

“INNOVATION IS THE KEY TO CREATION”

A conversation with Guy Ullens, a pioneer of Chinese art collection and founder of UCCA Beijing, who at 84 is starting an ambitious platform to promote digital art

BY JÉRÔME NEUTRES

An installation of Miguel Chevalier's "Extra Natural."



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The legendary art collector Jacques Doucet — who in the early 1900s collected 17th-century classics, antiquities, books, and then icons of the avant-garde of the early 20th century like Brancusi’s “Sleeping Muse” and Picasso’s “Demoiselles d’Avignon” — used to say that during his long life as an art lover he had successively established the collections of his grandfather, his father, his children and his grandchildren. Guy Ullens could be seen as a new Jacques Doucet: An art collector for more than 50 years, the Belgian-born businessman and philanthropist combined many varied collections before discovering the Contemporary Chinese art scene in the 1990s, accumulating some 1,500 works by young masters like Zeng Fanzhi or Huang Yong Ping. Today, at 84 years old, the founder of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing along with his wife, the couture entrepreneur Myriam Ullens, is starting a new chapter of his collection life, dedicated to digital art and curated by our contributor Jérôme Neutres. Ullens explains here why he wants to promote what he considers the most important medium in the arts since the appearance of photography.

Did you grow up with art? When did you start collecting and what were you first attracted to?

My Austrian grandmother, who was a great influence on me, was a passionate musician and a close friend of Debussy and Ravel, and she collected Flemish classical

A portrait of Guy Ullens

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An installation view of “Yan Pei-Ming: Landscape of Childhood” at the UCCA.



Yang Yongliang's
"Journey to the Dark II."

"The 'computing artists' I collect and promote know very well how to protect their HD program from copying with a sophisticated coding system, and deliver rigorous certificates for their unique works or limited editions"

paintings. My parents were collecting antiquities, from China and Iran, guided by the famous archeologist André Godard. In the 1960s, I started collecting Western Contemporary art, like Tapiès, Fontana, Takis, Pol Bury, Vasarely... I was attracted to the research and inventions of then-emerging artists. Like Jacques Doucet used to say, I prefer life to dust.

How did you become the first and most influential collector of Chinese Contemporary art?

My father, who was a young diplomat in China in the early 1920s, taught me a lot about China when I was young, and I have been always fascinated by this culture. I first started collecting classic Chinese artifacts in 1981 while visiting Singapore, then classic paintings in 1987 when I started to do business in Asia; then very quickly I met young Chinese artists like Liu Xiaodong, Zhang Xiao Gang and Yu Youhan, and I had a cultural shock. I became very good friends with them; we were partying together. Those artists didn't have many clients at that time, so they were very available. I had the chance to have a personal relationship with them. It was very exciting!

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In parallel you have been always a great philanthropist through the Guy & Myriam Ullens Foundation, building a major educational program in Nepal, and supporting many museums (still including today the Met in NYC...) until founding the first major Contemporary art space in China: UCCA, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, in Beijing.

The idea came in the early 2000s to have a location to exhibit the monumental installations and pieces I had collected in China. In the spring of 2002 we exhibited our collection of classic Chinese paintings in the Imperial Palace of the Forbidden City in Beijing; and in the fall of the same year we exhibited some 150 Contemporary art works in Paris, then at the museum of Lyon. Then in 2005 we fell in love with an incredible building in the "798" cultural compound, a former military storage space, built by east German architects from the Bauhaus, which was first renovated by Jean-Michel Wilmotte, and later by Rem Koolhaas. It cost me a lot of money [a \$100 million investment, according to a Harvard University study] but gave me so much pleasure and pride as well! Today UCCA had become the leading art organization in China, it is brilliantly managed by Philip Tinari and ruled by a powerful fund, and I am proud of remaining a shareholder of it.

Today you are again surprising the art world, by launching an ambitious platform for the collection and promotion of the most innovative form of art: digital- and computer-based works...



"Last Supper"
by Zeng Fanzhi.

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When I saw the exhibition “Artists & Robots” that you curated at the Grand Palais in Paris, I realized how much this aesthetic is in perpetual movement, like today’s world is. Here, everything is moving, works are different today than yesterday. It is a very lively form of art. It is like a living creation. And it is a form of art that can touch every generation. There is an innovative dimension in Miguel Chevalier’s work for instance that one can hardly see in other fields of art. When you collect art, you generally see your works during art exhibitions, and the rest of the time it is in storage. Here, the flexible form of the art, its immaterial essence, makes it easier, as you can keep a version of the work on your laptop for example. And you can also share it with a massive audience by projecting some works on the walls of a public monument, like my friend Leo Villareal is doing in London, illuminating the Thames bridges through an incredible generative program which will change the vision of London by night.

Many collectors are afraid of digital works they consider difficult to preserve over time, and vulnerable to pirating. How do you respond to that?

For decades, people have said that photography was impossible to preserve and had the potential of unlimited copies. And you can see today that some photos are sold for more than \$1 million. Anyway one can copy any painting or sculpture (fakes and forgeries are everywhere in the market); but only the original source will always remain the guarantee for a collector to have the authentic image. The “computing artists” I collect and promote know very well how to protect their HD program from copying with a sophisticated coding system, and deliver rigorous certificates

for their unique works or limited editions. As for the preservation over time, those artworks are not at all fragile like a drawing or photo: their immaterial essence protects them from a material obsolescence! It is like the archives of the world are better conserved on computers than kept on paper in storage spaces vulnerable to water or fire.

Did you also find digital artists in China, or more in Europe?

This is truly a universal trend in art, as we saw during the last Biennale of Venice. Europe has been well represented since pioneers like Vera Molnar and Edmond Couchot, and even South America with Elias Crespin, but Asia is definitely very important in this segment, with the Japanese artist Riyoji Ikeda for instance, and many young creators from China, like Yang YongLiang, Lu Yang, Lin Ke... UCCA Beijing is by the way preparing a major exhibition in this field for next year, which I guess could open new opportunities for those artists.

Do you realize that you have been always very innovative in your art career?

I know at least that I have been always an innovative entrepreneur. In 1970 I was among the first to use the services of international consultancy and auditing companies in the development of the business. Then in 1980 I built a start-up focused on the reorganization of traditional industries to update their management skills and modernize their activity. LBO was a very uncommon business at that time! And I was always very successful, so for me innovation became the key to success. I naturally follow this vision in art. Innovation is also definitely the key to creation. ☐

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An installation view of “The Second Situation” by Geng Jinyi at the UCCA.