

RENTING ART DOWN UNDER

Geoffrey Cassidy is director of Artbank, an Australian company that rents art to individuals, corporate clients and government agencies

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTOS: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES, AND COURTESY OF ART FORUM

Collecting, dealing, curating and appraising: in the wheeler-dealer world of art, Geoffrey Cassidy has pretty much done it all. But three years ago, the former international director of Sotheby's Australia left the exciting and demanding world of the auction market to pursue something more subdued: renting out art.

Cassidy was in town over the weekend for Art Taipei, where he gave a lecture on Australia's art market. But the questions asked by the audience of art professionals and aficionados suggested they were more interested in the company Cassidy currently heads, Artbank, than in Australia's art scene.

Established in 1980 by the Australian government and self-funding since 1992, Artbank rents art out to individuals, government agencies and private corporations.

With more than 10,000 works by 3,000 Australian artists in its collection and an acquisition budget estimated at more than US\$800,000 per year, Artbank is a major player in Australia's art world. And even with the global economic downturn, Artbank still manages to rent out 65 percent of its collection, which is valued at more than US\$29 million.

Cassidy arrived at Artbank in 2006 following a nine-year stint as a paintings specialist in Australian, Chinese and Outsider art at Sotheby's Australia. Cassidy's current passion is fulfilling Artbank's mandate, educating the public about contemporary art

and collecting art for his private collection

Taipei Times: How does Artbank operate?

Geoffrey Cassidy: We are unique because of the tensions between being an art support organization, which was why it was set up, and a business, which allows us to be self-funding. So our imperatives are not financial. Our successes are measured culturally and not financially, but in order to succeed culturally we need to be a thriving business.

We are two pronged in a way: we are about supporting artists in the most practical way possible, which is by buying the work and hence putting together a collection of this work and promoting the work by making it available to people to rent, and teaching people how to live with contemporary art.

It's a very important institution in terms of buying Australian art. When I first worked in a commercial gallery 26 years ago, I can still remember Artbank coming and buying from us in Brisbane and it was the only red dot in the show.

TT: How do you teach people to live with contemporary art?

GC: A lot of our clients are not art people so we are really preaching to a non-art audience and I think that people are scared of contemporary art because they don't understand it.

People come to us because they are allowed to take a risk that they wouldn't normally take in going into a gallery and buying work by coming in and renting it. And one of the nicest things that we see is that people will come to you and say, "We hate these works, we want to change them," and by the time they've lived with them for six months or a year they've learned to love them. So art can work its magic on people.

TT: Does Artbank collect new media art such as video?

GC: Australia seems quite advanced in the collection of video work. It's actually quite accepted and a lot of people are collecting it and displaying it in their home. We talked a lot about how we should go about it ... but in the end I decided if new practices are happening, we couldn't not collect it because we are about supporting artists. And it's not expensive yet. Some of it is nice work, but most of it isn't, so we could outlay, not an enormous sum, to get a good collection of works and [what] we are going to do is have a launch next month to let people know that we have this kind of work.

It often surprises me what engages people — the strangest things can engage the least likely people and that can be fun. And they wouldn't come across it in their normal daily life. So I think we are kind of throwing people together with objects they wouldn't ordinarily see and all sorts of strange things can happen.

TT: Can Artbank turn renters of art into art collectors?

GC: Absolutely. It is something that we encourage. Often when people want to buy work, we will send them to the gallery that sells that artist so they can, perhaps, buy the work. And we often see that the reason why

people stop renting from us — and we do keep very good records about that — is that they purchase their own ... We don't mind losing clients for that reason.

TT: What is the difference between working at Artbank and working at Sotheby's?

GC: It's completely different. The only thing that I miss about Sotheby's is the excitement of the auction world. But I'm much more interested in art when it is not a commodity and much more interested in emerging art — particularly artists and what they are doing. So I think in terms of what I like about art and collecting art, I enjoy more what I'm doing now.

TT: Judging by the questions at this morning's lecture, there seems to be a lot of interest in Taiwan about Artbank.

