

SEANKELLY

Chow, Vivienne. "Berlin: A Growing, Vibrant Community for Young Asian Artists."
Sotheby's. November 12, 2019.

Sotheby's EST. 1744



WU CHI-TSUNG WORKING ON THE WORKS FROM HIS CYANO-COLLAGE SERIES. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Berlin has become the up-and-coming place for a contemporary artists from Asia. Vivienne Chow explores this steadily growing community to discover why the German capital is positioned as the ideal city for artists and creatives of the 21st century.

SEANKELLY

In what appears to be an apartment in the west Berlin district of Charlottenburg, eleven pillars of varying heights rise from the middle of the room, with rays of light ricocheting off mirrored surfaces of the glass sculptures. The serene ambiance of *Missing Space* (2019) belies its violent roots. Look closer and you will find that the pillars refer to *The Silent Wall* (2014, 2019), a video series on display in the adjacent room. In the series, artist Isaac Chong Wai uses his hands to cover the countless number of bullet holes on the walls in Sarajevo and Berlin – but his efforts are in vain. Such is a scene at Zilberman Gallery, where Chong is having his first solo gallery exhibition *What is the Future in the Past? And What is the Past in the Future?*

Chong is part of a steadily growing community of Asian artists living and working in Berlin. Hailing from Hong Kong, the 29-year-old is an alumnus of Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Visual Arts. The German capital has been his adopted home since 2015, after he earned an MFA in public art and new artistic strategies at Bauhaus-Universität in Weimar, Germany. Historically, it was Paris that had been the mecca for artists of the modern period, shaping the trajectory and artistic language of many such as Zao Wou-Ki, Chu Teh-Chun, Wu Guangzhong, Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita, Kim Whanki, and Kim Tschang-Yeul. Today, Berlin is certainly casting a great influence on a younger generation of contemporary artists.

Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the capital—and Germany as a whole—has gone through remarkable transformations. In the three decades of reunification, the country has grown into an economic and political powerhouse, but Berlin seems to be riding on a different pace. Famously described as “poor but sexy” fifteen years ago by then-mayor Klaus Wowereit, Berlin was positioned as an up-and-coming creative and hip city. These initiatives saw some measure of success, but only for a while. Still, the city has a certain energy that continues to draw young artists and creatives from around the world. It has a relatively affordable cost of living, and the city boasts a strong network of institutions and funding initiatives that favour the development of the artistic community. While Paris was artistic epicenter of the last century, Berlin has also emerged as a creative metropolis in its own right – a romanticised utopia for artists and creatives of the 21st century.

Today Berlin is home to an estimated 20,000 artists, plus more than 160,000 employed in the cultural and creative economy. Many internationally renowned contemporary artists have called Berlin home, such as Haegue Yang, Chiharu Shiota, Ai Weiwei (who despite moving to Cambridge just this year still keeps a studio in the German capital). Avant-garde performance artist Ming Wong from Singapore also has a strong tie with the city. Ho Tzu Nyen, also from Singapore, has spent a significant amount of time in Berlin since he was awarded the DAAD scholarship during 2014-15 and is still showing in the capital frequently. Chinese artist Aajiao divides his time between Berlin and Shanghai. Artist and curator Ma Yongfeng calls Berlin a kind of a base – as do independent curators Li

SEANKELLY

Zhenhua and Kim Keum-hwa. Kim moved to Berlin from South Korea in 2003 and founded Keum Art Projects that facilitates cultural and artistic dialogues between her home country and Germany. Carla Chan, contemporary artist from Hong Kong, also lives in Berlin.

Wu Chi-tsung first came to Berlin from Taiwan under an artist-in-residence programme at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2017. At first, he had planned to set up a studio abroad in Beijing, Shanghai or New York. He found a studio in the German city before the end of his term, and he has since divided his time between Berlin and Taipei.

“You rent a space, sell a few beers, and you can make a living. Emerging artists can make a living easily. They can work three days a week and still have four days to themselves to make art. You cannot do this in New York, Paris or even Hong Kong. That’s suicide.”

- WU CHI-TSUNG

Unlike New York, London and Hong Kong, Berlin is not a major marketplace. However, art fairs and large galleries exist. Rather than being seen as a significant drawback, the distance from the art market has the unintended positive effect of giving artists more room to manoeuvre, mentally and physically, according to Wu: “Berlin is a strange case. It’s a production centre for artists, not a market centre.”

There is no lack of great art in Berlin, but there is also a lot of bad art around too, Wu quipped. That’s because anyone can open an art space there. “But it’s not about good or bad. It’s about the possibility. If you have more trial and error, you will have a higher chance to succeed,” he said.

Wu’s collage works employ cyanotype-making techniques, but reference Chinese landscape ink paintings from the 5th century. In recent years, Wu has moved towards more abstraction owing to the influence of western contemporary art. “Had I stayed in Asia, they would’ve probably referred to more of an ink art context,” he said.

The Asian artists community in Berlin is still relatively small, but Chong believes that it will continue to grow, especially with the opening of the Times Art Centre in Berlin, founded by the Guangdong Times Museum. Chong was one of the featured artists when it launched last year. “The opening of the centre helps strengthening the Asian artists’ community in Berlin. They have provided a great

SEANKELLY

platform for artists, researchers, curators and scholars to share their knowledge, methodologies and artistic practices,” he said.

Banner image: Photo credit: Vivienne Chow