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Illustration by Jake Cohen.

SHALL WE SHAKE ON IT?

NEWS: THE POINT BY ANDY COHEN FROM SEP/OCT 2010

CHINA

A two-faced specter of fear and greed is haunting China's art world: a government afraid to consecrate its modern heritage by including avant-garde art—critical of the system—in public collections; and mercenary dealers who value the RMB over art, knowledge and human relationships. I encountered this specter firsthand at Art Beijing in late April, and had to swap my collector's hat for a pen.

At the Triumph Art Space stand, I inquired after a 1989 Zhang Xiaogang oil on paper and a Liu Wei landscape from his 1980s student years. The prices? 1 million RMB (USD 145,000) and RMB 350,000 (\$50,000), respectively. Not too bad. The Zhang's condition was good, the image beautiful. I offered RMB 850,000. The salesperson consulted her boss outside the booth. She returned to tell me that the work was no longer for sale; it had been sold to someone who saw it earlier. The show had just opened. Bizarre. I asked for the best price on the Liu Wei. With a deadpan demeanor, she said it was not for sale either. Apparently they had just learned that a Liu brought \$400,000 at a London auction the week before.

How do dealers like this get into shows? "This is how we do business in China," she said. I'd had enough. I offered RMB 1.1 million for the Zhang. She dutifully went to the boss. She came back to say that the phantom buyer proposed 1.2 million. I offered 1.3 million. Without missing a beat, she sat down and wrote up an invoice. "Because the buyer already has a long-standing relationship with the gallery," she explained, "he is kindly willing to let you have the work for RMB 1.3 million with the hope that we can also develop a long-standing relationship with you."

"How considerate," I said. "Since I don't want to jeopardize this long-term relationship, I'll let your buyer have it." It was at this point that a friend pulled me aside to tell me I was wasting my time. Triumph is affiliated with Beijing Poly International Auction Co., Ltd., which is owned by the Poly Group, a leading arms dealer with affiliations to the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The gallery's shady sales style was one thing. What I find outrageous is that 20 years after the military's violent suppression of the student democracy movement, the PLA—or rather, their "civilian" family members—are, at arm's length, in any way profiting on the art born from that struggle. Was this what Deng Xiaoping meant by "socialism with Chinese characteristics"? Perhaps it is, since the Deng family purportedly owns an interest in Poly.

These ethical lapses are not limited to military- or state-affiliated entities. I had a similar experience two weeks later, buying a painting through a consultant from Xin Dong Cheng Contemporary Art Space, a privately owned Beijing gallery. After our deal, Christie's Hong Kong sold a comparable work by the same artist for twice the price I was quoted. Suddenly, the gallery owner's wife couldn't bear to part with the picture I'd bought. Oldest trick in the book. I called the gallery owner, Mr. Cheng, to ask him why he felt he did not have to honor his word. I reminded him that he had signed an invoice. "It's not a contract," was his reply. I asked if his reputation mattered. He hung up the phone. Evidently it didn't.

Though many contemporary galleries and dealers work within the venerable tradition of honor and integrity, sadly, many stories are

circulating of dodgy dealers practicing the art of deception. This is an age-old problem, especially in a bubble market with prices rising and speculators rushing to the "new world" to set up shantytown dealerships. And by no means is this phenomenon limited to China. India is rife with it, and it is far from uncommon in Europe and the US. Each region has its unique set of circumstances.

The problem in China is exacerbated by the fact that the Ministry of Culture refuses—for ideological reasons—to officially recognize the cultural value of China's avant-garde. As the pioneering art historian and curator Li Xianting said at a lecture I attended in Beijing, "We can't expect the government to establish, from top to bottom, an art museum system in such a short time . . . because until now the collection in the government's museum of contemporary art has been really poor."

As a result, works from one of the most important art movements of the late 20th century are not included in the collections of China's public museums or ingrained in the collective consciousness of the nation that produced it. The Ministry of Culture's fear of art that criticizes the government created a vacuum where it could have plugged a draining hole—cultivating museum collections, courting donations from individuals and corporations by offering tax incentives or providing no-strings-attached commissions and grants to artists.

Auction houses, secondary-market dealers, collectors and so-called "private" museums with their curator-cum-agents have filled the void. Corruption filters down from the top levels of government; reform fights its way up from the masses. With transparent, reform-minded antitrust violation legislation and Freedom of Information Acts, conflicting interests in military, government and business practices can be analyzed, if not regulated.

Of more immediate concern is the need for a communal culture of professional integrity, perhaps a self-governing art association, through which deals are honored, conflicts of interest openly discussed, artistic freedom encouraged; where business can be conducted with a handshake and an invoice, and crooked art-world operators lose face. In every language, one's word is still one's word.

Tools

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