

Future visions

Writer and curator Karen Smith aims to change perceptions of Chinese contemporary art, she tells **Clare Morin**

It was a freezing day in February, 1989, when a gunshot rang out in the National Art Gallery of Beijing. Artist Xiao Lu had just fired a shot at her own installation. The show, featuring works by nearly 200 Chinese artists, was immediately closed down by the authorities. The same year, contemporary Chinese art hit the West for the first time, when the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* was unveiled at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Then the events of Tiananmen Square happened. It was in this year of immense significance that a young British woman named Karen Smith boarded a plane to Hong Kong. Little did she know, she would become one of the world's leading authorities on Chinese contemporary art.

"I came to Hong Kong, like many do, for a wedding, and stayed for four years," says Smith with a laugh, when we meet for a coffee in the afternoon sun of the IFC. The renowned writer and curator is in town to promote the second edition of her 1996 book *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China*. The immense tome profiles the stories of the most influential artists of the contemporary Chinese art scene – from Wang Guangyi, leader of the New Art Movement, to conceptual master Wang Jianwei.

Smith recounts that after she landed here, she was almost immediately involved in the arts, first as a film editor, and then as the managing editor of art magazine *Artension*. By the early 1990s, she had become irresistibly drawn to the art coming from China.

"In 1992, Johnson [Chang] was preparing his *China's New Art Post-1989* exhibition, [Manfred] Schoeni was working with some of the cynical realist painters, and Alice King was showing more ethereal art," she says. "It was hard to understand how there was such an extraordinary diversity. I knew nothing about China, and most of the people I met didn't know much either." So she set off for Beijing. "I went there thinking it would be a fantastic subject for a book. I thought I would probably be there for a year to do research; it took a lot longer."

In fact it took her 14 years to write that book, but it didn't take her long



Cultural critic Karen Smith at PP Photography Studio

to find the artists. Smith met most of the important Chinese avant garde artists in 1993, at the opening of a solo exhibition by German expressionist artist Jorg Immendorf at Beijing's International Art Palace. "It was quite a spectacular event," she remembers. "Every kind of artist you could possibly meet was there. Of course, I couldn't speak a word of Chinese, which is what made me think about having a good look at the language before I went out to the studios."

Smith spent 14 years studying the language, working with the Chinese Literature Press and befriending the artists. "I was out every day with artists, having dinners, going to events and all those crazy things that were going on in the 1990s." Getting under the skin of the artistic culture was of paramount importance. "I didn't want to be one of those people who skips in and glides across the surface, missing so many of the references."

It is this depth of knowledge and

context that makes *Nine Lives* a compelling read. Already working on her second book, *From Bang to Boom*, which chronicles the Chinese art scene in the decade from 1989, she is equally in demand as a

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curator – from the Tate Liverpool to London's ICA. She says that much of the criticism mainland artists are currently receiving – the predominance of painted works, the strong narratives of cynical realism – are a result of the auction house effect. "Auctions are

not the mechanisms that decide art history," she says firmly. "They just happen to be an effective commercial mechanism for allowing busy people to bid on lots of different types of art in one place. Auctions are not a decider of taste. They come with this neat little catalogue, and ... what sells best is what hangs best in a hotel lobby. What reproduces best in a catalogue is always going to be painting, photography or printing. That's why the art that makes it into the press is not an indicative barometer. The same media is also criticising the types of art being made. It's a vicious cycle."

She points out that one of the biggest issues facing artists in China today is the issue of self-censorship. "It's so ingrained in people's psyche that they tend to second guess what the government will do in response," she says. "They might choose not to paint something because it might affect the work's ability to be shown. Or they deliberately do things which they know will catch attention. There are a lot of slightly idiotic reports about art censorship in China. I always take issue with this, because a lot of the art that gets so-called censored is the very

obvious stuff. It would be like walking in a crowd and taking your clothes off." Western tastes, she argues, have meant that people tend to go for the obvious. "They do miss all these extraordinary pieces of work, so much more political, so powerful, because they don't understand the references – quite often the Chinese government doesn't get it either." She points to Qui Zhijie's current exhibition at Shanghai's Zenda MoMA. The installation *Ataraxia of Zhuangzi* investigates suicide in China by recreating the infamous Nanjing Bridge, in Jiangsu province. The bridge is a famed suicide site, so much so the local government actually places counsellors at the site to prevent people jumping. "In terms of being politically challenging, that's pretty tough. It's not a cheap pot shot being taken at Mao: that's easy."

Later this month, Smith will be curating an exhibition that expands on this theme. *Subtlety* opens on August 30 at the Platform China Contemporary Art Institute, showcasing nine leading contemporary artists. The rest of the world may be finally catching up with the contemporary Chinese art scene, but Smith is still light years ahead. *Nine Lives* is published by Timezone 8, www.timezone8.com