

# Museum manoeuvres

By **Yenni Kwok** in Shenzhen and Guangzhou

The bustling cities of the Pearl River Delta are most commonly known as destinations for shopping, dining or karaoke. But these days, the cities of Shenzhen and Guangzhou are beckoning art-minded visitors to a variety of galleries and art museums that have mushroomed in recent years. Institutions such as Guangdong Museum of Art in Guangzhou, He Xiangning Art Museum and OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shenzhen are seen as top-notch art venues within China's art world.

Located in the Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), close to the Window of the World theme park, the He Xiangning Art Museum is regarded more than just the city's best museum. "It's considered one of the three most important contemporary art spaces in the country," said Liu Yingjiu, deputy supervisor of the museum's curatorial department. "The other two are the Shanghai Art Museum and Guangdong Museum of Art."

The museum does not limit itself to exhibiting the works of He Xiangning, China's celebrated woman painter for whom it is named. Since its opening in April 1997, the museum has also hosted many exhibitions, from Chinese experimental art to Picasso's paintings. It has earned praises both for its curatorial quality and its architecture. Designed by Hong Kong architect Sherman Kung, the building exudes a simple, graceful look that is said to capture He's artistic style.

He (1878-1972) was a painter, woman activist and revolutionary figure who was close to Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai. So precious are her paintings that they are among those of seven modern Chinese artists whose work is forbidden to be exported from the country.

Around 80,000 people visited this Shenzhen museum last year, but Liu thinks the number is small. "People come to Shenzhen to make money," he says. "There is no cultural tradition."

Nonetheless, China's young and wealthy metropolis has the ambition to transform itself from a manufacturing centre to cultural hub. "Shenzhen has been considered as a cultural desert," Liu says. "People have come from

elsewhere, so it seems to lack cultural history. This bothers the government and certain people, so they have started investing in projects to create a cultural identity and boost the city's confidence.”

The He Xiangning Art Museum does this. For example, consider the museum's sculpture park, located just across the road, showcases Taiwanese master Zhu Ming's *Taichi*, French conceptual artist David Buren's *On the Billows*, *Horizon*, and Beijing-based sculptor Yu Gao's *Leaning Apple*.

Some hundred metres down the road is OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), opened last year as an extension to the He Xiangning Art Museum. It occupies 2000 square metres of disused factory houses, following a trend seen around the world, from New York to Hamburg and Beijing, where industrial spaces have been turned into art ventures. But, by no means OCAT is similar with the famed Factory 798 complex in Beijing, which houses scores of galleries.

“OCAT is very special because there is no other organisation like this in China at the present time,” says Karen Smith, OCAT's artistic director. “It is a part government-run, part corporate-sponsored venue that employs professional staff, and has a mission to serve the art world and the public in China. 798 is almost entirely run by private initiatives and on a commercial basis. Both its independence and professionalism make OCAT unique.”

Michael Mueller-Verweyen, director of the Goethe Institut in Hong Kong, sees OCAT as a unique entity. “It is not yet a museum, but it is beyond a private gallery,” he explains. “It is an experimental public place, or a middle-level site, like the *kunstvereine* in Germany.”

OCAT has hosted superb exhibitions, including the first “Shenzhen Urbanism and Architecture Biennale” and “Asia Traffic Exhibition”, which featured works by international artists from Asia-Pacific.

It also sports a bizarre spectacle: A rusty half-plane sits alone on the backyard, seemingly lost and forgotten. It is Bat Project I, one of a three-part installation by Paris-based artist Huang Yongping. It is a replica of the United States' EP3 spy plane, nicknamed the ‘bat’, which collided with a Chinese fighter plane in April 2001.

Huang, who assembled Bat Project I in Shenzhen, is among scores of Chinese diaspora artists who have started to return to China. Paris-based curator Hou Hanru returned to his hometown late last year as a curator of the second Guangzhou Triennial at Guangdong Museum of Art (GDMOA), together with long-time collaborator Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guo Xiaoyan of the GDMOA. With over 100 artists, including international names such as Dutch star-architect Rem Koolhaas and cutting-edge Chinese artists such as Cao Fei and Lin Yilin, the Guangzhou Triennial was considered better focused and more progressive than its rival, the Beijing Biennale, which opened two months earlier.

GDMOA, opened in November 1997, has earned respect by exhibiting prestigious works through events like the Triennial or collections from the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. It has also built a reputation for showcasing controversial works. An exhibit last year, *Humanism in China* – a series of photos of modern China including images of China’s underworld – drew censure when it was shown in Beijing.

The museum, which attracts an estimated half a million visitors each year, is also expanding. Koolhaas, who studied the cities on Pearl River Delta in 1996-97 for his *Great Leap Forward* book, is designing the new venue. Located in the northern part of Guangzhou and scheduled to open in September, the Time Museum is to be integrated into a newly built 18-storey residential complex, complete with restaurants and shops. “The museum should be like a toolbox to facilitate art,” says Adela Liao Jianfen, GDMOA’s deputy head of public education. “It should also be more about versatility, rather than about a large generic exhibition space.”

Why is that the more progressive art museums are located in the south, rather than in Shanghai and Beijing? “In Shenzhen and Guangzhou, the museums enjoy a large degree of autonomy,” says Smith, who wrote the book *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*. “I think this is because things are slightly more relaxed in the south... where the local business community and government agencies tend to be more open and understanding of how important culture is to the community.”

Sceptics may accuse Guangdong’s art venues are being influenced by consumerism. But, if the great art patrons of centuries past were the rich European merchants, why shouldn’t today’s champions of art be the wealthy southern Chinese now?

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OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, tel. +86-755 2691 1976, [www.o-cat.net](http://www.o-cat.net)  
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