

ART WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Christie's China Managing Director, **JINQING CAI**, says the auction house's debut auction in mainland China signals a milestone for the global art market



ON SEPTEMBER 26 2013, CHRISTIE'S HELD its inaugural sale in mainland China after becoming the first fine art auction company to gain a license to operate independently in the country.

At a showroom in Shanghai's Shangri-La hotel, sales totaled \$24.9 million, from objects including paintings, sculpture, jewelry, watches and wine. A ruby and diamond necklace fetched the highest price of the night for a single item, \$3.4 million, while contemporary Chinese art also proved very popular, with *Clothes Veins Study Series*, a set of 14 plaster and bronze sculptures by Sui Jianguo, fetching \$1.9 million (see left).

Brunswick's **BEN RAWLINGSON PLANT** talked to Christie's Jinqing Cai about what the breakthrough means for the company and about the burgeoning interest in fine arts in China.

What was it like on the night of the first auction?

Everyone was very, very excited. There was a lot of buzz created in China and around the world. We brought over about 80 global clients to witness this historic moment. Christie's is the first international fine art auction house that has been able to conduct its auctions completely independently in China, under the Christie's name, in Christie's style, with Christie's auctioneers. It was really a defining moment for the art market here. This is a fascinating time to see this market really become globally connected and Chinese collectors as well as artists are becoming a driving and powerful force in the world.

Why Shanghai?

Really it came down to a mutual interest – for Christie's and for the city. Shanghai said it would support us in getting a license and creating an environment where more and more international art companies could not only start but also sustain their businesses there. For us, it was about being able to create a complete Christie's experience as Shanghai develops an international position for the city's art market. When we started this conversation, we immediately clicked.

What was Christie's involvement in the Chinese art market before 2013?

We have been in China for almost 20 years. We set up our first representative office in Shanghai in 1994, the first international auction house to do so. Over the years we developed long-term relationships with Chinese artists and with clients who were buying from Hong Kong. We were also quite innovative in promoting Chinese art globally. Starting in 2002, we developed a whole contemporary offering – in addition to our traditional areas of expertise such as Chinese painting and ancient artworks. We did a lot of promotion of Chinese contemporary artists on this platform and it has become an important way to be recognized internationally. Their value has been growing quite significantly.

Why is it important to have a fully operational saleroom when people are increasingly buying virtually, by telephone or online?

For us, putting an auction together is very much like putting on a theater production. There is a certain drama – the prices, the high impact of a live event – it's unique. It is the fullest way for people to experience Christie's. Of course you have online and telephone bidding. But however you participate, taking part in an auction is more than just doing a transaction. You really have a special moment to observe the market.

In emerging markets, is there a learning process too?

The auction sector in China is very young – only about 20 years old. For the Chinese, having a leading brand to conduct auctions provides their first chance to come and see it. For us, there is a learning process too: new laws, how we interact with local clients, their pace and preference, their price range and tolerance. Now, we are convening people not only for sales, but also for lectures, as part of our education program. It all promotes art.

BEN RAWLINGSON PLANT is Managing Partner of Brunswick Arts, supporting arts and not-for-profit clients and advising on engagement with the cultural sector.



JINQING CAI

Jinqing Cai is Managing Director of Christie's China, having joined in summer 2012 from Brunswick Group, where she had been a Partner since 2005. Born in Beijing and educated at Wellesley College and Princeton University in the US, Cai heads Christie's activities in China and leads their educational and cultural projects.