

Last updated: May 12, 2012 1:28 am

‘We will create a vibrant arts scene’

By Sophie Hastings

Pearl Lam is finally opening a gallery in her native Hong Kong. She explains why it has taken her so long

“I define Chinese contemporary art as the reinvention of tradition, reacting to and embracing western tradition too, and creating a new form of expression, a new visual language,” says Pearl Lam, on the eve of the inaugural exhibition at her eponymous Hong Kong gallery.

Lam’s return to her native Hong Kong is a significant move. With a fine art gallery, a design gallery and a project space in Shanghai, an arts foundation based in New York and an apartment in which she exercises her formidable networking skills on London’s Savile Row, she has been exhibiting Chinese contemporary art and international design for nearly two decades (much of it at her Contrasts Gallery, last year renamed the Pearl Lam Galleries). She left Hong Kong partly because there was no audience for such work. Her 2005 exhibition of French designer Andrée Putman, for example, which was shown first in Shanghai to crowds of visitors, drew “only a handful” when it transferred to Hong Kong’s Design Centre.



Lam’s homecoming is testament to Hong Kong’s recent metamorphosis from cultural wasteland to hub of the Asian contemporary art scene, ignited by the success of Hong Kong International Art Fair, the influx of western galleries and the creation of the West Kowloon Cultural District and the M+ contemporary art museum.

Lam grew up with traditionally minded parents for whom art is “a hobby not a career”. Neither her father, a property tycoon, nor her mother had any experience of art, collecting or contemporary culture. In her younger days Lam cut a flamboyant, couture-clad figure in Hong Kong, known for leaving parties through kitchen windows to escape the paparazzi. One of the first generation of affluent Chinese children to be educated in the west, her interest in art began overseas. “I bought horrible things from graduate shows,” she remembers.

She returned to her family with a dream of opening a gallery. “It was not acceptable. They didn’t approve of me studying abroad for 10 years only to become a shopkeeper. We have

no tradition of galleries in China and they didn't understand. I was sent to Shanghai to help on a property development project. My parents thought I was too wild and needed calming down. But I negotiated the possibility of doing some pop-up shows."

The young Chinese artists whom Lam met in Shanghai in the early 1990s had a life-changing influence. "They were talking about Confucius, Daoism, Buddhism," she recalls. "I was amazed, it seemed so old fashioned; I thought of contemporary art in terms of western street culture. But of course, this kind of discussion had been banned during the Cultural Revolution and to talk about these things was subversive and cool. No one was reading this material in Hong Kong. I learnt how to be Chinese."

As well as funding an artist-in-residence programme for western and Asian designers, and sponsoring exhibitions of western art in China, Lam curated shows looking at Chinese traditions from ink painting and calligraphy to furniture, asking contemporary western and Chinese artists to respond to ancient practice.

"I didn't want to show just art or just design, I wanted to make shows about living with art," she says. She was concerned that China had lost much of its heritage, expressing shock when parts of the Forbidden City were repainted with red paint instead of lacquer and condemning the gaudy palaces of the nouveaux riches as "mini Versailles". But she was also infuriated when western critics accused Chinese contemporary art of being derivative. "Yes, Chinese pop art was shallow, feeding the west's perception of Chinese contemporary art. But our problem was that if we stayed true to our roots, we were not considered international and if we responded to international art, we were aping the west." Frustrated by misunderstandings between the two cultures, Lam decided to promote cross-cultural dialogue, starting with her touring show, *Awakening: La France Mandarine – the French Influence on Chinese Art*.

She also established The China Art Foundation to bridge the gap between the west and China. As well as organising conversations at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, it develops partnerships and runs training programmes for museum staff.

China is at a crucial stage of development, she feels. "We're trying to find our Chinese contemporary culture. Who are we today? We have experienced over 150 years of cultural collapse and western domination and now, finally, we can stand up and have a voice."

But with no tradition of galleries and museums, the question of how to develop contemporary artists' careers is an issue. It is part of what prompted her return to Hong Kong.

"Not-for-profit activities are all very well, but in Asia museums don't have a voice," she says. "Art is seen through auction houses, as an investment. I realised a couple of years ago that if I want an artist to be academically endorsed, to be really big, I have to strategise in a different way, to use the art market and the commercial gallery system to build them up."

Apart from promoting her artists abroad, working with Stephen Friedman gallery in London and Blum & Poe in the US, Lam decided that Hong Kong offered her the international platform she needed. Her first show takes a fresh look at Chinese contemporary abstract painting, featuring eight artists of different generations, and is curated by Gao Minglu, a scholar of Chinese contemporary art and another key influence on Lam. “When I was asking myself why there was so much misinformation between China and the west, I sought him out – he was teaching somewhere in Pittsburgh. We talked for hours and he kept asking why I was there. I told him I wanted knowledge. His opinions led me to start the foundation.”

Next, she will show the Hong Kong artist Tsang Kin-Wah, “a huge installation, not exactly commercial, talking about the Last Judgment – the artist is a lapsed Catholic. But it’s also about Ceausescu in Romania, and how we live today. It’s very dark, morbid and not at all Hong Kong.”

By which she means the old Hong Kong, the one in which her mother tells her friends that “Pearl likes art that doesn’t look like anything and no one would understand.” The new Hong Kong that embraces contemporary art is, she says, “still considered weird by some. The Hong Kong government needs to understand the importance of culture and learn to promote it, as they’re doing in Singapore.” The opening of a slew of western galleries should help convince them, she thinks. “It’s group power and we will create a vibrant arts scene. I think it’s fabulous.”

www.pearllam.com

You may be interested in



Seoul's techs boosted by demand hopes

Homecoming heroes

Insider art

Expat lives: Sweet Carolina

Asian demand powers Swatch profits rise

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/2f9493ec-98f4-11e1-9da3-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2012 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.