

Collecting

FTWeekend



Brushed up
The traditional form comes in many guises

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Fun of the fair
The best of Hong Kong's Art Central

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In love and war
Iranian photojournalist Newsha Tavakolian

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Medici prince of China

Film | Art Basel Hong Kong shines spotlight on new Chinese art. By Jan Dalley

The history of contemporary Chinese art is very short: a few decades, no more. Maoist prohibitions and the Cultural Revolution stamped out all individual creativity: it was only in the late 1970s that sculpture, for instance, was permitted. And then of course there were the censors.



Continued on page 2 A still from "The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg" (2016) shows the collector at home with his portrait by Zhao Bandi (2010)

Medici prince of China

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Despite it all, China's contemporary scene took off like a rocket in the years after Mao's death. Often working underground, the artists were radical, and when Swiss businessman Uli Sigg first went to China in 1979, he hesitated to make contact for fear of getting the artists into trouble with the authorities.

That's one of many intriguing details revealed in *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, a film by Michael Schindheim about the collector's life, showing in Art Basel Hong Kong's film section.

Sigg was born in 1946 in Switzerland, but his "Chinese lives" began in earnest when in 1980 he negotiated the first joint venture between China and a western business. The company, Schindler China, gives a nice metaphorical twist to this compelling story. It makes lifts. Elevators. A smart business in a country expanding ever upwards, but in the art-world context it seems a symbol of Sigg's special role on the Chinese scene. More than just a collector, Sigg became — as he puts it — a documentarist, and the huge holding he has amassed over some 35 years is effectively the canon of this new tradition.

The work filled Schloss Mauensee, the picturesque island castle in Sursee where he lives with his wife Rita, and spilled out into warehouses galore. At the same time, he transformed the lives of the artists by enabling their access to funds and international notice. As the market for Chinese work grew in tandem with domestic freedoms, the process of change seemed almost dizzying.

One artist fast-tracked by Schindler's lift was China's best known, Ai Weiwei. At the start of this clever film, he says: "However famous I become, he [Sigg] is the creator." Starry names of today's contemporary scene — Wang Guangyi, Zang Fanzhi, Fang Lijun and others — pay similar tribute to this exceptional man, and the film treats their works with a delicate skill. As China's transformations are recounted, mostly by Sigg himself, reminiscing about his years first as businessman and then, from 1995 to 1998, as Swiss ambassador to Beijing, period footage is interspersed with the works, presented wordlessly and without captions — and suddenly you get it. The art leaps into focus as a searing human response to the era.

Sigg's role in business opened doors: Schindler China's business model, and its input of cash and know-how, were desperately needed. Sigg must be a man of exceptional patience: board meetings, we hear, could last 12 days; a salary

negotiation 18 months. But once his diplomatic life began, the embassy both provided space for his art and, according to curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, became a cultural "salon" for Beijing.

And the legacy? Sigg's wish, he tells us, has always been to place the entire collection in a public museum in mainland China, and to restore to the Chinese the cultural history that many of them don't even know. No private museum for him: only a public museum, he maintains, can ensure the long-term preservation of a cultural heritage far beyond the lifespan of its donor.

It is a noble aim — but apparently a step too far even for someone of Sigg's diplomatic nous. Most of these works, after all, were and still are critical of the regime. As he puts it, tactfully, there were "complications". So Hong Kong's new M+ museum was the answer — and a magnificent collection of some 1,500 works will turn that institution, on its

opening in 2019, into the world's most substantial holder of new Chinese art.

If it was a slight compromise for Sigg, one person who is pleased is Ai. To the idea of locating the collection for safekeeping on the Chinese mainland, Ai replies acidly that Sigg might just as well "throw them in the lake at Sursee".

Schindheim's documentary is just one of over 70 works by and about artists that Art Basel Hong Kong will be showing. Another focuses on Zang Fanzhi: for a rich 17 minutes of action, the artist was filmed creating a giant work in Berlin over 12 days, with the help of a bevy of immaculate white-coated assistants. His shirt is spotless; each brush he is handed appears to be brand-new; the result will be worth tens of millions. It's a far cry from his, and Sigg's, early days — but compelling for all that.

Showings run March 21-26
artbasel.com/hong-kong/the-show#5960



Zeng Fanzhi painting 'YOU', as featured in the film 'YOU Art Project' — Lisa Walker