

## China's avant-garde – how it all began

The mighty Chinese art market, now worth more than US\$13bn a year according to the latest Art Basel/UBS Global Art Market report, grew with extreme speed, powered by a number of significant milestones in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. One of the best known, just 40 years ago, was the illicit event staged by a number of (mostly) self-taught artists in Beijing in September 1979. After being rejected by official institutions, they defied the authorities and used some of the city's park railings to hang works that flew in the face of Socialist Realism and explored forbidden western styles such as abstract expressionism.

Although this display by the Stars Group (Xingxing) was rapidly closed down by the authorities, they succeeded in creating a further exhibition, not long afterwards, this time inside the National Art Museum of China in Beijing: it drew more than 80,000 visitors. As well as open-air shows they staged street demonstrations and public readings which attracted equally large crowds, and proved equally disturbing to officialdom. So although the group was a significant force in the gradual loosening of the cultural stranglehold of the Cultural Revolution, it was inevitably short-lived, and by 1983 its

members had mostly dispersed or moved abroad to avoid harsh political strictures.

Some of the artists in the group – Ai Weiwei among them – have since become leading lights of the Chinese contemporary art scene, after leaving China to expand their practice. Others



remained in China throughout and are therefore perhaps less well known internationally, even though their work has been no less creatively important in the country's transformation.

At Art Basel Hong Kong, the gallery 10 Chancery Lane is celebrating the Stars Group by showing work by three of its members – Huang Rui, Wang Keping and Ma Desheng. Huang Rui still maintains his belief in



art's power to effect social change, while Wang Keping's sculptures, exploring the human form, seem equally inspired by western modernists and Taoist ideas of simplicity and nature. Ma Desheng, who left China in the early 1980s and now lives in Paris, has a varied practice that includes abstract acrylic on canvas.

*10chancerylanegallery.com*

Clockwise from left: untitled woodblock print (1979) by Ma Desheng; Wang Keping's 'Silence' (2007); Huang Rui's 'The Guitar's Story' (1979)

Gallery 10 Chancery Lane

