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Art in America



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FRONT PAGE

▷ **SC** How does it become accessioned?

RB The museum essentially has to catalogue it on a public register.

SC Why do you think that this measure needs to be legislated and not left to the field to self-regulate, for example, through the widely accepted guidelines of the Association of Art Museum Directors?

RB I think there's greater and greater pressure from the bean counters on the integrity of collections. If we don't do this, there will be institutions that cannibalize their collections in order to stay open, and you'll end up with paintings being sold to keep the doors open, and eventually institutions with open doors and no paintings.

SC Is the current economy the impetus behind this bill?

RB There's no question that the current economy has focused attention on the problem.

SC What about museums like L.A. MOCA or the National Academy that have been in dire straits or on the verge of closing their doors?

RB That's a huge issue—making sure that we don't lose institutions in the midst of a fiscal crisis. But selling off collections isn't the answer.

SC If the law goes into effect, how will it be enforced, and by whom?

RB Most of it is self-enforcing.

SC What happens if a museum violates the law?

RB Then the property would be recoverable because the museum didn't have the authority to sell the work, and the Board of Regents would have the enforcement authority to deal with the people who engaged in that sale.

SC Do you think that the boards of these troubled institutions have to take a more active role?

RB I wouldn't want to suggest that boards in any institution have not taken an active role. It's case by case. Boards clearly have additional responsibilities. It's not pleasant, it's not easy, and we admire and appreciate the work they do, but that has to be looked at as part of the solution.

SC Do you see this bill as a model for a national policy?

RB Yes, we were very conscious of that as we were writing the statute, and we consulted very widely in the museum world, and in the education and nonprofit worlds. With any luck it'll be something of a template for dealing with a problem that's being felt all over the nation. ○

▽ the area in January, Bleckner, who had never traveled to sub-Saharan Africa before, was appalled by the squalid living conditions and the children's stories of horrific abuse. Apprehensive at first, he set up a studio with art supplies to help the children convey through painting not only the traumas they'd sustained but also their more hopeful imaginings. For teacher and pupils alike, the experience was cathartic.

Bleckner traveled in Uganda with a translator, driver and bodyguard, and set up the studio at a UN depot in an abandoned convent.

Working with a group of 24 children, he was astonished at their transformation over a short period of time. At first, the children produced almost exclusively depictions of the pain and suffering they knew firsthand. Bleckner then asked them to think of something beautiful, something that they would like to be, or what they hoped for their country's future. "What happened with these kids is nothing short of amazing," Bleckner says. "They were just waiting for permission to explode with joy and color. The work speaks for itself." A number of paintings by the children will be on view on May 12 at the UN to coincide with the ceremony honoring Bleckner. Sales of the works will be used to finance various UNODC projects.

—David Ebony



Artwork made by one of Bleckner's students.

CUSTOMS DELAY PROMPTS CHINESE ARTIST'S FREEWHEELING IMPROV

What does an artist do when he arrives on the far side of the world, only to find that the works for his gallery show, scheduled to open in 48 hours, are sequestered in U.S. customs—with no reason given for their delay and no hint of when, if ever, they will be released? Qiu Zhijie, 40, one of the most prolific and conceptually astute members of China's post-Mao avant-garde, responded by re-creating a version of the impounded image suite directly on the walls of Chambers Fine Arts in New York. Beginning at 3:00 p.m. on Mar. 11, he worked for 20 sleepless hours—pausing only for food and cigarette breaks—to create a flowing brush-and-ink fantasia that wraps around three and a half walls of the roughly 1,000-square-foot display space. After finishing at 11:00 a.m. on Mar. 12, Qiu immediately crashed from jet lag and exertion, almost missing his show's opening that evening.

Titled "Mochou," like the series of 14 ink-on-paper paintings on which it is based, the ephemeral wall work—on view until May 9—alludes to the Yangtze River Bridge in Nanjing (since 1968 a symbol of China's modernization and a site of many suicides), as well as to an eponymous young beauty of legend. Depending on one's mythological source, Mochou was either a young bride who pined so intensely for her husband, absent in the army, that she turned into a lake in order to flow to him, or she was an impoverished maiden who drowned herself after being forced into a loveless marriage in order to pay for her father's funeral. Qiu's involvement with Nanjing began in 2005, when he curated the Second Nanjing Triennial. Since then, he has worked closely with the city's suicide prevention agencies. His fluid mural mixes classical references with such contemporary images as soda straws and the hand of his own young daughter opening an ancient Chinese text.

On Mar. 27, three weeks after their arrival in New York, Qiu's hostage works were released from customs—still without explanation. Chambers staff members, who had previously hung photocopies on the walls to show viewers (especially potential buyers) the mural's on-sale antecedents, have now installed several paintings in the gallery and keep the remainder in a back room for client inspection.

Qiu's bureaucratic snafu in the U.S. mirrors problems encountered by dealers and booksellers recently attempting to bring material into the still haphazardly censored People's Republic. Last summer, Danish-run Galleri Faurstou Beijing experienced a customs delay of Warhol works, while PRC authorities toyed briefly with the idea of restricting art exhibitions during the Olympics to pieces made in China by Chinese artists. And this writer's own book *New China, New Art*, surveying the last 30 years of experimental art in China, was held in Mainland customs for three months last fall, only to be released in January without comment and without restrictions.

—Richard Vine



Qiu Zhijie at work at 4:32 a.m. on the day of his opening.