

## CIGE GalleryGuide Interview with DSL Collection co-Founder and Owner Sylvain Levy

Interview by Iona Whittaker

The DSL Collection represents a progressive model for collecting contemporary art. Co-founded by owners Sylvain Levy and his wife Dominique in 2005, this key collection continues to be conceived with the aim of representing leading experimental and avant-garde Chinese artists – those exerting an influence on the development of contemporary Chinese art as it unfolds. As befitting its ethos, the collection includes works in diverse media from painting to sculpture, installation, video and photography. Among around 90 artists currently present in the collection are established names like Ding Yi, Zeng Fanzhi, Zhang Huan, Li Yilin, as well as emerging artists such as Ma Qiusha. For Sylvain and Dominique Levy, to collect Chinese art is an adventure.

The DSL Collection sets itself apart with a museological approach to acquisition. The collection is conceived as a project, with specific criteria governing the selection of works. A cap on the number of works in the collection – set now at c160 – ensures the constant redefinition and evolution of the collection in tandem with artistic development, and pursues communication between the artworks. These must be connected with Chinese tradition, but at the same time engage with the contemporary environment in China. For Sylvain

Levy, 'A collection is a work-in-progress.' The DSL Collection actively seeks artists who inscribe themselves in contemporary discourse and, in their works, reflect the increasingly globalised state of the world at large from a Chinese perspective.

"One of my principles is to go into depth; no matter which subject I pursue, I want to do it thoroughly" A visiting professor at Shanghai University, Mr. Levy and his wife undertake regular trips to China to meet artists in their studios and keep abreast of developments in the art scene. It is their wish to share the DSL Collection with a wide audience – the 'net citizens' of today – and to sustain an active approach incorporating the documentation and accessibility of the artworks. A website and virtual museum provide the platform for displaying the collection in tandem with new technologies. In addition, works from the collection are exhibited in museums and are accessible through an iPad application. Conferences, a prize and educational activities complete the picture of DSL's support for contemporary Chinese art. The collection is disseminated along these channels on the basis that "You do not wait for people to come to you, you go where people are."

A virtual exhibition of the DSL Collection curated by Martina Koppel Jiechang will be shown soon.



DSL创始人沙利文·莱维及其妻子多米尼克  
DSL Collection co-Founder and Owner  
Sylvain Levy and his wife Dominique

### Sylvain Levy=Sylvain Gallery Guide=Guide

**Guide:** Which artist(s), for you personally, most powerfully reflect contemporary Chinese culture at the moment?

**Sylvain:** One of the main aims we have is to build a very strong cultural identity for the DSL Collection. In terms of artists, this has shifted a little bit; in the beginning we looked at more established artists, and gradually we are moving towards emerging artists; those from the '80s are for me very interesting because they are exploring very different types of society from what the older artists were experiencing. It's very interesting to see this new generation of artists who have their roots in China, but are also 'globalised'.

**Guide:** Do you communicate directly with Chinese collectors? Do you notice a change in taste amongst them?

**Sylvain:** The world of collectors is a very small one, and that maybe makes collecting interesting, because it's more about connecting people than gathering objects. The new generation of Chinese collectors is very interesting because the really do very good homework and very quickly; they travel, they are very open-minded, and I think that in the next 5-10 years we will see a new type of collector in China, especially in terms of the young generation, which I think will be very interesting.

**Guide:** Are there other collections you follow closely as part of your research?

**Sylvain:** In China, we were first inspired by Guan Yi. He collected very conceptual works and installations in the beginning, and for me he was really an example. What I want to insist is that I strongly believe collecting is a personal adventure; I am always interested to see how the others make their collections, but it doesn't really influence me. I am very happy with my mistakes, and I only really need my instinct.

**Guide:** Do you feel Chinese artists' attitudes and approaches to the market are changing now?

**Sylvain:** Yes. I think the first phenomenon is that more and more artists don't want to be considered as a "Chinese artist", but just as an artist. They try to be

represented by international galleries – to be linked with the art world in general. What's also very new is that Western galleries are now trying to represent them. This world is changing even more since a lot of galleries are opening in Hong Kong. But on the other side you still have artists who act like Chinese artists, meaning that they don't want to be linked with just one gallery – they want to be free to do whatever they want; they are more interested in the local market than in having international exposure. Things are moving in different directions and it depends on individual artists.

**Guide:** And from your perspective as a collector based in Europe, what do you think is the current attitude in that region to Chinese artists' work and credibility?

**Sylvain:** I went to see the Madeln exhibition at Galerie Nathalie Obadia; all the works were very good and a huge number of people came. I discussed with Nathalie and also Alexia from Madeln about people's reactions, which were of absolute surprise. Chinese artists have a very reductive image – one of people only interested in the market and of a kind of exotic art. An exhibition like this is very important that it makes people think. A few months ago there was an exhibition of the latest acquisitions of the Centre Pompidou; there was just one Asian artist – Korean – and no Chinese artists. So, on one hand you hear that Chinese contemporary is the biggest market in the world, and on the other you see that at Basel, Frieze and Fiac there are only one or two galleries presenting it: there is a paradox. I think this will change quite quickly. We have made a book of the collection and distributed it free to people and institutions in 12 different countries. Their reaction is often one of surprise, which means that they will become curious. Bit by bit, Chinese art will be viewed differently.

**Guide:** What are you most excited about at the moment with regards to the collection?

**Sylvain:** Coming to China! We are very lucky to be able to do something like this. It's an incredible adventure to discover a new country and a new culture and to be connected with such interesting people – not only in China but all over the world.