

BRAVE ART

The Société Générale Chinese Art Awards will affect more than just the lives of its winners and finalists – it's a step towards achieving new heights in Chinese art, writes BONNIE ENGEL



JURY GRAND PRIZE WINNER JIANG PENGYI'S *UNREGISTERED CITY NO. 2*

MANY CORPORATIONS AND individuals encourage young artists by buying contemporary art or offering prizes in juried contests. What differentiates Société Générale (SG)'s new awards programme from the rest is that it is not only awarding a cash prize or three, but is also sponsoring international exhibitions for all of the top 22 winners. The art is a good mix of painting, video and photography, and all represent names to watch in the future as they broaden their horizons and creativity.

Since the art world is primarily about networking and contacts, the opportunity to partake in large group exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei and Paris, and

possibly Singapore and Tokyo, is like a dream come true for young artists.

It's not just a boon for the award recipients, either. It's been a recent tradition for banks to involve themselves heavily in cultural causes, proving a commitment to more than just financial concerns and reinforcing a well-rounded corporate identity. Hikaru Ogata, CEO Asia Pacific, SG CIB says, "SG has for decades been supporting emerging talents in contemporary arts and classical music, and it is only natural that we extended these artistic endeavours to the Asian talent pool, given the huge potential of the region's contemporary artists. Through the SG Chinese Art Awards, the success of which has been made possible

by the broad experience of our jury experts, we hope to bring talented young artists on to the international art scene."

Using the unique properties of the Internet for submissions and judging to create a Chinese Art Awards programme, SG's outstanding jury mulled over 364 offerings from youthful (under 35) artists from China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Contestants were invited to submit one example of painting, drawing, photography or videography. They were also allowed to submit supporting information to show their art path; for example, an arts diary or more art works from a series.

Another unique feature of the Chinese Art Awards is its interactive aspect. The



JURY SPECIAL PRIZE WINNER LUO HAIMING'S VIDEO *FANG · GRAIN RAIN*

grand-prize and second-prize winners are chosen by a qualified jury, but third place is determined by the general public and SG's staff, all of whom voted through the Internet.

Laurent Tison, SG's head of communications in Asia Pacific, said, "A combination of different elements brought us to this point. We wish to present what the bank is rather than our products. Our corporate personality has been developed for decades and it is in the DNA of our bank to be more concerned about current and future staff's development as well as engaging in community projects.

"Our strategy for a number of years has been to promote better what we are and what we stand for in order to engage all

our stakeholders; that is, future employees, clients, regulators and all opinion leaders, not just our shareholders. Most importantly, our employees, over 160,000 in 83 countries, become active ambassadors of our corporate stance by voting for an artist or taking part in a SG-organised charity bike ride. The artists will benefit ultimately by the visibility gained from the worldwide exhibition tour."

The initiative has been embraced by the art world, not least because of the potential it has to allow diversification in the Chinese art, which has come under attack for its homogeneity in themes and styles. Juror Elaine W Ng, publisher and editor of *ArtAsiaPacific* magazine, enthusiastically supports the SG

initiative because of what it isn't. "There's too much hype about the contemporary Chinese art bubble. The company is sticking to young Chinese artists and with the international exhibitions as part of the overall plan; it really helps the artists who are not yet part of the art-market hype. The older, Beijing-based artists really don't need this type of platform so it's refreshing to be a part of something that can call attention to young artists and give them critical feedback," she said.

Adds Tison, "Société Générale has been supporting contemporary art for about 15 years, and classical music for around 25 years. Our corporate art collection is displayed in the Paris headquarters as well as travelling



LIUXIAOFANG'S *REMEMBER*

around in exhibitions and art fairs, but we admit this collection has a European bias, so we're excited about sponsoring this SG Chinese Art Awards programme and show our commitment to a broader art community. Our constant goal is to develop talent, and now that the Chinese art scene is so vibrant worldwide, we wanted to participate in the art trends coming from Greater China."

Ng also likes the fact that the company opened the competition to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, as well as the mainland. "In Taiwan, there are many wonderful artists who are overwhelmed by the enormous Chinese art

scene. They are completely under-recognised."

She was also pleasantly surprised with the quality of the submissions, as well as gaining exposure to artists that art lovers usually can't find in galleries or museums. With her previous jury experience in the Middle East, which she said is "very different," Ng is well qualified to be a critic and judge.

"As a juror, I am looking for art that expresses a message or demonstrates creative innovation, that gives me a visceral reaction. I am pleased to see very little imitation of art already on the market. I got a sense that the art work is trying to grapple with artists' place in the rapidly

changing society and environment, looking for a personal place in the world.

"That Macau is included speaks volumes about the commitment of Société Générale. They truly are giving back to the community of Greater China, giving to young emerging talent rather than just sponsoring an art fair or giving a prize. They are sincere about wanting to nurture artists, I feel."

Jurist Johnson Chang, curator and director of Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong, one of the first contemporary galleries in the city, was very impressed with the diverse range of artistic language and themes in the submitted



CHI CHUNG SIMON WAN'S *THE CITY GLOW: SEOUL - NAMDAEMUN NO II*

works. After the 20 finalists were chosen, he spoke about what he looked for in the art.

“For painters, I look at the style and approach, and examine closely to see if it’s well done. It’s important to see if what the artist is trying to say comes across, also conveying an emotional tone. The top five or six were very convincing and not all of the finalists were from China, but also from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

“I also noticed that these painters are moving away from ‘art-school approved’ styles. These are less academic, working around studio and other ways of approaching art.”

Chang was surprised at the number of video

entries and installation works. Although it was difficult for the judges to see them properly to assess their impact, the jury still managed to select quite a few works in new media.

For the award winners of this first-time prize, the reward is in the exhibition and exposure, more so than the cash, but it seems in the judges’ eyes, the real payoff is to the art community. As the art prize gains in esteem and fame, the pool of artists will only continue to diversify and expand, leading to a new framework for up-and-coming generations of creatives. And perhaps, following SG’s lead, other corporations will only follow. ■

Total submissions: 364

Art breakdown: 77 percent painting and drawing, 15 percent photography and videography

Location: 76 percent China, 13 percent Hong Kong, 10 percent Taiwan, 1 percent Macau

Residence: 74 percent China, 12 percent Hong Kong, 10 percent Taiwan, 1.5 percent France, 0.5 percent USA

Winners: The jury awarded its grand prize of €15,000 to **Jiang Pengyi** of China with his photograph *Unregistered City NO.2*; the jury’s special prize of €7,000 went to **Luo Haiming** from China for his video *Fang · Grain Rain* and the publicly voted prize of €7,000 went to **Liu Xianfeng** of China for his painting *I Feel that You are Leaning on My Shoulders*.

Other finalists: **Zheng Duanxiang**, China, photography; **Liu Yong**, China, videography; **He Junyi**, China, oil painting; **Wu Wenwen**, China, video; **Lu Jifan**, Taiwan, painting and drawing; **Su Jiayi**, China, painting and drawing; **Qiu Jianren**, Taiwan, painting and drawing; **Chi Chung Simon Wan**, Hong Kong, toned gelatin silver print; **Wing Fat Wong**, Hong Kong, photography; **Ho Sin Tung**, Hong Kong, painting and drawing; **He Zhaonan**, Hong Kong, photography; **Liu Xiaofang**, China, photography; **Chen Wei**, China, photography; **Yu Cheng-Ta**, Taiwan, video; **Chow Chun Fai**, Hong Kong, photography; **Wu Junyong**, China, videography; **Chih-hung Liu**, Taiwan, painting & drawing; **Bo Wang**, China, photography and **Sun Xun**, China, video.