

CHINESE ART TAKEAWAY

Charles Saatchi has bought cleverly in the past, but is he crackers paying so much for Chinese contemporary art, asks **Godfrey Barker**

THIS autumn the Saatchi Gallery reopens in a new museum housed in the Duke of York's Barracks, Chelsea. After two years' closure and months of false starts the curtain rises on a long-awaited China show, the latest focus of Charles Saatchi's roving eye for contemporary art.

Saatchi, a gambler's gambler, is already a small force behind the fast-rising price of Chinese contemporary art at Sotheby's and Christie's – he paid \$5.6 million last year for a grim Zeng Fanzhi Hospital Series painting. But as one remembers Saatchi's *bon mot* of four years ago – “all Chinese contemporary art is rubbish” – and surveys now his sudden purchases of Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Yuan, Shen Shaomin, Feng Zhengjie and Zhan Wang, to list only the bigger names, the question is, has Saatchi called it right? What about the murmur that his choices are not Chinese choices – worse, that there is shelf-life to his taste?

Let's admire his boldness. Saatchi's invasion of China is as brave as the

Japanese assault on Western art in the late Eighties. The Japanese retreated in tears, having unerringly preferred the third rate in French Impressionism, Utrillo, Laurencin and Buffet. Has Saatchi been wiser in China?

For the many art buyers who follow him “wise” means, most importantly, financially wise. Saatchi has been an unashamed trader of his art since the Seventies. But whereas he fished Hirst's shark out of its darkened waters for mere tens of thousands in the Nineties and bought other Young British Artists (YBAs) for as little as £2,000, he has arrived on Chinese shores at a far later date. His price entry level was far higher than it was in England for the YBAs; the bar was raised on Zhang Xiaogang to near \$2 million just two years ago.

Saatchi is no fool and he likes profit. We must assume that since he has paid premium prices at auction for established names and not much less in the Peking/Shanghai galleries for the next generation, he expects the market to rise farther, to dizzying heights. Is he right? Or is he living on Cloud Nine? ➤

Scholar's Rock, by Zhan Wang. Charles Saatchi has bought other work by this artist



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AROUND THE COUNTRY

UNTIL 31 AUGUST WAR AND PIECES

Dorman Museum, Linthorpe Road, Middlesbrough, tel 01642 813781

Soldier Ian Forsyth's photographs of the British effort in Iraq combined with work on the looting of art in Baghdad.

UNTIL 28 SEPTEMBER AMAZING RARE THINGS

The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1, tel 020 7839 1377

Sir David Attenborough collaborates on the curation of the beautiful and bizarre in nature from artists and collectors.



War and Pieces

UNTIL 2 NOVEMBER SOPHIE RYDER

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Wakefield, tel 01924 832631

The sculptor's ever-vaster, more ambitious animals in bronze and wire.

UNTIL 16 NOVEMBER HANDEL AND THE DIVAS

Handel House Museum, 25 Brook Street, Mayfair, London W1, tel 020 7495 1685

Fascinating exhibition of the wars between Handel's London singers.

26-29 SCOTTISH AND SPORTING SALES

Sotheby's (26), Gleneagles Hotel, Auchterarder, Perthshire, tel 020 7293 5387 for details; Bonhams (27-29), 22 Queen Street, Edinburgh, tel 0131 225 2266

Sotheby's and Bonhams' annual sales of Scottish and sporting art, sporting guns and much more.

Saatchi faces two problems on the Chinese contemporary market, as do all Britons eyeing it for fast profits in 2008. One is that he does not have it to himself, as he did for many years when driving the YBAs. He was preceded by a wave of Western business and diplomatic buying in the late Eighties and Nineties. Now he is just one individual amid a second, 21st-century wave of buyers from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indonesia. *They* drive the market and *their* taste will determine future values, not that of buyers from the West. Put bluntly, is Saatchi's taste Asian enough for safety?

"Yes and no," is the careful reply of Emily de Wolfe Pettit, the Peking and Shanghai-based dealer who advises Western and Chinese buyers. "He buys art that the Chinese like, art which explores the cross influence of East and West. But he also has a large grouping of works with political

messages, easily identifiable as Chinese to the Western eye. It's an open question whether this highly political painting, much of it thick with Chairman Mao iconography, has long-term appeal in China.

"Taste in the 21st century will be shaped by the reputable China-based dealers, not by those in London – by professors such as Xu Bing and wealthy Chinese collectors, not just from Peking but from Shanxi and beyond," she says. "They are less engaged by politics than by a reworking of classic traditions – for example, the painting of ink-brush works on paper or silk or other Zhan Wang's stainless steel replicas of scholars' rocks."



Portrait, from the *Bloodline* series by Zhang Xiaogang, an artist favoured by Charles Saatchi

Saatchi can point to an overlap of taste and to leading Chinese collectors such as Zhang Rui, Guan Yi and Yang Bing of Peking who buy both classic and contemporary, Saatchi taste and their own.

But with an eye on Chinese priorities, de Wolfe Pettit cites the picture hang at Zhang Rui's house in Peking. Here a work by the most expensive Chinese contemporary artist, Zeng Fanzhi, is inconspicuously placed behind a DVD screen (he made an auction record \$9.7 million for a Chinese living artist in May 2008). "There's no collection I can think of in Peking or Shanghai that's dominated by political or consumer art," she says. Buyer beware! ■

Emily de Wolfe Pettit deals in Shanghai and Peking. To contact her email emily@artsinfluentialchina.com. Charles Saatchi's Chinese art can be viewed at www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk.

“It's an open question whether this political painting has long-term appeal”



Old Masters

IN FOCUS

Mattia Preti's *Solomon Offering Incense to Pagan Gods* (above); *Self-portrait*, by Guido Reni (above right)

IN Clovis Whitfield's recent summer show at Partridge Fine Art, 144-146 New Bond Street there was a Correggio, a Parmigianino, a Pontormo, a Titian, an Allori, a Lodovico Carracci, a Reni, a Vouet, two Mattia Pretis and two Poussins. All were for sale. I blinked twice and wondered whether I had flown back in time. No comparable array of first-rank Italian and French Old Masters had appeared in a single auction at Sotheby's or Christie's in years. Whitfield admitted to no exhibition

like it in his 30-year career. Does it mean that Old Master paintings, a market long since creamed of masterpieces by first-rank artists, are still capable of throwing up surprises?

The answer is yes. Indeed Whitfield, who recently discovered a Caravaggio that has been confirmed by Sir Denis Mahon among others and is the publisher of lost works by Poussin, Reni, Canaletto and Carracci, had produced no fewer than six new attributions among his Partridge pictures.

Most dramatic was the finding of a companion work to Poussin's small *Landscape with a Lake*. It kept company with a *Landscape with the Baths of Diocletian*, which had been five times catalogued by experts in the past 30 years as by Poussin's brother-in-law. Whitfield was suspicious. He gained permission to remove the lining and revealed an inscription identical to that on the *Lake*, which placed it in the collection of Carlo Antonio dal Pozzo, friend and executor of Poussin. Mahon confirmed the master's hand.

A portrait of Guido Reni, long given to Domenichino, turned out to be an early self-portrait. The removal of a letter glued to the back in 1621 revealed an inscription by Reni. "All his later tricks are there," says Whitfield, who was alerted by them.

What lies ahead for Old Masters on the market? "There's an increasing price gap between sound works that can be sold well and uncertain pictures that cannot be sold," is the reply. Uncertainty is a killer but Whitfield is clear on this: Old Master discoveries are not over. ■

Godfrey Barker is a distinguished art commentator. His interests encompass most things that make Britain civilised.