

Thinking out of the white box

Young art collectors in China are finding exciting ways to share their passion for art



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TUCKED away in an alley off Shanghai's Huaihai Road in the shade of a Magnolia tree, is a small restaurant called Le Petit Cochon Vert (The Little Green Pig). Enter, and you will find a colonial home with a large white fireplace, exposed wooden beams and red brick walls. The food is trendy European fine-dining style – the sort of edible art made from wisps, crisps and colourful foam that leaves the diner open-mouthed when the dishes are brought in, and empty-bellied when they are taken away.

But this is no ordinary fine dining restaurant. Le Petit Cochon Vert is owned by second-generation Chinese art collector, Chong Zhou. Instead of a gallery or museum, this is where 26-year-old Mr Zhou chose to share his collection of emerging Asian art, although he jokes that he still cannot pronounce the restaurant's name.

It was Mr Zhou's pharmaceutical entrepreneur parents – particularly his mother, Zhiqin Zhou – who started collecting con-

temporary art 14 years ago. They inspired his passion, he said, at a recent Asia Society forum in Hong Kong.

Mr Zhou has a degree in art history from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and bought his first piece of art in 2010. Today, he has around 150 works of Asian art from the 1970s and 1980s, including Nara Yoshitomo, Liu Wei (the younger), Yang Fudong, Yayoi Kusama and Zeng Fanzhi, which he displays at home, in the office and at his restaurant.

"My restaurant is a place to give young emerging Chinese artists a voice", including Chen Yujun, Hao Liang, Sun Xun and Yang Yongliang, said Mr Zhou.

"We don't own museums or galleries," said Mr Zhou. "Every few months I collaborate with a gallery in China to allow young artists to show their art in my space. It's very casual with a few guests and friends sitting around to discuss art, with food and wine, just like in a house. There are no white walls like the common exhibitions in galleries," said Mr Zhou.

Art collecting is still in its relative infancy in China. There are over 11,000 ultra-wealthy individuals (those with a net worth of at least US\$30 million), but only around 500 "market-dominating art collectors" based in the mainland, according to art research firm Larry's List. But collecting is on the up. Nearly half of Chinese collections were founded between 2001 and 2010, according to Larry's List's Art Collector Report 2014. However, the new power players – the young generation – are doing things differently from the West. Mr Zhou's story is a classic example of the wave of Millennial Generation Chinese who are veering away from traditional art galleries.

"Being more aware and more open-minded than their parents, this younger generator of collectors not only looks at art in a globalised perspective but are willing to share them in alternative ways," said Claudia Albertini, Hong Kong head of Platform China, an art gallery based in Beijing and Hong Kong.

These buyers are coming up with exciting ways to participate in the global art market buzz through restaurants, online platforms, philanthropic workshops and even creating whole villages around a museum.

This differential is partly driven by the onset of the digital age. Art collecting in the East is a relatively recent phenomenon compared to the West, where art patronage dates back centuries. On the other hand in China, although demand for art is rapidly growing, it is only in the first and second generations and deeply intertwined with the rise of technology and the Internet.

This is the belief of China-born, Hong Kong-based Alice Zhang, founder and creative director of Mischmasch, an online community of artists and collectors. Since Mischmasch launched in 2008 it has grown into a community of 3,000 artists from cities including New York, Beijing and Berlin to intriguing locations such as Guayaquil, Myrskylä and Gdynia (in Ecuador, Finland and Poland, respectively). Two years ago she launched a sister site called Stew, which

'My restaurant is a place to give young emerging Chinese artists a voice.'

Chong Zhou, Chinese art collector and owner of Le Petit Cochon Vert



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ART AND GRACE

David Chau, co-founder of ART021, is another champion of China's emerging art scene



PHOTO: DAVID CHAU

allows buyers to print artwork on demand.

"The Internet is full of low-quality content, so people who are tired of junk food come to our site. Once in a while we find art that hits a main vein of our generation and captures the frustrations, vulnerabilities and loneliness of so many young people," said Ms Zhang.

"I'm a Millennial, we're on the front lines of technology, it's a tough generation but we've grown up," she added. "In 2015, technology alone no longer feels grand, so what will take its place? Art and design will replenish the emotions that are missing in our daily lives. Online experiences will transpose us to moments of awe and beauty."

Another emerging trend is for China's Generation Y to use their position philanthropically to become patrons to young artists and launch platforms to cultivate young talent. One such young patron is 35-year-old Hong Kong billionaire Adrian Cheng, scion to the New World Develop-

ment group. In 2010, Mr Cheng launched a non-profit "artist village", an 11-studio workshop space in Wuhan, China, to incubate emerging artists. Already 50 budding artists have cut their teeth at the village and later they will be involved in an artist-in-residence exchange programme through a three-year agreement he arranged with the Palais de Tokyo.

"We have three missions, incubating young Chinese artists, grooming curators and educating the Chinese audience," Mr Cheng explains.

Meanwhile David Chau, the 31-year-old co-founder of ART021, a fair in Shanghai, is another champion of China's emerging art scene. Mr Chau was fascinated with collecting throughout his youth, buying and selling coins, stamps and memorabilia so well that by age 12 he had founded his own eBay business. While reading history of art at the University of British Columbia, he began a small collection "when Chinese contemporary art was still cheap". Today, he has around 500 works and

buys around 20-50 new pieces a year.

"With the younger artists, I don't feel like I am collecting their work. I feel like I am supporting them and creating the work with them. I love this process even more than the art itself," said Mr Chau.

In 2008, Mr Chau set up the non-profit CC Foundation, which facilitates loans of his collections to international museums and supports artists' progress financially and through public promotion.

Lu (Sean) Xun is also steering clear of the traditional gallery model. With his real estate developer father Lu Jun, the 32-year-old is creating a small village of 24 buildings in the mountains of Nanjing. The project is called China International Practical Exhibition of Architecture (CIPEA) and the 46-hectare plot includes a boutique hotel and various designer homes. It has involved 20 top architects, the likes of Ai Weiwei and Mathiaz Klotz, and cost the Lus around US\$164 million to build.

The village is built around the Sifang Art Museum, a 20,000 square foot museum which houses the family's contemporary

art collection. When they first wandered around the plot a decade ago, Mr Lu and his father had to use a GPS to find their way. "Ten years later and we are still learning about the enormous possibilities this space can bring us and the people of Nanjing," said Mr Lu.

He added that the Sifang museum was built in response to China's rapid urbanisation and "the profit-maximising mentality". "The landscape of Chinese cities is (increasingly characterised) by repetitive architecture at minimal cost. We felt obliged ... to break the mould and ... invigorate the cultural scene of Nanjing."

China's millennials are among the newest and most creative collectors of our time. And with less than 10 per cent of China's population having inherited their wealth, according to Wealth-X, there is plenty of room to grow. **W**

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