

Collecting

We are far underground, in a small chamber surrounded by walls two metres thick. Suddenly, someone switches off the lights. A musical note falls like a drop of water into a deep well. A pause that lasts seconds, then another note. And another. The music lasts just minutes but in that sense-deprived realm, time and space seem to contract and expand without respect for physical laws. As the last note falls, my eyes finally adjust to the darkness. At the end of our cell, a wolf-grey rectangle of light announces the portal that is our exit.

So cleansed is my mind, the next room, some 4,000 metres square, washes over me with the force of revelation. The impregnable, concrete walls are sustained by massive rectangular pillars. Damp stains the grey stone; the odd squiggle of decades-old graffiti flickers in the shadows. An old chain hangs in the emptiness, sinister and pointless. Photographs of trussed, semi-nude Asian women adorn the walls.

Yet this is temple as much as torture chamber. Ancient stone deities from Cambodia and Thailand stand in lonely, golden pools of light. From a distance those troubling black and white images are reduced to abstractions. Suspended perpendicular to pared-down tables and benches, they create geometries of line, light and shade that still the senses.

Here are the spectres of Angkor Wat, ancient China and modern Tokyo. Yet we are in 21st-century Berlin. The music was composed by John Cage; the statues were carved by Khmer craftsmen from the 7th to 13th century; there is a wall sculpture by Anish Kapoor; the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki is responsible for the images of tied-up women. As for the building, it is a bunker constructed during the second world war and barely used since.

"It didn't have to be Berlin. I thought about other cities such as Venice and Istanbul. I looked for a long time," says collector Désiré Feuerle, as he recalls his purchase of the subterranean wonderland, which opened as a private museum for his art and antiquities in the summer. "[I said] 'What other



Désiré Feuerle in one of the spaces of the Feuerle Collection; below, an 11th-century Khmer temple sculpture of Vishnu — Holger Niehaus/The Feuerle Collection

he is always on the move, most often to be found in Bangkok and Shanghai.

His collection of Asian antiquities encompasses not only Khmer sculpture but Imperial Chinese and Chinese Scholar furniture from 200BC to the 18th century. Most of the Chinese pieces, exquisitely carved and lacquered, are installed in the upper floor of the bunker with contemporary works by Cristina Iglesias, Adam Fuss, James Lee Byars, Zeng Fanzhi and more photographs by Araki. Here, too, the mood is of serene, uncluttered timelessness.

Mostly, Feuerle buys from private collectors. When I ask about the ethics of holding antiquities far from their homeland, he replies: "I think it depends on how someone is treating the artwork." He has been "astonished and shocked" at the storage conditions in major museums in Asia. "I understand there is no money but you can put an umbrella over a sculpture in the rainy season!"

Certainly, the works are safe in this bunker. And Feuerle could not have found a more suitable architect for the task of renovating it than the minimalist John Pawson.

On the verge of unveiling London's new Design Museum, Pawson joins us on our peregrinations. A jovial, self-deprecating character, the architect describes the job of restoring the bunker as one of "unbuilding". Both he and Feuerle wished to do as little as possible in order to preserve the spare mystery. The biggest challenges were technical. "It was like trying to put heating in the pyramids," Pawson chuckles.

The hands-off approach results in a space whose spare mystery triggers the imagination far more effectively than busier displays. Feuerle wishes visitors to experience fully the less-is-more power. Mobile phones must be left at the entrance and only 14 people will be admitted at once.

"I like it empty. It's healthy. Also for my soul," says Feuerle, when I say he is brave to embrace such austerity. Pawson, he continues, saw the place as a monastery.

What of the tension between those Araki photographs and this celibate dream? "I see a space and I see the potential," Feuerle replies. In the bunker, he continues, he saw "the potential for doing something special". Undoubtedly, he has succeeded.

thefeuerlecollection.org

Buried treasure

Private museum | In a bunker in Berlin, Rachel Spence meets Désiré

Feuerle — a collector with a penchant for unusual juxtapositions

people think is crazy, just show it to me. Don't show me something normal," he continues. When he saw the bunker, his first thought was that it was too big. "Then I thought it's an extraordinary space. It can't be too big." But it was in an "incredibly bad state", with water dripping down the walls inside.

A slight figure, his swept-back black hair, chiselled features and button-

bright eyes behind expensive glasses give him the air of a benign, watchful hawk. "I have a very good memory for pictures," he says, as we chat over leaf tea in his office. "[If] I saw something in India, or maybe in Switzerland, in a museum or in the street, I tried to keep it in my head." He would pin "things that had nothing to do with each other" in different combinations on the wall.

"There could be something from Egypt, next to a Roman piece, and maybe a carpet. But they had to work together."

Born in Stuttgart to a father who was a doctor and a "passionate collector", he started to collect keys aged 10. His favourite was a Gothic example he bought in an antique shop. "It was very special, very pure," he recalls. "The owner didn't want to sell it! He liked it himself." Feuerle laughs at the memory of his persuasive powers. After the keys he turned to tea and coffee pots, building up a cache that spans from the 16th century to the era of Tiffany. On leaving school, he took Sotheby's fine art course in London before going to New York. In the 1990s, after a spell with Michael Werner's gallery in Cologne, he opened his own gallery in the city and consolidated a reputation for mixing art from different epochs and genres. Now a free-lance art curator and consultant,

