. But there are downsides to living in Beijing.”

“In Europe there are rules and traditions that people abide by; here there are no rules for anything. I have seen artists in galleries take customers away and back to their studios to sell their paintings.”

Jayne Dyer (above) and her installation The Book Project (top left) at the K11 Art Mall (second left); Spanish artist Judas Arrieta with inflatable dolls (above left); Australian artist Tony Scott (bottom left).

Photos: Mark Graham



Asian thirst for fine wines set to pop records at auction

Scott Reyburn

International wine sales at the three main auction houses look set to reach a record US\$200 million this year as Asia’s thirst for fine French vintages pushes up prices.

The total at Sotheby’s, Christie’s and specialist auction house Acker Merrill & Condit will likely be double last year’s figure, as Hong Kong becomes a global hub of the market. Demand from China and other countries in Asia is strongest for trophy-label red Bordeaux.

“It’s partly aspirational,” says Serena Sutcliffe, head of Sotheby’s wine department. “Wine is part of the luxury Western lifestyle, and Asians feel they’ve missed out. They’re also passionate about food, and wine is an obvious follow-on.

It’s also become an important part of the Asian culture of business entertaining.”

Acker offered the largest-yet consignment from a Chinese collector, as well as wines from the cellar of collector Wilfred Jaeger from San Francisco, at its two-day “East Meets West” auction, which ended on Saturday. Sales totalled HK\$68.1 million, the second-highest ever for a wine auction in Asia after Acker’s sale in May, which itself raised HK\$152 million. Acker has raised US\$48 million at events held in New York and Hong Kong in the first half of the year.

The total is more than 10 per cent higher than that achieved in the whole of last year, the company says. “It most likely will mark the point in time where Hong Kong became

the largest wine market in the world,” it says.

Asians, many bidding via the internet, as well as Russians based in Britain, may help generate as much as £2 million (HK\$24.2 million) of sales at Sotheby’s auction in London tomorrow and Thursday.

The event celebrates the 40th anniversary of Sotheby’s first wine offering. In that inaugural season, beginning in September 1970, the company held three events in London. This year, it is scheduled to hold as many as 20 selections in Britain, the United States and China, the New York-based auction house says.

Sotheby’s wine sales raised US\$37.3 million in the first half of the year, with all eight of the most expensive lots falling to Asian private

buyers. Hong Kong-based events generated 52 per cent of the total. The company’s first-half sales last year totalled US\$19.2 million.

The centrepiece of the anniversary sale is a lot containing bottles of all but one of Chateau Mouton Rothschild’s vintages from 1945 to 2003, estimated at between £15,000 and £20,000.

The most highly valued of the event’s 1,308 lots is a 12-bottle case of the 1982 vintage Chateau Lafite, a favourite label for Asian buyers, with an upper estimate of £26,000.

Twenty-eight per cent of Sotheby’s first-half wine sales took place in London, with

Acker president John Kapon with a bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild.

Photo: David Wong



the remaining 20 per cent generated by New York. In 2005, three years before the Hong Kong government scrapped import duty on wine in a bid to encourage auctions in the territory, New York hosted 63.8 per cent of the company’s sales.

“Transporting wine is no longer a problem,” Sutcliffe says. “A lot of great collections from the US have gone to Hong Kong.”

Next month, Sotheby’s Hong Kong will be selling almost 2,000 bottles of Lafite, spanning 139 years, shipped directly from the cellars of the chateau. The October 29 auction is expected to raise as much as HK\$20 million.

Christie’s first-half wine sales for the year totalled £13 million, the London-based auction house says. Its sale in Hong Kong of the

Bordeaux collection collected by the Korean-based company SK Networks on Saturday added HK\$48.1 million to the total.

The rise in sales comes as US billionaire Bill Koch continues his lawsuits over wine auction buys he alleges are fakes. California-based auction house Spectrum Group International has increased transparency by posting 360-degree images of each lot online (you can rotate a bottle by moving your mouse).

Still, the big story remains Hong Kong. As Jason Boland, a 28-year-old technology wizard and the president of Spectrum Group’s wine division, says: “It’s sucking up the best wines from the entire world.”

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