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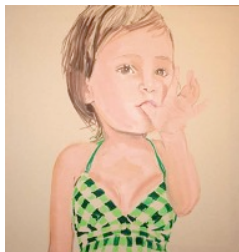
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Young at Art

The Beijing 798 Biennale brings fresh visions to the local art scene

More than 100 Chinese and international artists are slated to participate in what is shaping up to be the city's biggest art event in 2009 – the Beijing 798 Biennale.

For local art enthusiasts, comparisons to Venice or Art Basel still elicit something between a grimace and a grin. But the Beijing 798 Biennale, which opens on Saturday 15 and runs until September 12, has a decidedly youthful and international slant, and with virtually every form of art on show – from painting to performance and installation – even the most trenchant cynic has reason to get off the couch and brave the heat.

This is the first biennale to be held at 798, and its curators are pointing to both the scale of the event and the diversity of the artists as evidence of the cosmopolitanism Beijing needs in order to be a major international art centre (on a par with other world cities such as London or New York). Despite the shabby reputation of biennales in China as somewhat hit-or-miss affairs, the country does have a record of producing large-scale art happenings that dramatically alter the course of its artistic history.

A nationwide exhibition in 1929 sparked a heated debate between Chinese critics on whether artists in the new republic should embrace classical realism or the more abstract leanings of modernism. And just 20 years ago, artists were impassioned enough at the first avant-garde exhibition at the National Art Museum Of China (Namoc) in 1989 to dislodge firearms into their own art installations. The show was shut down, and, as a result, Namoc has avoided the avant-garde ever since.

Recent so-called 'biennales' at Namoc have been less explosive – but they've also been about as risqué as an Episcopalian cucumber party. The good news is that this year's 798 biennale has no connection with previous 'safe' events, nor will it be paid for and organised by any state-ordained cultural apparatchik. Namoc's 'biennales' remain staid; for the 798 biennale, the young will lead the charge.

Zhu Qi, art critic and chief editor of the city's bilingual *Art Map*, is this year's artistic director. The main curator is US-based Marc Hungerbühler. He and his wife Alexandra, who is also involved, are well-known on the New York art scene – among locals and international artists alike – for taking things forward and pulling together grassroots exhibitions, especially through an organisation called 'the:artist.network', which they set up specifically to support artists. Battle-hardened from a limping financial situation in New York, and having already organised six shows in Beijing, the pair are well-suited to organising a large-scale event in the city's current art climate.

'The first show we curated here, a large-scale group exhibition in 2007 called *Surge*, raised the bar in foreign curator survival tactics,' says Marc Hungerbühler, who became acquainted with New York-based Chinese artists such as Gu Wenda in 1995. 'We took on a gigantic construction site without the support of the main organisers of the arts festival we were part of. So we were forced to establish infrastructure on fundamental levels – like electricity and even an army of 24-hour security guards.' More enthusiastic biennale planners this year, he says, are allowing him to focus more on curatorial content.

No big names are on the list – no Hirst, no Hockney, no Emin. And forget the likes of Wang Guangyi, Fang Lijun and Zhang Xiaogang. This biennale is all about new blood from new territory. Exhibits in store include new trends in art from Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East.

In one exhibition, artists air their ecological concerns for the planet by taking their inspiration from science fiction. 'The Man Who Fell to Earth,' says curator Raúl Zamudio of the show, 'is based on a sci-fi novel by Walter Tevis, which was later made into a film by Nicolas Roeg and starring David Bowie.' One work in the show – a statement on toxic waste by the Mexican artist Gabriel de la Mora – superimposes a CAT scan of the artist's skull onto the skeleton of a chicken. Not your standard fare for Beijing.

Both Chinese and international artists are planning to make big statements at this year's biennale on issues that currently affect the lives of ordinary citizens here in Beijing and around the globe. Beijing-based New York artist Jeff Gompertz explores internet censorship in his installation entitled 'Firewall', while Chinese artist Zhang O presents banners and images of Chinese youths wearing American T-shirts. The texts used in Zhang's work blend Chinglish – the kind you see on T-shirts around China – with Cultural Revolution slogans.

Without any sponsorship from the government or major institutions, the curators admit it's been a tough biennale to organise – especially in the current economic climate. The Hungerbühlers, and their unofficial troupe, remain resilient.

'The good part,' Marc Hungerbühler says, 'is that if a community suffers from a common threat [such as the economic crisis], people seem to sympathise more and converge on a general sense of optimism. It is this optimism among the curators and supporters that have brought us this far.'

The Beijing 798 Biennale 2009 runs from August 15 to September 12 in select locations around the 798 Art Zone. See www.beijing798biennale.com.cn for more details.

image: Little Oral Annie, Emma McCagg

Stacey Duff

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