GC: There seems to be a lot of interest in it as a business model. But what I try to impress on people is that we are successful because we're not just about making money. And it almost has to be a government that starts it because it has to be focused on its cultural activities, but it also has to succeed financially. And that's the balance that makes it work.

TT: Has the financial crisis influenced people's willingness to rent art?

GC: It's hard to say. Logically you would think that there would be more people wanting to rent rather than buy. I couldn't quantify that at the moment. It has affected our business in the sense that people are renting less. So we have seen a drop-off based on people spending less and not seeing many new clients because confidence hasn't returned yet, but I think the worst is over.

TT: Does the Australian Trade Office in Taipei rent from Artbank?

GC: Yes, all the art up there is from Artbank. All the original works are from Artbank and there is a plaque explaining what it is and that it is from us. The previous trade commissioner was very interested in visual arts. And he got quite involved in picking the works. A lot of it depends on how interested the head of mission is. So it is quite ad hoc.

TT: In addition to your work at Artbank, you also collect privately. Have you seen anything here at Art Taipei that you want to buy?

GC: I haven't bought anything and I can't of course for Artbank because we only collect Australian art. Personally, there are a few artists that I like. A few that I've been tempted by.

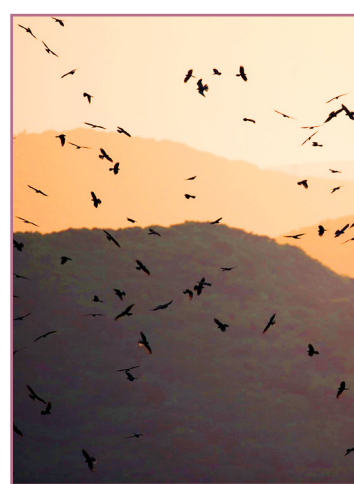
TT: Why collect art?

GC: It's a disease. I think passionate collectors collect because they have to.

TT: I've heard collectors describe it as an addiction.

GC: Yeah, I think it is an addiction, an uncontrolled addiction. I am a collector and ... it's an addiction. I don't have anywhere to put the works I collect now. I have no walls left. I have more works than I know what to do with. They are stacked all over the place — they are lent to family, they are lent to friends, they are all over the place. And yet I still buy them.

EXHIBITIONS



Taiwanese photographer Chou Ta-ching captures a flock of birds at sunset.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY

HIGHLIGHT

Environmentalism seems to be all the rage in the country's art circles, and now the National Museum of History is stepping up to the ecological plate with a group exhibition that focuses on global warming and its effects on the fragile habitats and migratory patterns of Taiwan's birds.

Global Warming From Artists' Perspectives: Kenting's Birds in Artistic Representation (全球暖化 - 藝術之眼—墾丁鳥類藝術特展)

presents 90 works by Taiwanese artists rendered in various media including painting, drawing, computer-generated images, wood carving, metal sculpture and installation. Divided into four sections — Evolution, Biological Diversity, Environmental Changes, and Ecological Ethics — the show highlights Taiwan's ecological diversity and the looming tragedy if these creatures were to disappear because of climate change.

■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號). Open daily from 10am to 6pm, closed on Mondays. Tel: (02) 2361-0270

■ Until Sept. 27

HIGHLIGHT

Lili Restaurant and Gallery in Tianmu has teamed up with the Community Services Center to bring art lovers and budding philanthropists

The Morakot Relief Live Art Auction: Artists Beat The Flood.

Lili will transform its second- and third-floor gallery space into a studio where 20 local and foreign painters will each work to fill a blank canvas throughout the day. The finished works will then be auctioned off in the same space. The event begins at 10am and the auction starts at 8:30pm, with all proceeds going to help the victims of Typhoon Morakot. Local music acts including the Muddy Basin Ramblers, A Moving Sound and Paiwan singer RS Legend, among others, will keep the painters at their easels and the atmosphere light and festive. Entrance to the event is NT\$500, which includes one drink.

