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Bringing a Flagship of Contemporary Art to Hong Kong

By JOYCE LAU MARCH 20, 2014

HONG KONG — Lee Kit, an artist in Hong Kong, watched as his works were installed this month at the Cattle Depot, an abattoir-turned-artists' commune.

"You," an adaptation of his solo show at the Venice Biennale, is a quiet reflection on daily life: a video of hands sorting cutlery, a faded sun chair, an old T-shirt. It is also one of the many pop-up exhibits organized by M+, the planned museum for the West Kowloon Cultural District, an enormous and long-delayed government project budgeted to cost 21.6 billion Hong Kong dollars, or about \$2.8 billion.

"I'm pretty happy they chose me," Mr. Lee said shyly.

M+'s budding curatorial team is faced with two daunting tasks: It has to assemble a major collection and has to engage the public through temporary offerings, years before the museum building is completed.

Workers are expected to break ground in August, with a planned completion date of 2017. In the meantime, M+ will use a smaller waterfront pavilion that should be finished by next year for its show, "Right Is Wrong — Chinese Contemporary Art 1975 to Now."

Lars Nittve, M+'s executive director and a founding director of the Tate Modern, is no stranger to new museums, but even he said that starting a collection from scratch was "rather unusual."

"The Tate Modern was born out of the Tate Gallery, so it has a history of over 100 years," he said. "Most museums, whether private or public, start with some sort of collection, something from an original donor."

Doryun Chong, who began work as M+'s chief curator less than a year ago, acknowledged that it was "very rare for any curator to have the opportunity to build an institution from the ground up." He added, "That's exactly why I took this job."

The Korean-born Mr. Chong was with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "I'm used to working in a well-oiled machine like the MoMA," he said. "It's different here — everything is new."

When Mr. Nittve began work in 2011, the museum's collection did not have so much as a pencil doodle. The first thing Mr. Nittve did was court Uli Sigg, a former Swiss diplomat and an important private collector of contemporary Chinese art. The lobbying paid off in 2012, when Mr. Sigg donated 1,463 works worth 1.3 billion Hong Kong dollars, or about \$165 million, according to estimates from Sotheby's. M+ topped that with a purchase of an additional 47 pieces.

Mr. Sigg was vocal about choosing Hong Kong because he wanted the works to stay on Chinese soil, but he was concerned about censorship at mainland institutions. His collection included one of Ai Weiwei's "Tiananmen" photos, which shows the artist's middle finger raised in front of the Beijing square.

M+ now has 2,784 pieces and shows no sign of slowing down or bending to government critics who have questioned its more politically charged choices.

The museum will also become home to almost 100 photos from Liu Heung Shing's "China After Mao" series. Some of these document the deadly 1989 crackdown on student protesters in Beijing; one graphic image shows bloodied bodies being rushed to the hospital. For now, the collection is mostly focused on greater China or the Chinese diaspora.

Last May, when art world luminaries flocked to the first Art Basel Hong Kong, M+ announced that it had acquired the complete editions of Tehching Hsieh's performance art from 1978 to 1999. It makes up the most comprehensive collection of the New York-based Taiwanese artist's work by a public institution. This January, the Chinese collector Guan Yi donated 37 contemporary works, including "Canton Express" from the 2003 Venice Biennale.

The curatorial team's next goal will be to reach out to the rest of Asia.



An artist's rendition of one of the spaces for large-scale installations at the planned M+ museum in Hong Kong. Herzog & de Meuron and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority



Lars Nittve, the executive director of M+, was a founding director of the Tate Modern. West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

“We’re spending more time on Taiwan, Korea and Japan, partly because Japan has a long history of important avant-garde movements,” Mr. Nittve said. “But as our team grows, we will look toward Southeast and South Asia.”

Mr. Chong said the fact that Japanese and Korean museums had done a good job in preserving modern works boded well for the region, but maybe not so well for a new museum. “This is particularly true of Asian works from the early 20th century,” he said. “When you see major works already on a museum wall, you know you can’t collect them. Museums almost never sell their collections, unless something catastrophic has happened.”

“In some ways, South and Southeast Asian art may be more accessible to us because of a lack of a strong history of institutional collecting,” he added.

“But we haven’t done much work there yet. We are very new at this.”

M+ will show not only art, but also what it calls “20th- and 21st-century visual culture,” including disciplines as wide-ranging as film and design.

Earlier this year, M+ used an art space called ArtisTree to showcase about 100 models, photos and drawings from its growing architecture collection, which spans the 1920s to the present day.

On M+’s long to-do list is the development of its “moving images” collection, which is still lacking a curator.

“Our collection could include movies — Hong Kong cinema is a classic — but also video games, graphic design or computer design,” Mr. Nittve said.

One advantage of starting with a clean slate is that the M+ collection can address historic imbalances.

“We’ve been struck that the Sigg collection is very male-dominated,” Mr. Nittve said of the major donation of Chinese works. “There is an over-representation of male artists and an under-representation of female artists of standing. I think we need to keep an eye on this and not end up in the same situation as many Western museums.”

M+ is being built in a city whose art scene only began attracting international attention several years ago. Much effort has been made to include local artists.

Last year, M+’s directors visited Blindspot, a small gallery that was showing Stanley Wong, a Hong Kong designer and artist also known as another mountain man.

They bought 10 works from his “Lanwei” photo series for an undisclosed sum, while the artist donated an additional 36 works so the show could be kept together. This was Mr. Wong’s first gift to any museum, which he says he plans on following up with more donations.

“Lanwei” documents unfinished or abandoned building projects from across Asia, which Mr. Wong spent six years tracking down across 12 cities.

“These ‘lanwei’ buildings are actually a bit dangerous — holes in the floors, no walls, no elevators, no windows,” he said. “There I am, lugging 30, 40 pounds of equipment up the stairs. There I am, squatting on some industrial estate sidewalk trying to manipulate film in a cloth bag.”

“A ‘lanwei’ building in Asia says something about the issues in this region, like overinvestment or corruption,” he said. “I photographed an enormous road built outside Bangkok’s new airport that had never been used.”

Mr. Wong said he was not overly concerned by the delays and budgetary squabbles that have beset the West Kowloon project.

“West Kowloon has been called a white elephant, and there have been criticisms of whether it is the best use of government money,” Mr. Wong added. “But if we are going to be committed to making this into a cultural city, we need something like this.”