

A CLUSTER OF FORMER MILITARY FACTORIES built in Beijing in the 1950s has emerged as one of the world's leading destinations for art tourism. Now called the 798 Art District, it houses an almost uncountable number of hip creative spaces, galleries, museums, cafés, restaurants, outdoor sculpture installations and boutiques.

At the center of all that activity is the museum UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. Director and CEO Philip Tinari is an American who has lived in Beijing for most of the last 20 years and witnessed firsthand the dramatic changes in China's economy, cultural life and relationship to the world.

The stories of the 798 District and UCCA are inextricably linked to the recent history of China itself. Under Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, competition from private enterprise shuttered government-owned factories of the Dashanzi district. Artists took advantage of the abundant cheap space—with great natural lighting owing to the Bauhaus-inspired designs. Art galleries and museums, unheard of in

Beijing prior to Deng's reforms, began popping up and the sale and collection of art exploded into a growing business sector. A former electronics plant in Dashanzi, Factory No. 798, became an important center, housing some of the early exhibition spaces.

In 2007, Belgian art collector Guy Ullens sponsored the founding of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in the emerging 798 District to showcase contemporary Chinese art. Over the last decade, Mr. Ullens, now in his mid-80s, sold off much of his personal collection, while the restructured UCCA has continued to flourish under new ownership and patronage since 2017.

In addition to its 86,000-square-foot main space, UCCA also operates a remote facility, UCCA Dune, constructed under the sand on the shores of the Bohai Sea, 300 kilometers outside of Beijing. The museum still focuses on Chinese contemporary work and also hosts international exhibitions, including a recent major display of work by legendary 20th century modernist Pablo Picasso.

Part of the "Land of the Lustrous" exhibit at UCCA Dune, Chinese artist Zhao Yao has placed an enormous red Mani stone on the shore, like a giant cell.

The 40-year-old Mr. Tinari joined UCCA in 2011, after having been the founding editor of international art magazine LEAP, then based in Beijing. He spoke to Brunswick's Yan Mei and Damian Chandler about the role of art amid the changes in Chinese society. After almost 20 years handling the pressures of artistic business and creative expression within restrictions of Chinese society, he remains optimistic.

"You have those inevitable moments of existential angst, like, 'What am I doing here?' But then you think about how much positive change has happened and remember what it was like years ago," Mr. Tinari says. "Attitudes change, and I don't think you can go quantitatively backwards."

UCCA's mission was to bring more international art pieces to China and Chinese contemporary art to the world. Has that mission evolved?

At the founding of UCCA, there was a lot of rhetoric about trying to bring China up to a new level and China, in the intervening years, has gotten to

that level. While it might sound patronizing, behind that original desire was a bigger urge to bring China together with the rest of the world through contemporary art and culture. That has never changed. That's deep in our DNA.

What has changed is the audience. When we were founded, there were some artists here in the 798 District—a few adventurers and people very much in the know. There was no way of knowing that it would become what it is now: a tourist area that sees more than 8 million visitors a year. So our audience has changed from a very insider kind of art world crowd to a much more broadly based cross-section of the population.

Do people behave the same in museums in China versus the West? Has that changed?

I remember being at the Shanghai Biennale in 2002 and feeling like something was different that I couldn't put my finger on. The next day I went back and realized that people were not afraid to talk.

PHILIP TINARI, Director and CEO of Beijing's UCCA, talks to Brunswick's **YAN MEI** and **DAMIAN CHANDLER** about the role of art in a changing China.

ART Dynamic



Museum-goers in the West come from this other tradition of feeling the need to whisper.

Our viewers have gotten much more sophisticated over the years. Basic things, like touching the art, are less of an issue. If you read the history of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, you see the same thing. One of the big issues around the visitor experience in the 1880s was people spitting on the floor.

What's special about the way people interact with art here now is they're not burdened by the accumulated weight of museum traditions. There's much more of an excitement and openness.

What lured you to China in the first place and what has driven you to stay?

I came to China for the first time 20 years ago, when the art and the culture scene were at the tail end of their underground moment. Around that time, I got to know some Chinese artists including Xu Bing who I did a big show with last year. I was hooked.

Contemporary art in China somehow seemed to be a microcosm of things I was interested in—linguistics, culture, global politics. Then I got very deep into this field, writing, curating and mediating in other ways. Contemporary art in China went from being a tiny circle to a whole cultural industry. And UCCA's been at the center of that.

What's your personal view on the changes that have taken place in the cultural sector in China?

China is much more sophisticated today than 20 years ago. I tend to see it through the prism of the people that I interact with—artists, collectors and patrons. Unless you are deep in both languages and surrounded by these people it's hard to really grasp how vastly the possibilities have expanded on this individual level. They have a new freedom to imagine possibilities for themselves.

We've seen a real broadening and deepening of interest in art, both traditional and contemporary. They're ready to embrace Chinese culture and heritage in a new way and they have some money to do it. Chinese are traveling all over the world. They're seeing the great architecture and artworks in cities of different countries and they're starting to think, maybe there should be something like that here.

For us, that points to education. The last thing we want is to spend the time, effort and resources to put on a major show and have people walk out and say, "Well, I didn't understand that." What's the point? We're pursuing different channels, including working with Tencent on a new kind of interactive media guide to our exhibitions.

