

# Time Out

## Doha

### MADE IN CHINA

The Qatar China Year of Culture 2016, a year-long collaboration between the two countries, has kicked off. Get set for months of contemporary Chinese art, festivals, celebrations, and more

For the past four years, Qatar has partnered up with a different country for a year-long exchange of art exhibitions, festivals and other cultural events.

It all began back in 2012 with Qatar-Japan, which saw exhibitions in Doha by world-renowned artists like Takashi Murakami and, since, Qatar has teamed up with the UK, Brazil and Turkey.

This year, Qatar-China is already shaping up to be the biggest cultural collaboration yet, with the first big exhibition *What about the art?* *Contemporary art from China* already announced for March. Curated by Chinese contemporary artist Cai Guo-Qiang and featuring works by 15 artists and artists' collectives from mainland China, it's one of the most significant events to be held since the Year of Culture initiative started. We look at what you can expect from the exhibition, and from the rest of 2016.

#### What about the art?

Cai Guo-Qiang has been researching and developing the exhibition for the past three years, focusing on the nature of Chinese contemporary art and asking self-reflective questions of, and challenging, creativity itself. Everything comes together to provide a fascinating insight into how contemporary art in China has developed. It takes the focus away from politically-dominated conversations about China's social and economic issues, putting it onto the vision and techniques of the art itself. Instead of asking what these artists are saying, Guo-Qiang wants to ask: how are they saying it? Is it creative? How are they contributing to the development of Chinese art?

Works by the 15 featured artists attempt to challenge traditional Chinese aesthetics through not only painting, sculpture, installations, video and other "conventional" forms of art, but also through the use of media such as interactive video game design, creating an interesting dialogue surrounding historical and cultural development.

*Timeline*, for example, will be a prominent part of the exhibition. Curated by scholar Wang Mingxian, it will comprise a display of archival documents, images and data relating to Chinese art from 1949 right through to the present.

The exhibition will open on March 14 at Qatar Museums Al Riwaq Gallery and run until July 16.



Landscape art from Xu Bing

## Five minutes with Cai Guo-Qiang



The exhibition poses questions about the artistic value of the art itself on display. How have some of the artists gone about exploring that?

The featured artists are investigating the artistic value of their artworks in distinct ways. For example, Xu Zhen regards his practice as a new kind of pop art. He founded Madeln Company, and launched the brand "Xu Zhen". The commercial aspect of Madeln is not an independent element of the art, but rather it is the art itself. By exploiting the systemic and institutional aspects of pop art practice, Xu Zhen challenges our intrinsic experience and the knowledge of that art practice.

Take Zhou Chunyu as another example. He revitalises oil paintings by engaging and reconstructing traditional literati brushwork, and by adopting the cavalier perspective that's characteristic of ancient Chinese paintings. At the same time, colour has always been a priority for him.

These treatments liberate the material attribute of oil painting, and expand it from the two major Western elements of light/colour and structure, resulting in a new painting language.

Can you tell us a bit about your process for selecting artists?

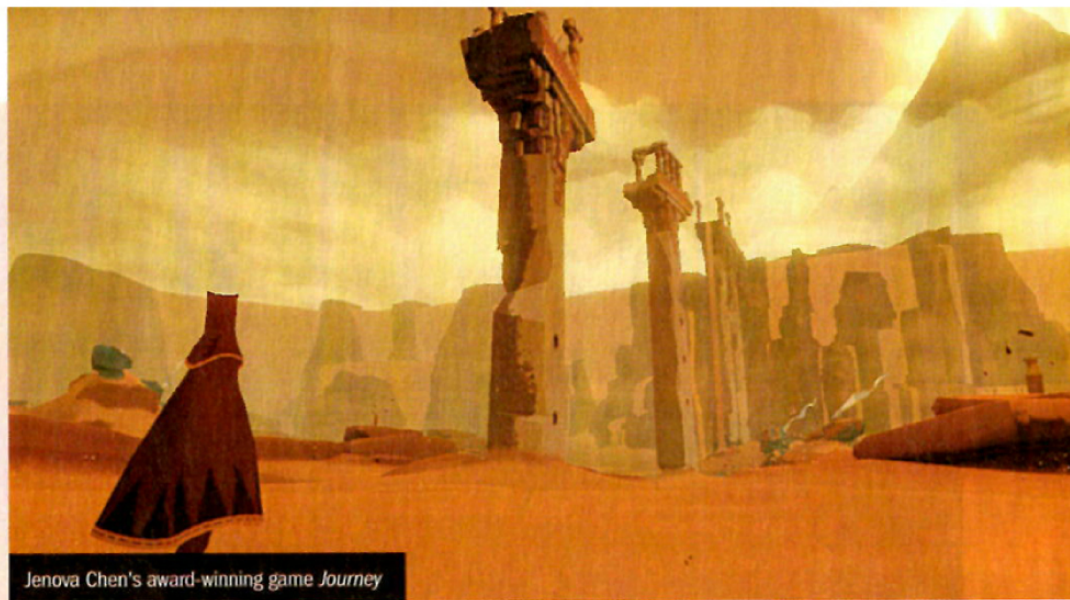
Over the past three years I led Cai Studio to compile a list of over 250 exhibitions related to the subject of contemporary Chinese art, and identified 30 key exhibitions as case studies. We looked into the practice of over 200 contemporary artists born in Mainland China. I conducted a series of conversations with art historians, critics and curators worldwide to discuss issues relevant to the current critical understanding of contemporary Chinese art. Additionally, I visited selected artists' studios in China, and had discussions with them about their pursuit of independent artistic language and about my curatorial concept.

