

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Radar

The antique and the contemporary: “The Shape of Time” at Gagosian Hong Kong

Gagosian Gallery mounts museum-calibre exhibition juxtaposing Chinese antiquities and contemporary art.

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Nam June Paik, 'Untitled', 1998, acrylic paint on canvas, 170.2 x 16.8 cm. © Nam June Paik Estate. Photo by Ben Blackwell. Image courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

“The Shape of Time” is an exhibition of Asian antiques and modern and contemporary artworks running until 9 January 2016 at Gagosian Gallery Hong Kong, and presented in collaboration with Brussels-based Asian art dealer Gisèle Croës.

“The Shape of Time” is a museum-calibre exhibition comprising a series of firsts: the first show in Hong Kong for one of the world’s premier Asian art dealers (Gisèle Croës), the first time Gagosian has displayed antiquities, and the first exhibition, perhaps anywhere, that compares the links between Chinese antiquities and contemporary art. Art Radar had the pleasure of viewing the show just before it opened and meeting Gisèle Croës and Nick Simunovic, Gagosian Hong Kong’s charismatic, young director.

Nick Simunovic says his gallery’s goal “is to bring museum-quality programming to Hong Kong at a time when Western modern and contemporary art is not widely available in the city”. He

also recognises that Hong Kong – the world’s third largest art market – is unique in that it serves as a bridge linking China to the rest of the world. Therefore, Gagosian frequently showcases major contemporary artists from Asia, such as Liu Dan or Takashi Murakami, in addition to the Western stable often associated with the Gagosian name, including Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons. However, Gagosian has never shown Asian antiquities before and Simunovic hopes “to bring into the gallery people who perhaps are familiar with antiquities but not contemporary art and people who might be familiar with our programme but not with antiquities”.

Simunovic praises his collaborator, Gisèle Croës, who supplied the Asian works on display. Croës offers her expertise on ancient Chinese treasures to collectors and museums around the world and her passion goes back many decades.

In 1962, Gisèle Croës, an “idealistic Maoist”, left her European home for China to join Mao Zedong’s Propaganda Ministry, broadcasting government bulletins to French-speaking Europe and Africa. Still speaking in exquisite, softly-theatrical tones, she was known as a young woman as “the golden voice of Beijing radio”. Her travel was restricted to a small area around Tiananmen Square, so Croës bought a bicycle and roamed the neighborhood buying antique sculptures, calligraphy and paintings for a pittance. “My fascination with Chinese art re-oriented my entire outlook on life,” she explains.

Later, as the Cultural Revolution was beginning, Croës knew it was time for her and her collection to get out, as she explains: “[I] had gone to China for youthful political reasons. [I] left for artistic reasons.” In 1965 she became a member of the secretive world of Chinese art collectors. Her gallery in Brussels has been renowned for its top-quality antiquities for over 30 years and she regularly offers Chinese objects at international art fairs for well in excess of USD1 million. She estimates 60 percent of her clients are Chinese. “I am a friend to China,” Croës says, “I repatriate [Chinese art].”

Gisèle Croës believes the best art has a transcendent quality that rises above specific contexts and time. She was greatly influenced by Yale University art historian George Kubler’s book, *The Shape of Time* (first published 1962) which introduced the radical idea that ostensibly disconnected cultures throughout history share basic human understandings and beliefs that are reflected in the art they produce and that superficially dissimilar works of art can be seen as reflecting the same understanding or belief. An ancient Chinese bronze may be ‘about’ the same thing as a contemporary American painting; there may be correspondences regardless of historical distance.

Nick Simunovic explains something easily overlooked:

all of the [ancient and old] works that you see here at one point were contemporary and maybe they pushed the limit of what was considered proper form or function in their time, and the work that you see by contemporary artists will at one point perhaps in the future be considered classic.

The show is thoughtfully arranged, encouraging visitors to ponder deeper themes and see connections. In the central area of the exhibition there is Chinese contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang’s monumental gunpowder drawing *A Certain Lunar Eclipse – Project for Humankind No. 2* (1991). It shows an ominous explosion hovering over the earth and is part of a series intended

to “awaken the conscience of the people of today who are faced with the destruction of the environment and the imbalance of life on Earth”.

It is paired with an enormous archaic bronze Ding vessel of the Late Spring and Autumn period (770-481 BC), which may have been used for mountaintop ritual sacrifices appeasing deceased ancestors and bringing good fortune to the living. Both works touch on the “idea of combining the heavens and the earth [and] are put together in a type of ‘sympathy’”.

Nearby, Andreas Gursky’s not-quite-abstract print Bangkok III (2011) shows truck headlights shining on a rubbish-strewn Chao Phraya River, commenting on ecological devastation. The print hangs beside two large cast iron basins, Qing dynasty water holders used to put out fires in the Forbidden City. Gisèle Croës points out that in this same area visitors can find references to all five phases of the Wu Xing (五行), central to Chinese philosophy.

Some correspondences are more readily apparent than others. For instance, a huge bodhisattva head (“perhaps the largest in private hands” in the world) from Shanxi province sits beside a colourful Takashi Murakami acrylic representation of hundreds of skulls. There were also “a number of unexpected moments,” connections that Croës and Simunovic did not anticipate, as they tell Art Radar.

Liu Dan’s stunning 2015 ink drawing Floating Particle a meticulous rendering of a craggy mass of stone, dominates the gallery’s final space. It is a tribute to the traditional Chinese scholar’s ritual of rock contemplation, the rock representing a fragment of the natural and cosmic planes. A few feet away, Alberto Giacometti’s small bust of a seated man appears to ponder the depicted stone. Only after the works were installed did Croës and Simunovic notice how closely the back of the Giacometti sculpture resembled a scholar’s stone, which they described as an unforeseen poetic link.

Nick Simunovic says this may be the first time ever an exhibition had been devoted to pondering how 5000 years of Asian antiquities correspond to Western and Chinese modern and contemporary art; “it’s very prophetic in that it overlaps [...] it’s a double showing,” he explains. Gisèle Croës adds:

It will be new and show to the public that art is eternal. There is no doctrine. There is no limit. There is no frontier.