

Spirited moment endures: The White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney

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THE ARRIVAL OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST PRIVATE contemporary art museum with Sydney's White Rabbit Gallery which opened late last month was, like the long-eared *lapin* in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, always going to be 'late'.¹ Not in the sense of delayed schedules or nervous, time-befuddled staff. On the contrary. The mid-morning media launch for this brave, new Gallery was a well-managed, almost serene affair: the light snacks and green tea, two guest speakers – a scholar and an artist – and the organised dispersal into smaller groups for a guided gallery tour; all unfolded with a just-right air. No, the lateness of the White Rabbit boils down simply to its being long overdue as a unique privately funded public gesture in the Australian art world, and thus all the more grand and welcome in our cultural landscape.

Chinese art scholar Edmund Capon – the launch's first guest speaker – certainly set the tone for such praise. As long-time Director of the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW), Capon appreciates only too well the role of the private benefactor in supplementing the public purse. Next month his gallery pays tribute to Sydney arts patron John Kaldor whose formidable support for contemporary art has not only materialised through substantial funds but through an active, experimental vision.² Sydney also has the Shermans (Gene and Brian, with the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation), and the Belgiorno-Nettis family (founders of the Sydney Biennale) yet until now, the reality of the private collection-based public contemporary art museum was but a distant venture found in other countries with more noble art philanthropy traditions.

The White Rabbit Gallery is the passion and brainchild of Sydney art collector Judith Neilson. Unlike the antiques-to-contemporary eclecticism of Tasmanian collector David Walsh (whose Museum of Old and New Art is set to open outside Hobart in 2010), Neilson's is a singular bent: for contemporary (post-2000) Chinese art. Over the past decade, with the assistance of Beijing-based artist (and former Sydney College of the Arts graduate) Wang Zhiyuan (notoriously represented in the Gallery's initial display through his gigantic, musical knickers, *Object of Desire*, 2008), Neilson has acquired a collection of 450-plus works. This four-level gallery site in the inner-city suburb of Chippendale retains some of the structural charms of its former life as a knitting factory, while reeking with state-of-the-art gallery flair. It's certainly bigger than some regional galleries I've been to, even while the current hang accommodates just one-fifth of Neilson's collection to date.

In his speech Capon also appreciated the unapologetic and 'energetic' subjectivity of Neilson's collection, its freedom from any curatorial canon. This display in fact inspired Capon to revise his three-tier model of contemporary Chinese art (1: the traditional; 2: modernist with debts to tradition; and 3: the international) such that the second and third categories were now less distinct from each other, and reinforced Chinese-ness rather than a global trend. Fellow guest speaker, Beijing/New York-based artist Bingyi, also represented in the exhibition, revealed how eye-opening the exhibition was for her; the irony of travelling half-way round the world to better appreciate her contemporaries. While representing some of China's better-known, mid-career artists such as Ai Weiwei, Chen Haiyan and Zhou Xiaohu, this opening exhibition impresses with its bold array of emerging talent, giving it the edge over even the Queensland Art Gallery's authoritative, though arguably more culturally sanctioned collection of contemporary Chinese art.

Notes

1. The Gallery/Collection's name, according to Judith Neilson, was simply born out of 'a spirit of the moment'. The TarraWarra Museum of Art, which opened in 2002, in Victoria's Yarra Valley, rightly earns the distinction of Australia's first privately funded public visual arts museum. Funded by Marc and Eva Besen as a venue for their Australian art collection, the Museum's focus is not solely contemporary art; it also programs exhibitions drawn from other collections.

2. The exhibition *40 Years of Kaldor Public Art Projects* will show at the AGNSW, 2 October 2009 to 14 February 2010.

The White Rabbit Gallery's opening exhibition will remain till at least the end of the year. The gallery's opening is accompanied by the publication of a guide-catalogue. Entry to the gallery is free. For opening hours, and venue/program details, visit www.whiterabbitcollection.org

Installation views at the White Rabbit Gallery with, THIS PAGE, TOP: Chen Wengling's sculptures from above, left to right: *Valiant Struggle No. 11*, 2006 (including an 11m-long tongue), *Red Memory – Smile*, 2007, and *Asking God*, 2006; LEFT: Ai Weiwei's *Oil Spill*, 2007 (foreground); PAGE 13, TOP: (left) Bai Yiluo's *Recycling*, 2008, and (right) Cang Xin's *Shamanism Series – Variation*, 2005; BOTTOM: Jiao Xingtiao's *Green Diary*, 2007 (foreground) and *Happily Forgotten* (behind), both fibreglass. All images courtesy and © the artists and the White Rabbit Collection. Photographs by Alex Craig.