

## Interview with Judith Neilson

The White Rabbit Collection, a private museum funded by Judith and Kerr Neilson, will soon open in a restored warehouse in Sydney's newly gentrified Chippendale area. The space, renovated at a cost of more than AU\$10 million, will exhibit the collection formed by Judith Neilson of more than 250 works by some 100 Chinese contemporary artists. Wang Zhiyuan (b. 1958), a Chinese artist based in Beijing and adviser to Neilson, will be the chief curatorial consultant, while Neilson's daughter, Paris, will assist in the running of the museum. Kerr Neilson, founder of the listed Platinum Asset Management, has an estimated wealth of AU\$3.5 billion and is often referred to as Australia's Warren Buffet. The museum will be self-funded and will have the status of a not-for-profit gift-receiving charity.

The establishment of White Rabbit comes at a time when Australia is enjoying closer ties with China, its largest trading partner. The Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, wowed President Hu Jintao at an APEC luncheon in 2007 with his fluent Mandarin, and there has been a concerted effort to expand the teaching of Mandarin in schools. The museum will undoubtedly increase public interest in Chinese contemporary art in Australia, and perhaps we will be seeing more collectors from the land down under in the future. *Orientations* talked to Judith Neilson about the project.

**Orientations:** When and why did you decide to form a collection of Chinese contemporary art and then to establish the White Rabbit Collection?

**Judith Neilson:** During a visit to China with my daughter in 1999, I was exposed to the exciting work being produced and was thoroughly impressed with what I saw. I bought a few pieces during that trip, and came home and raved to my husband about how fantastic the art scene was in China; his reply was: 'Why didn't you get more?', to which I responded that we had run out of hanging space. The idea for the museum grew from there...

**O:** It's an ambitious leap from being a collector to establishing a private museum.

**JN:** Well, I have never seen the point in owning an artwork and hiding it away; I believe it should be shared. My objective is to share these wonderful works with the greater public so that they



Judith Neilson, founder of the White Rabbit Collection

can get the same pleasure out of them that I do.

**O:** Wasn't the museum initially scheduled to open at the time of the Olympics?

**JN:** As with most building projects, there always seem to be delays. The museum is now set to open officially in May 2009. We are also working on a publication which will come out in time for the opening.

**O:** How will you interact with the community and with other museums and galleries?

**JN:** The museum will be open to the public and admission will be free. The main purpose is to show our collection, but we intend to have guest-curated shows as well, and we are definitely open to lending works from our collection to other institutions. The Sydney art galleries are aware of our project and have been most helpful and supportive.

**O:** Are you trying to present an overview of Chinese contemporary art?

**JN:** This collection is not an exhaustive document of the history of Chinese contemporary art; instead, the intent is to focus on works produced after 2000. I have chosen each work because I love it.

**O:** What is distinctive about your collection?

**JN:** All the works have been produced in the new millennium. I feel they reflect a new stage in Chinese contemporary art. While the so-called 'big faces' have received much attention for their high auction values, for me they do not represent the art that is being created by younger or less established artists, which is what I am focusing on.

**O:** How do you make the selection?

**JN:** I consult my good friend Wang Zhiyuan [b. 1958], who is also an artist, on every work that is collected. The vast majority have been acquired on trips to China, where I visit galleries and artists' studios. I have been at least every three months for the past three years. On our



*Sperm*  
By Xiao Lu (b. 1962), 2006  
Installation/performance piece, mixed media  
Variable dimensions



*Mini Home*  
By Jin Shi (b. 1976), 2005  
Installation, mixed media  
120 x 140 x 195 cm

last trip in September we visited the Shanghai Biennale, the ShContemporary art fair and the Nanjing Triennial.

**O:** Are artists from Taiwan or Hong Kong, or Australian-based Chinese artists, represented?

**JN:** I have collected some work from Taiwan, but haven't as yet seen anything from Hong Kong that has interested me. If I love the work of Australian-based Chinese artists, there's no reason not to show them.

**O:** What do you think of the notion that the Chinese contemporary art market is a bubble?

**JN:** Perhaps it is, but I have faith that the works I've collected are good not just because they were produced by Chinese artists, but because they are immensely creative and because of the incredible skill involved in their execution. Work that has these traits should outlast bubbles.

**O:** Is Chinese contemporary art overrated?

**JN:** I believe that only a select group of artists have received large amounts of publicity and coverage. These artists reflect only a small part of Chinese contemporary art in general.

**O:** Which works do you consider to be of greatest importance in the collection?

**JN:** Most certainly, Xiao Lu's [b. 1962] *Sperm* installation. This piece has the dual quality of being poignantly critical of soci-

ety on the one hand and gently reflective of human frailty on the other. After a failed 20-year relationship, Xiao Lu wanted to seize her last chance of having a child before it was too late. Her attempt to find a sperm donor failed, and this installation/performance piece bears witness to that traumatic realization in the lives of many woman.

Another work which particularly touches me is Jin Shi's [b. 1976] *Mini Home*, which is an installation piece. Every item has been carefully crafted to represent a scaled-down version of the original. This work is the embodiment of the life and aspirations of an entire class in modern China as a result of mass migration to the cities. A mouth-dropping piece is Dai Hua's [b. 1976] 6.35-metre-long visual epic of a millennium of Chinese history. *I Love Beijing Tiananmen* is one of the most impressive examples of the new digital print medium. Last but not least, Bingyi's [b. 1975] *Six Accounts of a Floating Life* rises above what is Chinese and what is contemporary. Her free-flowing style transcends both culture and time, as universal themes of death, love, passion and beauty are expressed in this visual narrative.

**O:** Which other artists do you consider noteworthy and why?

**JN:** There are four other artists I'd like to mention in particular. Wang Luyan [b. 1956] uses his knowledge of mechanical engineering and graphic design to create large-scale paintings and sculptures. His works give the appearance of functional mechanical designs, but upon closer inspection, one realizes that the inner workings have been manipulated to confront the audience with questions of human conflict and dilemma. Xia Xiaowan [b. 1959] has taken classical drawing to a new dimension with his hologram-like 'glass boxes'. These ethereal works are made up of multiple sheets of glass on which the artist builds up a three-dimensional image.

Shi Jinsong [b. 1969], who is predominantly known for his sculpture, creates works that are both conceptually challenging and beautifully executed, but with a strong sense of mischief and cynicism. And Wang Zhiyuan is a true artist with the ability to work in a wide variety of media. His work is provocative and socially relevant, but lifted by his delightful sense of humour.

All photography is by Silverpixel.

All artwork shown is in the White Rabbit Collection.  
<http://www.whiterabbitcollection.org>



Detail of *I Love Beijing Tiananmen*  
By Dai Hua (b. 1976), 2006  
Digital print on paper  
Height 110 cm, length 635 cm