

BLOUIN ARTINFO, 《The Best and Worst of the ShContemporary Art Fair》, Madeleine O'Dea,
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A view of the ShContemporary 2011 space

by ARTINFO China, Madeleine O'Dea

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ShContemporary, Shanghai's contemporary art fair, wrapped up earlier this week after a run of solid sales that attained the modest goal set by new director **Massimo Torrigiani**: to be the best and most professional contemporary art fair in mainland China. After

years of decline, ShContemporary will now be back on the radar of any Chinese or Asian gallery looking to hang out its shingle in mainland China.

Cynics may note that Torrigiani's aspirations are well short of the grand plans that former **Art Basel** supremo **Lorenzo Rudolf** sketched out for ShContemporary when he launched the fair in 2007. But as Torrigiani wittily put it in a recent interview, the fair's conception was marred by an "original sin" — that of imagining that the it could be an outpost of international galleries in mainland China, rather than an event built on the foundations of the local scene.

Whether there was a stain on its soul or not, ShContemporary soon struck double trouble, first when the founding of **Art HK** in 2008 outflanked Shanghai in its global ambitions, and later when the financial crisis chilled the market worldwide. When the dust settled it was clear that neither Shanghai nor any other Chinese mainland city could compete with Hong Kong as a natural center for doing business. With its zero-percent tax on art and its transparent British-based legal system, the harbour city is now the choice of international art market players from **Sotheby's** and **Christie's** to **Gagosian** and **White Cube**.

But there remains a belief that the mainland needs one quality contemporary art fair of its own and, based on ShContemporary's 2011 showing at least, Massimo Torrigiani has positioned the event to shrug off its Beijing rivals and take the crown. Beijing does have natural advantages, home as it is to most of China's important galleries, artists, and institutions. But the capital shot itself in the foot a few years ago when, having launched one successful contemporary art fair, the founders fell out and the capital ended up in 2006 with two competing events, the **China International Gallery Exposition** (or CIGE) and **Art Beijing**. As ARTINFO China has wearily reported, this has resulted in not twice the value but something less than the sum of the two parts.

The big question for ShContemporary now is whether there is sufficient demand to justify a major contemporary art fair on the mainland at all. Naysayers quietly point out that serious collectors can choose to attend Art HK or an established regional fair like **Art Taipei**, or simply deal directly with the galleries and artists, as is already commonplace. Why go to a local fair? It is true that business at ShContemporary was not exactly stellar, if you take Art HK (or indeed ShContemporary in its opening year) as your yardstick, but many galleries reported solid business. A number of local players — including leading Shanghai gallery **James Cohan** — have already confirmed their intention to attend next year.

Cohan, who sampled this year's fair at the urging of Torrigiani after skipping it in 2010, had a strong booth at the event. Showing a range of local and international works, the gallery calibrated its offerings carefully to the market, with no work priced above \$30,000. They were rewarded with a slew of sales, including of work by local Shanghai sculptor **Wang Xieda**, who Cohan will feature in a solo show in the city later this year. Cohan's local director **Arthur Solway** pointed to the fair's "renewed energy" and was happy to be quoted in the official ShContemporary press release as deeming the fair "terrific." He confirmed to ARTINFO that he did enough business to secure his endorsement for another year.

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Meanwhile, leading Beijing gallery **Beijing Commune**, which is directed by **Leng Lin** (who is also the president of **Pace Beijing**), put its toe in the water this year after sitting out ShContemporary for the last two years. They secured a smattering of sales including two mesmerising abstract canvases by rising art star **Wang Guangle** and a new video work by **Ma Qiusha**. Beijing Commune are yet to decide whether to return next year.

The standout results at the fair were, unsurprisingly, secured by the canny Taiwan-based galleries who have previously impressed at Beijing's art fairs, as well as on their native turf of Taipei. Gallerist **Tina Keng** did particularly well, selling 90 percent of a booth featuring works from a range of both Taiwan and mainland artists at prices from the tens to the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Most interest focused on Taiwan artist **Chen Chun-Hao**, who constructs sublime evocations of classic Chinese landscape paintings using not ink but hundreds of tiny "mosquito" nails. Keng sold all of Chen's works that she brought to Shanghai, including a bravura piece evoking the famous Northern Song Dynasty painting "Travelers Among Mountains and Streams" by **Fan Kuan** for close to \$178,000.

Fellow Taiwan gallery **Lin & Lin** also did good business across a range of prices and artists in their booth, selling a still life "Apple Sofa" by mainland artist **Liu Wei** on opening night for RMB 4 million (\$625,000) and a number of works by emerging Taiwan artists in the RMB 120,000 (\$18,750) range.

Ninety galleries exhibited at ShContemporary — the largest number at any mainland fair this year though a long way short of market leaders Art HK (with 260 galleries) and Art Taipei (with 124) — and some 33,000 people visited during the course of the fair, about half the crowd at Art HK but comparing favourably with Taipei and Beijing.

