

Artist Featured: Bai Yi Luo (China)

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# A show of faith and trust

Contemporary Chinese art collector Uli Sigg tells why he's willing to showcase eight works from his private collection at ARTSingapore



PHOTOS: ULI SIGG, ARTSINGAPORE

**WHITEWASH:** An arrangement of seven Neolithic vases by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

**June Cheong**  
ARTS REPORTER

**T**OP contemporary Chinese art collector Uli Sigg has some 1,600 pieces by renowned Chinese artists to his name, but he has no idea what the value of his extensive collection is.

The 61-year-old has never had his personal collection assessed by an art expert or valuator.

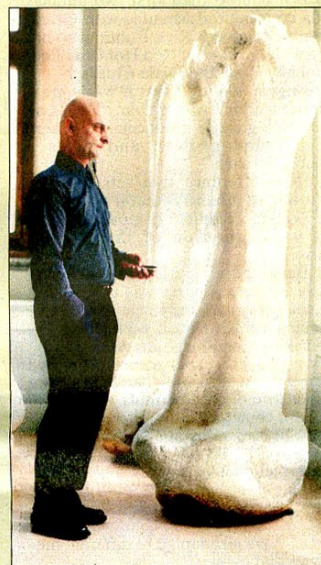
The mild-mannered Swiss says on the phone from Beijing: "I don't pay much attention to the issue of value. It's not an incentive for me as I don't sell my artworks."

He does not procure or hawk works for investment purposes, and he is more than keen to loan his collection to museums and galleries around the world.

He will showcase eight pieces from his collection at ARTSingapore 2007 from next Thursday to Oct 8.

And lest you think that the eight works are minor ones plucked from the dusty depths of his congeries, he points out that one of his all-time favourite pieces will be among those exhibited.

The work he so adores is an installation titled *Whitewash* by avant-garde Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, which features an arrangement of seven Neolithic vases.



**AFFINITY:** Dr Uli Sigg believes Singapore can play an important role in art trade some day.

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rangement of seven Neolithic vases.

Dr Sigg says: "It deals very cleverly

with the most important phenomenon in China today – the clash of Chinese traditions with today's industrial world."

He reveals that it was ARTSingapore fair director Chen Shen Po's sincerity which moved him into agreeing to show part of his collection here.

He recounts their meeting at international art show Art Basel in June this year: "She made a good impression on me and I could feel her ambition to create a good art fair. It has much to do with her person. I won't entrust my works to just anybody.

"I think Singapore can play an important role in art trade some day as you have an affinity for Chinese culture."

Dr Sigg began collecting contemporary Chinese art in the late 1980s and has seen the scene grow from a lacklustre one which aped Western techniques into the bustling, auction house sales record-busting one that it is today.

He says: "It took some years for Chinese artists to find a language of their own. They were trying all kinds of ideas and forms that the West had gone through earlier on.

"But then they gradually found their own language after 1985, and the scene got very lively and creative."

Dr Sigg brokered China's first joint venture with a Western firm, the Schindler Elevator Company, in 1980 and served as Switzerland's ambassador to China, North Korea and Mongolia from 1995 to 1998.



**CURSIVE SCRIPT: A series of four photographic pieces completed by Bai Yiluo in 2004.**

He explains his affinity with China: "Chinese art is a way of gaining access into China, and China is my ultimate object of study."

His base in China enabled him to visit artists in their studios and homes around the country. To date, he has visited more than 1,000 artists to chat with them about their work and artistic attitudes.

Through his numerous visits, he soon came to the realisation that he

was the only serious buyer of contemporary Chinese art then.

He says: "At that moment I decided to create a document of this period, starting from 1979. I tried to mirror the whole spectrum of art production in China and I collected across all media, from video to sculpture.

"I also collected works that may not be my personal favourites but may document something that Chinese artists were concerned with then."

In 1997 he established the biennial Chinese Contemporary Art Awards in China to raise awareness of contemporary Chinese artists within and outside of China.

One positive offshoot of this was Dr Sigg influencing his friend, the late Swiss museum curator Harald Szeemann, into showcasing some 20 Chinese artists in the 1999 Venice Biennale.

Asked what he thinks of the current craze for contemporary Chinese art in auction sales, he says: "I'm happy for the artists but I have to question if it is good for art production.

"Not all of them can cope well with this pressure and may tend to copy themselves or create artworks that don't evidence enough thinking."

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> ARTSingapore is held at Suntec Singapore, Level 4, Hall 404 from Oct 4 to 8. Admission is \$10 per entry for adults and free for those under 16. Tickets are available from ARTSingapore (tel: 6235-4113 or visit [info@artsingapore.net](mailto:info@artsingapore.net)). Opening hours are 11am to 8pm from Oct 5 to 7 and 11am to 5pm on Oct 8.

> For more information, log on to [www.artsingapore.net](http://www.artsingapore.net).



**SPLASH: Metal sculpture by Chinese artists Liu Zhan, Kuang Jun and Tan Tianwei, who form the collective Unmask.**