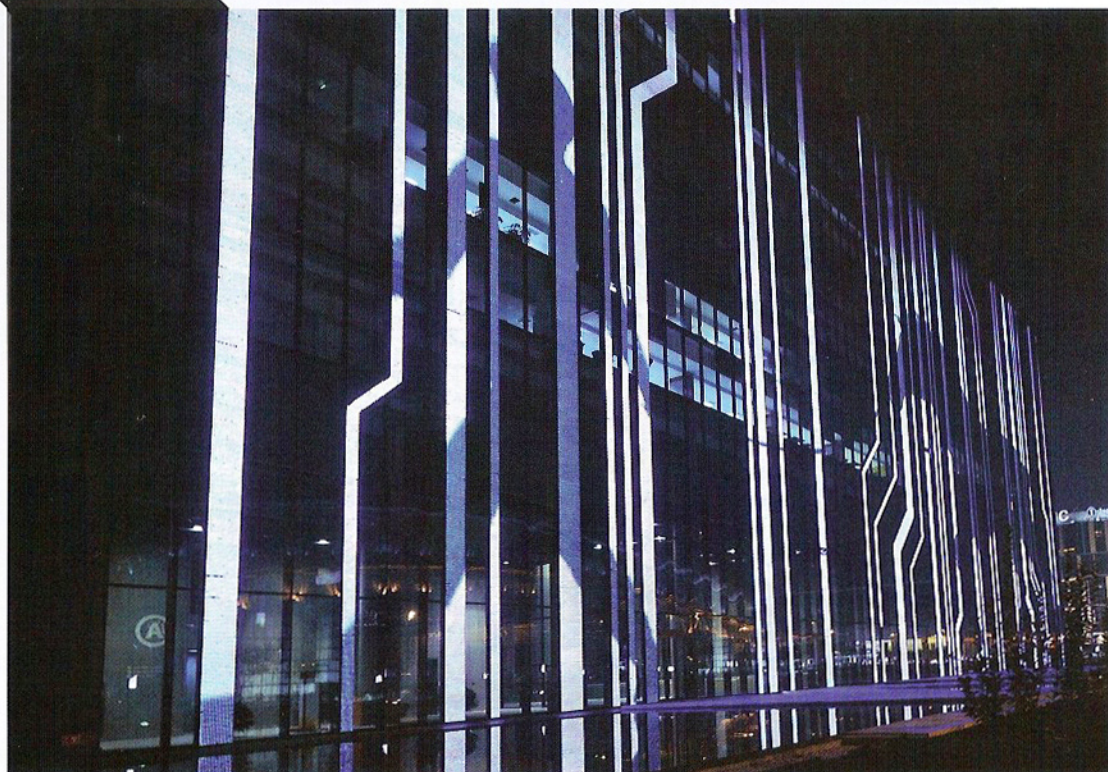


whitewall

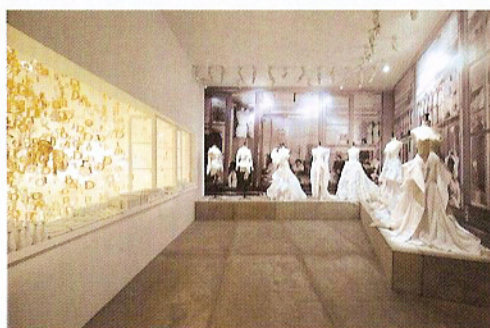
CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

SPRING 2009

WORLDWIDE



Jennifer Ma
The In-Between World – Daydream Nation
2008
Photo by Lin Yi
Courtesy of the artist



“Christian Dior and Chinese Artists” exhibition views in UCCA
(November 16, 2008 – January 15, 2009), provided by Dior.
© Christian Dior

BEIJING

BY ARIC CHEN

This past December 31, the über-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist was in Beijing to ring in the new year – at the newly opened Beijing outpost of the gallery-slash-store-slash-art-platform **Vitamin Creative Space**, the site of his latest “interview marathon.” Assembled for the 14-hour powwow were some of China’s best-known minds: the artists Cao Fei and Ai Weiwei, the architect Yung Ho Chang, the media guru Hong Huang. The premise? “In the lull of Post-Olympic flagging pep,” Obrist wrote in a statement, it was to declare a “New Beijing Optimism.”

Less grandiose, however, was Hu Fang, a Vitamin co-founder and adviser to this year’s **Venice Biennale**: “If you consider that the Olympics had an important impact on Chinese society – though I personally doubt this,” he says, “then certainly we can think of this post-Olympic moment as an uncertain time. How do you define it?”

The answer to such big questions is anyone’s guess. But even with the Olympic hullabaloo over, and China’s GDP growth predicted to slow to between 5.5 and 8.5 percent this year – still enviable by Western standards, but worrisome to the Chinese – the mood in Beijing’s art world seems to echo that in China generally: concern tempered by underlying optimism. “I think there’s sort of a post-Olympic relief and back to normalcy, which is a good thing,” says Meg Maggio of the

leading Beijing gallery **Pékin Fine Arts**. As for the global economic meltdown, “I don’t think most galleries have really been affected,” she adds. “There’s still an enormous, very strong appetite among local Chinese and Asian collectors.”

Prognoses no doubt vary; rumors abound of galleries on the verge of closing or making significant cutbacks. But at least for the moment, the Beijing art scene is still hoping to ride its breakneck momentum of recent years, when the Caochangdi art district seemed to sprout overnight and the 798 enclave was transformed, for better or worse, from an artists’ industrial zone into something of a tourist attraction – complete with an “Originality Square” and enormous new Pace gallery. “It’s amazing how this area has changed,” says Jérôme Sans, who arrived in 798 last year as director of the **Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA)**. “When I first came, there were dirt roads and maybe one or two cafés; now it’s asphalt and there are cafés on every corner.”

Joining existing Beijing venues like the Today Art Museum, the opening in late 2007 of the UCCA, a mammoth contemporary art center founded by the Belgian philanthropists Guy and Myriam Ullens, was seen as a big boost for a contemporary art infrastructure lacking institutional weight. But the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts has also unveiled a new contemporary art

museum, designed by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, while the **National Art Museum of China**, having recently veered toward contemporary art under director Fan Di’an, has plans for a sprawling new 80,000-square-meter building of its own. Scheduled for completion in 2010 or 2011, the latter is set to occupy a site adjacent the Olympic Bird’s Nest stadium; nearby, artist Jennifer Wen Ma has already transformed the facade of **Digital Beijing**, the Olympic digital-command center, into a moody, interactive LED work appropriately titled *The In-Between World – Daydream Nation*. “The public here has gone through a very rapid learning curve,” Maggio says. “Contemporary art is no longer considered radical or subversive.”

To a point, at least. Last year, a group of four artists and curators took over a vegetable stall in one of the city’s *hutongs*, or traditional alleyways, and opened **Arrow Factory**, a diminutive 15-square-meter nonprofit storefront gallery created purely for the benefit of passersby. The organizers deem it an antidote to the art world’s market-frenzied gigantism and an effort to better integrate art into the city’s daily life. But, says co-founder Pauline Yao, “the neighbors think we’re crazy.”