

Follow the Rabbit

Taking stock of a collection and its reception through contemporary Chinese art

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In the main exhibition 2023 "Follow the Rabbit" curated by Alexandra Grimmer, the Liaunig Collection shows a new side by opening the door to the Far East and presenting itself in juxtaposition with contemporary Chinese art. The Year of the Rabbit – according to the Chinese lunar calendar – is intended to invite visitors on a journey in which they follow the rabbit into its burrow in a quotation-like similarity to Lewis Carroll's tale "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" in order to engage with a new world there.

In addition to the highlights of contemporary artworks from the Liaunig Collection, pieces by 28 Chinese artists will be integrated into the main exhibition and are intended to achieve a new way of looking at the museum's own collection. Through a juxtaposition, in some cases of single or multiple works, each by an Austrian or European artist and a Chinese artist, a discourse is created – breaking down the conventional view from the perspective of Western aesthetics.

Some characteristics become more visible when juxtaposed with a Chinese work rather than when viewed in isolation or alongside works by contemporaries from the same culture. Other features find a complement in their forms when viewed in the new context.

According to the criteria of five loosely chosen categories, individual snapshots will be picked out and illustrated in the exhibition. The selection of Chinese works from the period 2008 to 2022 reveals the multi-layered and dynamic development of visual art in China, which had to proceed much faster due to the history of the country, which opened up to the rest of the world only after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

With a few exceptions, the works from the Liaunig Collection were selected for the most part from the 1960s to the present and cover a comparable framework of development as the approximately 40 Chinese works.

The perception of art in Austria broadened from the 1960s onwards, with groupings such as the 'Wirklichkeiten' [Realities] or the 'Neue Wilde' [New Wild Ones], and the path into contemporary art and its acceptance developed along various parallel strands in places such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Chengdu and Nanjing. We are talking about two phenomena: first, the development of a new aesthetic and language in itself, and second, its perception and acceptance in its environment.

Why China? In times of heightened global tensions and concerns, as well as more difficult international relations in recent years, it is good to take a new intentions: whether from the West or from within the country itself. While in a democracy, decisions and regulations are questioned as well as discussed from many different points of view, in China it all comes down to one party, whose (only) truth must therefore be infallible. Similarly, decisions in China do not need to be justified, as is generally required in the West.

Nonetheless, the view of individual citizens should not be blurred by a country's politics. The spirit of optimism and constant need for debate and communication in China's art scene continue unbroken today, just as they were 20 years ago. A large number of the loans to this 2023 exhibition come from Blue Mountain Contemporary Art (BMCA), a collection of contemporary Chinese art based in Vienna. In what has been a very positive collaboration for both parties, the BMCA Collection is delighted to be able to display their works in the unique space of the Museum Liaunig. For the concept of this exhibition – the juxtaposition of Western art with contemporary art from China – the BMCA Collection's storehouse is a wonderful source of important works, most of which have never been shown in Europe.

As an homage to the collection, the Museum Liaunig's holdings provided the foundation in the search for corresponding parallel positions or counterpoints to the Chinese artists. The aim is not to present a complete overview, whether in the choice of works from the Liaunig Collection or in the works presented from China's contemporary art scene. This would be impossible and pointless in any case. The present exhibition is rather a subjective snapshot of the situation in China, which at the same time reaffirms the topicality and the high quality of the Liaunig Collection.

— Alexandra Grimmer