■ Lili Restaurant and Gallery, 760, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 6, Taipei City (台北市中山北路6段760號). For more information contact Prashantha Lachann at 0975-021-931. On the Net: www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=145174285239&ref=mf

■ Saturday from 10am to 10pm

Artists from the UK, the US, Japan and South Korea have been invited to join seven Taiwanese sculptors for Kuandu Museum's annual **Driftwood Sculpture Festival**. The finished works will be displayed at the Taipei National University of the Arts' Aigrette Down (鶯鷺草原).

■ Taipei National University of the Arts (台北藝術大學), 1 Xueyun Rd, Taipei City (台北市學園路1號)

■ Until Dec. 31

Wood, steel wire and clay are among the materials used by Taiwanese sculptor and installation artist Tsai Ken (蔡根) in his solo exhibit **The Great Form Without Shape (大象無形)**. Tsai Ken's sculptures are meticulously crafted and rich in religious and philosophical themes.

■ Main Trend Gallery (大趨勢畫廊), 209-1, Chengde Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市承德路三段209-1號). Open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2587-3412

■ Starts Saturday

Emerging Taiwanese artist Wang Chi-sui (王綺穗) returns with a series of oil paintings in **Detached Reality I (現實彌留)**. Wang's intentionally blurry images of people wandering through cityscapes suggest a frenetic world that can be seen but never fully comprehended.

■ Jia Art Gallery (家畫廊), 1F-1, 30, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段30號1樓-1). Open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2591-4302

■ Starts Saturday



Art Taipei: it was the worst of times

The global financial crisis and Typhoon Morakot resulted in fewer visitors and buyers at Art Taipei, with galleries focusing their efforts on selling lower-priced works

BY NOAH BUCHAN
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Eric Huang (黃麟) quit the bottle two years ago. The scotch drinker decided in 2007 that he'd had his fill and was going to take his life in a different direction. His parents, oddly enough, opposed his decision.

"I gave up collecting single-malt scotch to collect art," said Huang on Friday at Art Taipei. "At first my parents were against it, but I eventually convinced them that collecting art is a good investment."

Huang, 29, said he budgeted NT\$500,000 to spend on art at this year's Art Taipei, Taiwan's largest art fair, which ended yesterday. He hoped to add to his collection of Japanese and Taiwanese sculpture, painting and

photography, a collection he estimates to be worth NT\$2 million.

But while the former "brand ambassador" for Glenfiddich — he'll return to the family business later this month — has set aside big bucks for art, many collectors were staying away from Art Taipei.

The global financial downturn and lingering devastation wrought by Typhoon Morakot were cited as reasons by organizers and gallery operators for the small crowds at Taipei World Trade Center.

Seventy-eight galleries from throughout the world — most from Taiwan and Southeast Asia — participated in this year's Art Taipei, one-quarter less than the 111 that exhibited last year.

But the number of exhibitors was

not the only figure to drop. Last year's Art Taipei saw 72,000 visitors wander into the Taipei World Trade Center over a five-day period. This year's exhibition attracted 50,000 visitors, said Joanne Chen (陳京晴), marketing director for Art Taipei. Sales of artwork this year totaled US\$14 million, compared with US\$24 million last year.

An early indication that it was going to be a slow year came on Thursday evening — a time reserved for VIP collectors to browse and hobnob with gallery owners.

"There were fewer VIPs this year," said Lawrence Chuang (莊國華) of Main Trend Gallery (大趨勢畫廊), estimating the decline, somewhat anecdotally,



at about one-third less. "But smaller crowds meant that it was more comfortable for viewing the art," he added.

Big money items were also a hard sell this year, said Chen. She said that in previous years the average sale price of art would be around NT\$100,000. "This year, people are more likely to buy works valued at NT\$5,000 or NT\$10,000," she said.

But Morakot and the financial crisis



This year's Art Taipei attracted roughly 20,000 fewer people than last year's event.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PILOT INTEGRATED MARKETING

weren't stopping Huang from drooling over a painting by Taiwanese artist Tsong Pu (莊普). Valued at NT\$540,000, it was a little over his budget.

"That's okay," he said. "I have a stable salary so I'm not too concerned."