

Global Times

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798 Beijing Biennale, a milestone for China's contemporary art

* Source: Global Times

* [20:32 August 30 2009]

By Harvey Dzodin

The first 798 Beijing Biennale, which began recently and runs until September 12, marks another milestone for contemporary art in China.

Chinese art's modern roots began with the Star Group Exhibition in 1979 and the 1985 New Wave, but goes back thousands of years to the Bronze Age and the flowering of the earliest Chinese civilizations.

The 798 Biennale joins other prestigious ongoing events that enjoy an international reputation, such as the Shanghai Biennale, Hong Kong International Art Fair, Art Beijing and the China International Gallery Exposition.

Personally, I love Chinese contemporary art. It represents the energy, enthusiasm and determination of young Chinese, together with artists one generation earlier, many of whom, are still young at heart.

The Chinese contemporary art scene makes Beijing an infinitely richer and more interesting place to be. More and more art villages and culture zones such as Caochangdi and Songzhuang are springing up all the time.

My favorite is 798!

798 is claimed to be the third most visited tourist destination in Beijing after the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. Aside from foreign tourists, there are many Chinese, especially young people, there. One day some of them will become great artists or great collectors, inspired by the creative energy that they felt there.

Some artists hate 798. They think that it is too commercial, too touristy and too prosperous. Some purists even look down on artists and galleries at 798 for selling out. Well, frankly speaking, it is commercial and sometimes crowded. But so what? What is the purpose of art and how do you measure success?

"Success is what sells," according to Andy Warhol, a leading figure of pop art. This is the capitalist market at work. People vote with their renminbi, dollars and euros. A famous New York criminal, Willy Sutton, when asked why he robbed banks, replied "Because that's where the money is."

Why do people go to 798? Because that's where the art is. And not only art but a wide swath of humanity, both domestic and foreign. That's why I go almost every week.

Most art openings in Beijing, unlike in North America or in Europe, occur on Saturday afternoon. Usually no invitation is needed. In addition to a smorgasbord of art, you may find some delicious snacks.

Most importantly, you will find interesting people from many countries and walks of life. At art openings you can meet people with the right stuff in an atmosphere that is relaxing and conducive to good conversation and fellowship.

But all is not well with the contemporary art scene in Beijing and China either. After an orgy of Chinese and foreigners buying in the recent years, the art market crashed along with the stock market.

It continues to be sluggish even though China is at the vanguard leading the way out of the economic crisis. For some this correction was predictable and long overdue. I believe that the shakeout is healthy and natural, although painful for speculators and some artists.

There are now too many art galleries, art zones and artists to satisfy domestic and foreign demand. Many galleries have closed with too little money chasing too much art.

Sadly, while other Chinese cities and provinces build culture palaces, Beijing itself still lacks a world-class contemporary art museum.

We now have our National Center for the Performing Arts, the "Egg" just southwest of Tian'anmen Square, which is a true cultural gem but we lack such a living shrine for the visual arts, with the exception of the National Film Museum that is sadly inaccessible to most Beijingers even though it is a few minutes beyond 798.

The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art and Iberia Center for Contemporary Art are both quite new and have helped energetically fill the void. However, Beijing has no such facility in the heart of the city, unlike Shanghai with the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai and its nearby neighbors the Shanghai Museum of Art and the Shanghai Museum.

Chinese art has existed for millennia and its contemporary art will evolve as China evolves. Participating in that evolution is one of the most interesting and satisfying things we can do.

The author is former director and vice president at ABC Television. He spends most of his time in Beijing now working on media projects