

LEISURE & ARTS

Freedom Fuels a New Chinese Art

By PAM LAMBERT

New York Robert A. Hefner III doesn't speak Chinese, but he's got a pretty good idea of what Wang Yidong, Ai Xuan and Chen Yan Ning mean: opportunity.

"I really believe that the Chinese art scene today is like being around at the turn of the century," he explains, "being able to buy things at reasonable prices that ... could sell like van Gogh."

Mr. Hefner's enthusiasm is understandable. In September, the 52-year-old Oklahoman, who made a name for himself in deep gas drilling—and earned a couple of others through his role in the Penn Square Bank collapse—opened a gallery here devoted to contemporary oil paintings by artists from the People's Republic. He isn't alone in his excitement. James D. Cox, director of Manhattan's Grand Central Art Galleries, broke his establishment's 65-year tradition of exhibiting only American art. David Lester, a Los Angeles dealer, was so "astounded by the wonderful quality of the work" that he plans to open a gallery to handle contemporary Chinese oil painting within the next six months.

The new Chinese art bears as little resemblance to the subtle expressions of traditional ink-and-brush landscapes as to the propagandistic socialist realism mandated by Mao. It's the result of finely trained painters revealing in new-found freedom.

"I found a revolution in art, equal to the revolution I saw going on in the economy and culture itself," says Mr. Hefner, who first went to China in 1984 in search of new business for his natural gas concern, GHK Co. of Oklahoma City, Okla. Instead of gas, however, he discovered oils.

Mr. Hefner eventually staged the first major exhibition of contemporary Chinese oil paintings in the West, at Manhattan's Harkness House in April. He also arranged to bring over a couple of Chinese artists—including Messrs. Wang, Ai and Chen—to study, to see Western masterpieces that they knew mainly from blurry reproductions and also, as it turned out, to paint pictures for the Hefner Galleries.

Harkness House exhibition another show, also with a petroleum connection—it was sponsored by ARCO, a pioneer in Chinese offshore oil exploration—opened at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, Calif. The traveling exhibition, "Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings From the People's Republic of China," can currently be seen at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco through Feb. 28. (Subsequently, it will be at Texas A&M, College Station, Texas, beginning in April.)

Both shows challenge our picture of Chinese art. There's expressionism, Impressionism, surrealism, photorealism, cubism, abstraction. One can see a variety of influences—among them Courbet, Millet, Cezanne, van Gogh, Matisse and, most of all, Andrew Wyeth—"perhaps," Michael Sullivan speculated in the catalog to the Harkness House show, "because his realism is poetic, a little disturbing, and totally free from ideology."

The Wyeth influence comes through clearest in the work of Ai Xuan, in the meticulous detail, for example, of his Tibetan scenes—all the furry hide coats, the seas of grass, the weathered faces. But the real kinship is in the paintings' aura of isolation and mystery. For the most part Mr. Ai's Tibetans, like his "Boy by the White River" reproduced here, stand alone in their majestic surroundings, their eyes averted from the viewer-voyeur. The painter's palette, heavy on icy grays and blues, adds to the mood of melancholy. (Though Mr. Ai's one-man Hefner Galleries show has closed, several of his paintings are included in the exhibition "Realism From China," at the new Modern Museum of Art in Santa Ana, Calif., through the end of January.)

Mr. Ai, now 40, was first sent to the border region in the mid-'70s as a soldier, to do propaganda art. (He'd been conscripted after spending four years of forced labor in the countryside.) Once there, the artist explains through a translator, he was captivated by the land and its inhabitants—the grand vistas, the exhilarating color and light, the musky Tibetans with their wild manes. They seemed so free, Mr. Ai says—unlike the conforming, Mao-suited masses.

Zhang Hong Nian, spent a couple of years during the turbulent Cultural Revolution decade breaking up ice in rice paddies. Now the 40-year-old Mr. Zhang, who made his way to the U.S. in 1985, paints scenes of peasants that call to mind the noble laborers of Courbet and Millet. His work, which will be shown at the Grand Central Art Galleries here in February (and is also in the Santa Ana exhibit), has a nostalgic

of two sinologists. Though Art Waves handles a couple of non-Chinese, most of its roster consists of dissidents Mr. Cohen met during trips to the People's Republic with his art-historian mother.

Art Waves aims for what Mr. Cohen calls "cutting edge" work. One of its artists, Han Xin, has drawn inspiration from New York's subway graffiti and punks. Another Art Waves exhibitor is the experimental Xing Fei. She chafed under the rigid discipline imposed on her in China as a student of traditional ink-and-brush painting. In the U.S., the 29-year-old has tried her hand at collage, painted sculpture and even installation art. For her show opening Jan. 5, Ms. Xing plans an installation inspired by Chinese gardens.

In general the Chinese realists seem to be having the easiest time of it here, at least commercially. Their finely honed technique makes them competitive in a market in which realism is enjoying a renaissance; at the same time, their exotic subject matter sets them apart.

Their path was paved by Chen Yifei. Arriving here in 1980, Mr. Chen reportedly became the best-selling contemporary artist at the Hammer Galleries. So popular are the 41-year-old painter's works, principally dreamy images of the city of Suzhou ("the Venice of the East") and dramatic studies of female musicians, that it's rare to find any at the gallery between his soldout shows. And he's approached with more commissions than he can accept.

Mr. Chen's success has inspired many of his compatriots, but most are unprepared for the American art world. In China there's almost no private art market, hence no commercial pressure to produce a particular style—or quantity—of work. (The government, which supports "official" painters and art faculty, keeps any exhibited works it chooses to, which is why some of the most outstanding canvases end up hidden beneath artists' beds.)

Once here, the artists learn fast. For instance, 31-year-old Gao Xiao-hua discovered that browsers at the Laguna Beach Summer Festival of the Arts admired his arresting closeups of wizened Yi elders—but the paintings they bought were those of the beautiful young tribeswomen. He concentrated on the latter—and today some of them hang at the Hammer Galleries.

Having seen both sides now, several of the Chinese say things aren't so bad back home. "If your paintings don't sell here next month they may cut off your electricity, and then next month your landlord may evict you," says Ai Xuan. "In China you know you won't starve or be out on the street."



Ai Xuan's 'Boy by the White River' soft focus, which the artist achieves by applying 10 to 15 layers of pigment and glazes.

Yuan Yunsheng was exiled for 16 years in Manchuria. Now 50—though you wouldn't know it to look at him in his stylish beret and leather bomber jacket—he ran afoul of the authorities most spectacularly in 1980 with a mural he painted for the Beijing International Airport. The work, "Water Festival, Song of Life," depicted members of the Dai minority people celebrating their annual rite of spring, a few of them in the buff. Mr. Yuan has found a more congenial environment here at Art Waves, a Soho gallery opened in