"THE IMPACT OF ART IS VERY HARD TO MEASURE. IT'S NOT SCALABLE. IT'S NOT EASILY QUANTIFIABLE. BUT I THINK IT'S ABSOLUTE."

But honestly, one of our most successful programs is one of the most traditional, which is our docents program. We have around 200 active members now, people who are in other careers but volunteer their time to give tours. They go through rigorous training and become a kind of interest group in their own right. People have a chance to ask questions of someone who feels more like a peer, who maybe knows a little bit more about this stuff than they do.

We also work with the very young. We have an arm called UCCA Kids that has been in development since 2013. We have nearly four hundred students coming every weekend, from 2 years old to 8 years old, where they're basically little artists. The curriculum doesn't teach art per se, but uses contemporary art to inspire creative, independent thinking.

There's a perception that there is literally no freedom in China. Is creative freedom a struggle?

That's a fundamental tension to being here and working here. For a long time, art existed in a kind of a gray zone. It doesn't attract the same size audience as film or literature, and it's not as easily regulated. At the same time, as interest grew, this kind of economic envelope arose and it became easier for the government to see the whole sector as just another kind of business. There's some flexibility built into the system from those two things.

There's also a difference between what the government will put its name on, and what it will allow to happen. We work in full compliance with Chinese law and policy. But there are many things that can happen outside of the bureaucracy and much of it doesn't happen of its own accord. I think we've done a lot of work in that space.

The government can help, too. For the Picasso exhibit, we would have had to guarantee €200 million as a deposit to the customs service to bring this work into the country. But the French foreign minister came here and this was a point in his discussion with his counterpart, Wang Yi. They agreed to allow the exhibition as a cultural exchange. You would think more things like that would happen, but they don't. It's not because they're not allowed to, but because it's not really the way the bureaucracy is wired.

Someone told me that unless China sees a fundamental cultural change, it will never really be a modern nation. Do you agree?

You often hear people describe China's 5,000 years of history and its great traditions—its identity as the longest continuous civilization. But in a way, it's also one of the youngest nations. Things essentially



"Reading" by Pablo Picasso Boisgeloup, January 2, 1932. Oil on canvas 130x97.5 cm. Musée National Picasso-Paris ©SuccessionPicasso2019.

A major collection of work by Picasso was exhibited at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art over the summer. Philip Tinari, below, is the Director and CEO of UCCA.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF UCCA

restart from 1949—or '76 or '78. People don't seem burdened by tradition. I see such an incredible openness to new things, an intensity of interest and ability to learn. There's right now a dedication and a shared sense of purpose that China is really lucky to have.

One interesting change is the shift away from what was becoming more like a hereditary, party-based aristocracy, toward a new set of folk heroes, like Jack Ma, Wang Xing and Cindy Mi [world-famous entrepreneurs who each built corporate empires from scratch]. These kinds of self-made figures are starting to really loom large. They offer an inspiration to people, not just in business but culturally as well.

Can art and business really help each other?

Yes, that's really exciting for us. The idea is quite new to a lot of companies. Sometimes it's practical: how many people will see this show, what the visibility might do for a brand. But sometimes they come to us with crazy ideas that are actually quite interesting and open up new ways to connect art and commerce.

We've turned those special projects into a whole unit that we call UCCA Lab. That team works with these enterprises on art projects, everyone from McDonald's to Corona to Red Star Macalline—a big furniture wholesaler here in China. We end up teaching clients a lot about what it means to work as an artist. And perhaps this helps to push the aesthetic level of the society in an interesting way.

Do you feel art can really change society?

Oh, absolutely. If you look at Picasso—work from Europe in the 20th century that is globally relevant.

One creative vision can change the way that all of us see things. The impact of art is very hard to measure. It's not scalable. It's not easily quantifiable. But I think it's absolute. Art acts somewhere between being a reflection of existing circumstances and an influence over circumstances to come.

The Marxian idea, which is a kind of core belief in China, is that the base determines the superstructure. The people understand that culture is inseparable from the ground out of which it grows. But culture can also change that ground in the long term.

When people look back on a crisis period, a major war or a disease outbreak, the art is a big part of what they see. Art is what gets left behind. So it's less about art's influence on the mainstream than what it says about its era. Art always operates at the limit of what's possible. Like a candid photo, it's a reflection of the given moment that maybe isn't even clear until many years later.

So here we are in the midst of one of the greatest social transformations of the last several hundred years—the modernization and economic liberalization of China. What will the art that is left behind say about this moment?

Can you name a few artists and works that you admire and that have an influence?

There are many. I always come back to Xu Bing. I was very fortunate to meet him when I was still an undergraduate. To name just two of his works: the installation "A Book From The Sky" is a collection of 3,000 fake Chinese characters which he crafted and printed painstakingly in the 1980s. It reflects the state of thinking at the time, a passionate commitment to heritage coupled with deep, deep doubt that it might all be completely meaningless.

Then just a few years later as he goes to America, as many artists of that period did, and invents this script for English words that look to an English speaker like Chinese. To a Chinese speaker they look like nothing. It illustrates this profound propensity for misunderstanding—which is still present.

Art seems to transcend politics and social concerns, but do you see it having a positive role in connecting the world?

Absolutely. I don't want to be too teleological. I'm certainly not sure what the end result will be. But I do believe in the special power of art to create a space for dialogue and exchange. It's not a neutral space, but definitely an open space, where different kinds of people can come together. ♦