

# LOS ANGELES CONFIDENTIAL

## 'The Los Angeles Project' Brings Local Art to Beijing

BY LUKE CRISELL

**West meets east as LA artists prepare to take China by storm. Beijing, here we come!**



LA-based artist Alex Israel's Self-portraits at Isbrytaren, 2013, produced by Carl Kostyál, is representative of the work Israel will show at Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art this fall.

If you stop and think about it—if you put aside, just for a moment, the relatively complex historiography and the multifaceted socio-political context—the connections between Los Angeles and Beijing are relatively fundamental: Both cities, let's face it, are known for having pretty bad air and pretty bad traffic. Such rudimentary similarities between the cities haven't gone unnoticed by American-born Philip Tinari, director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, who this fall will mount "The Los Angeles Project."

The most important show to date of LA artists in Beijing (and, indeed, in China), the exhibition formalizes a connection that has been percolating for a while now—certainly since the polymorphous (and controversial) Sterling Ruby's breakthrough solo show at Pace Gallery, Beijing, in 2011, and including the inaugural Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013 (the 2014

fair featured LA-based galleries Susanne Vielmetter and François Ghebaly). The spotlight that has been trained on the Los Angeles art scene is about to get exponentially brighter.

Though based in Beijing, Guy Ullens, founder of the Ullens Center, is immersed in the LA art scene; his son sits on the board of Milk L.A., and, Tinari says, this was one of the catalysts that prompted him and his curatorial team to start considering the connection between the two cities. "There's something weirdly similar about them. There's a creative license that happens in both places. It's not a similarity of any sort of shared genealogy, but it resonates."

"The Los Angeles Project," presented as an "anthology," features eight of the most exciting young artists currently working in LA: Ruby (whose work was included in a show at UCCA in 2008) as well as Alex Israel, well known for his *As It Lays* website, with videos reminiscent of Warhol's famous screen tests (only with pastel sets that look like they're from the '80s); conceptual sculptor **Kathryn Andrews**; Aaron Curry; Matthew Monahan; Kaari Upson; and the conceptual video-art duo Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin. The many and varied spaces of UCCA have allowed Tinari to give each artist considerable emphasis, which is reflected in the show's publications: seven individual artists' books, rather than a traditional catalog. "I think it's exactly the right number; it's a group show, but people can remember each specific part of it," Tinari says. "It's not total bombardment, but it shows diversity. It shows a range of things happening there."

Of course, Chinese interest in American art is nothing new. Chinese collectors are now an integral part of the international art market; major auction houses such as Christie's have hired Chinese representatives to develop new business in Asia and manage relationships with important Asian clients, while leading galleries including Gagosian, Pace, and Ben Brown Fine Arts have all opened satellite offices in China.

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But alongside the commercial interest has risen an aesthetic one, a reaction in part to the repression of the Mao years, when art for art's sake was denigrated to the point of vilification. Lee Ambrozy, currently editor-at-large of Artforum's international Chinese language website and a PhD candidate in Chinese art history and archaeology at New York University, who edited and translated Ai Weiwei's *Blog* (MIT Press, 2011), puts it thusly: "The so-called Chinese contemporary art world is just beginning to truly outgrow its skin and look 'global,' meaning it has shed its gray hues and Mao jackets and blends into art fairs seamlessly. But art patronage in China is still fresh and adapting to emerging tastes of the newly rich. The ink is still wet on luxury taxes that will ultimately shape the international market there and will be very influential on how eager China's domestic collectors are to invest in American art."

But a specific interest in Los Angeles's contemporary artists is more recent. It's also symptomatic of a wider situation, which is LA's seemingly implacable rise as a hub for contemporary art. "It's interesting what's going on. It's as though LA artists have just been discovered, but we've all been making work for decades!" says Melanie Pullen, a fine-art photographer represented by Ace Gallery in LA, who is currently in talks for a major show in Beijing. "It's just now being recognized as unique and important, and our work has become highly sought after. This year has been one of the best years I've ever seen in the art market for me and my fellow artists. We can't produce work quickly enough. It's a nice place to be in!" Says Tinari: "A number of people I consult for, many of the top collectors in China, want introductions when they go to [LA]. I think LA is pretty sexy for Chinese collectors right now." And for many Chinese contemporary artists, too, like performance artist Yan Xing, who currently splits his time between Beijing and Los Angeles.

Ruby, among the first LA artists to show in Beijing, sees the developing relationship between the cities as a natural evolution of a shared cultural starting point. "The city of Beijing often reminds me of Los Angeles," says the artist, who works in multiple mediums, often presenting in dense, powerful installations. "Beijing is always changing—every time I go back it feels like things have shifted. It still feels wide open, with endless possibilities. I think that the artists I have gotten to know there really work from a place of autobiography that is not always in fashion in the West, but I often find myself working from a personal narrative that feels akin to the sensibilities of the artists in China. There is a community of Chinese artists who are inventing their own post-cultural-revolution art historical narrative. It is not the exact same thing, but in the US, New York has a longer art history and movements associated with it—Abstract Expressionism, Modernism, etc.—but as Los Angeles is a younger art city, artists in Los Angeles are continuing to create their own history as well."

One night this past spring, Philip Tinari found himself at the gothic 1920s movie theater in Downtown Los Angeles that houses the L.A. Dance Project, founded by choreographer Benjamin Millepied and composer Nico Muhly. "One of their dances had a giant set by Barbara Kruger and another one had a set by Sterling Ruby, and you looked around at the audience and there were all these [art-world] movers and shakers," Tinari says. "You just felt like you were in a city that was having a cultural moment—it was really exciting."

And that, perhaps, is the crux of it: The Los Angeles art scene, represented not just in the burgeoning independent galleries, but in the city's major museums (and that includes the Hammer Museum, which has evolved from a university gallery to an internationally important institution for contemporary art), hasn't been this exciting, this vital, in decades. "Really, if you look at the entire Western world, [LA has] one of the most significant concentrations of artists working anywhere," says Tinari. "For whatever reason, it feels like it is reinventing itself. The LA art scene has really become one of the most interesting things about art in America right now."