One kind of media included in the exhibition is "interactive video game design". Why do you consider it to be an art form?

Traditionally speaking, video game exists as a commercial practise. Oftentimes with themes of war, combat, adventure and competition, it attempts to create visual and sensory stimulation. As a result, a lot of video games feature criminal and violent content harmful to young audiences.



Hou Yong Ping  
Wu Zei



Jenova Chen's award-winning game *Journey*



Xu Zhen creates a new kind of pop art

As a video game designer, Jenova Chen explores life's more fundamental questions. He attempts to tell stories of life through the medium of virtual reality, and further conveys these stories through widely resonant aesthetics. In his game *Journey*, a lone traveller in life meets a companion, who is another player at an unspecified location. The resulting ecstatic surprise and a sense of mutual support is palpable and precious.

In order to convey and sustain this emotion, Jenova Chen had to incorporate his own philosophy as well as his craftsmanship in video game design. He managed to convey all of these complex emotions through the characters' movements, even the subtle undulations of the ribbons on their garment, bypassing verbal communication entirely.

How is contemporary Chinese art similar or different to the contemporary artwork of other countries?

It's the same in that it needs to return to

fundamental issues of creativity, and to the search of artistic methodology.

The main difference here is, because of China's socio-political system, contemporary Chinese art has its own unique limitation; at the same time, it also faces special expectations from the international context.

What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China has been three years in the making. What's the most surprising or unexpected thing you discovered while researching?

One thing that surprised me was that when I discussed the issues of creativity with artists, designers and film directors in China, and asked what they thought their unique artistic language was, or what set them apart, most of the artists found it very difficult to answer.

They couldn't articulate what was truly unique about their work, or how they are shaping their own independent language.

For example, in film, there is very little discussion on how to invent a new language based on the traditional aesthetics and methodology, and how to create one's own cinematic style.

It was surprising to me that there was a lot of focus on content, but not on methodology and craftsmanship.



Jennifer Wen Ma worked on the Beijing Olympics

## Meet the artists

Guo-Qiang has brought together an eclectic and diverse group of some of China's most talented and internationally-recognised contemporary artists. Here are four you should be looking out for...

### Jenova Chen

Chen isn't your usual artist. His degree wasn't in fine or contemporary arts, rather, he earned a BS in Computer Science in Shanghai before moving to LA. He is now the co-founder, president and creative director of thatgamecompany, and an internationally-awarded video game designer. His most famous game, *Journey*, has won numerous awards, including one for "Outstanding Achievement in Game Direction" and one for "Outstanding Achievement in Art Direction".

### Hu Zhijun

Zhijun was born in Hunan in 1952, and lived and worked for most of his life in rural China, before discovering an interest in sculpture in 2013. He was commissioned by Cai Guo-Qiang to make 500 clay sculptures that represent major Chinese artworks, and *What About the Art?* is his debut as an artist.

### Li Liao

A conceptual artist, Liao's recent solo exhibition *Attacking The Boxer From Behind is Forbidden* (2015) involved a boxer crouching in the gallery for five hours a day, engaging in defensive stances as visitors entered the room. As part of the same exhibition, Liao showcased a series of 100 photographs titled *Weight Loss Plan* (2011), following his month-long attempt to survive on just 350 Renminbi (roughly QR193) per month, and his looping video *A Slap in Wuhan* (2010), in which Liao waits with his eyes closed, until a stranger arrives at the scene and proceeds to assault him.

### Jennifer Wen Ma

Ma lives and works between New York and Beijing, and was the chief designer of visual and special effects for the opening and

closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics. Her works have been exhibited internationally, including at the prestigious Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

## Silk from the Silk Road

One of the biggest historical connections between China and the Gulf countries is the ancient network of trade routes that ran from the Asian continent to Europe and the Mediterranean, known as the Silk Road. So it makes sense that the second major exhibition of Qatar-China will be an exhibition of around 100 pieces of ancient and modern Chinese silk works. The exhibition will map out the history of silk, and its cultural significance over thousands of years, highlighting it, in particular, as a special local product of the beautiful province in Eastern China.

## Across the pond

Over in China, the latest edition of the notable exhibition *Pearls* will make its way to Beijing later this year.

Previously exhibited in London's Victoria & Albert Museum and in Istanbul, it follows the natural creation of pearls, the fishing and trading of them in the Gulf, pearl jewellery throughout the ages and the rise of cultured pearls, too.



Hu Zhijun debuts with 500 works

## Events to come

Details of several other events and programmes due to take place over the year are still to be announced, but plans are in place for a photography exchange, a Chinese movie week, and an open-air Chinese festival of music, performance, traditional crafts and food from different regions of China.