Leaving aside statistics, anyone who has ever visited Shanghai knows it is a city that rarely disappoints — at least on the purely physical level. Even as gallerists, media, and interested bystanders crowded on to the terrace of Shanghai's Exhibition Center at the vernissage to swap stories of slow sales, the floodlit skyline knocked us off course. Soon the talk turned to the amazing place we found ourselves in — a flamboyant wedding cake of a building dedicated in distant days as a Sino-Soviet Friendship Hall. And this, of course, is Shanghai's intangible advantage: it has one of the great urban landscapes of Asia, and visitors will always be a little bit seduced by it.

Having taken in this year's event, ARTINFO China brings you a look at the Best and Worst of this year's ShContemporary.

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BEST

Shanghai's art community, which rallied for a week-long celebration of contemporary art, opening with a mass vernissage at the city's Moganshan art district on the eve of ShContemporary and concluding with with **ifa** gallery's "art detox" on Sunday where weary art lovers were promised everything from psychotherapy to cupping.

WORST

Shanghai's traffic — which a sudden downpour turned into a taxi-less gridlock that stranded many between engagements.

BEST

Fair director Massimo Torrigiani, who joined ShContemporary with a background in publishing (Rodeo, Fantom) and took up the challenge of turning around the fortunes of a fair that was on the decline. He re-focused the event on the galleries, putting them front and center — literally in the case of his allocation of the Exhibition Center's grand rotunda space — while still making room for the art projects and parallel programs that added depth to the event. A raft of important mainland galleries attended giving the fair the local cred it desperately needed. Notable local exhibitors included Beijing Commune, Boers-Li, Galleria Continua, C-Space, James Cohan, Long March, Pace Beijing, Pearl Lam, Pekin Fine Art, ShanghART, Tang, and White Space

WORST

That despite Torrigiani's best efforts, many of China's leading galleries still stayed away. It will take time for him to lure some of these back — let's hope he's given it.

BEST

Arthub Asia's Hot Spots, the artist projects dotting the fair, where you could stumble on them without warning — all the better to intrigue and beguile. Our favourites included He An's new riff on his signature light works "What Makes Me Understand What I Know?"; the monumental mosaic pieces of happy smiling youths by Zhuang Hui and Dan'er; Song Chen's "Body of Life" installation of earth and mixed media; and Heman Chong's "Monument to the People We've Conveniently Forgotten (I hate You)," which comprised a scattering of blacked-out name cards carpeting the floor of an entry hall as if discarded from a series of meaningless meetings.

LEO XU PROJECTS

WORST

The positioning of video artist Kan Xuan's *Hot Spot*. Her minimalist yet aesthetically arresting and playful "Island" was captivating when actually watched, but when simply heard from the adjacent official fair café its repetitive sound track (including the seemingly incessant coda of "dollar") quickly became wearing.

BEST

Minsheng Museum, which opened its monumental survey of Chinese video art *Moving Image in China: 1988-2011* during the fair. Minsheng also deserves a special award for eschewing the long speeches that are typical of Chinese museum openings, cutting them short in favour of a wine-fuelled party that stretched into the night, with many of the featured artists flying in to take part.

BEST

Indian curator Gayatri Sinha, who brought some of the best of the coming generation of Indian contemporary artists to Pearl Lam Fine Art as part of the inimitable Lam's bold "Window in the Wall, India, and China – Imaginary Conversations" project. For those whose knowledge of Indian contemporary stops at Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat, or Anish Kapoor, Sinha gave us a glimpse of the ironic, sensual, personal, yet outward-looking practice of a new generation of Indian artists through the work of Mithu Sen, Manjunath Kamath, Gigi Scaria, and Lavanya Mani. Sadly the home team (i.e. China's contemporary artists) were less well served by co-curator Gao Minglu, who on the whole failed to surprise with the artists he chose to showcase.

BEST

Last Friday night when young Chinese curator and writer Leo Xu (who previously worked at Chambers Fine Art and James Cohan) launched his new space Leo Xu Projects on the same night that James Cohan opened its brilliant *Alchemy & Inquiry* exhibition featuring the work of Philip Taaffe, Fred Tomaselli, and Terry Winters. What could have been a regrettable clash turned into an enjoyable stroll as the two spaces' proximity allowed the art crowd to taste the exuberant spirit common to both events. Tomaselli being on hand for the Cohan opening, however, gave that event a win on points.

BEST

Shanghai is not Beijing. Notwithstanding the complaint about weather-induced gridlock, getting around the city is a breeze by comparison to the torments of the capital's ring roads, and the Shanghainese propensity to dress up is a nice change from Beijing's dressed-down aesthetic.

WORST

Shanghai is not Beijing. Despite the best efforts of the fair, the local museums, and the galleries, Beijing is still the center of China's art world, which will always make it a matter of some regret that the capital can't stage an art fair remotely as stylish as ShContemporary.

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