

# A Master of *Light and Darkness*

*Glass discovers refinement  
and simplicity at the Feuerle  
Collection in Berlin*

“**T** rue refinement seeks simplicity.” Lee Jun-Fan might seem an odd sparring partner for renowned art collector Désiré Feuerle, yet the wise words of the former’s alter ego Bruce Lee certainly resonate in the collector’s temple of minimalism at the riverbanks of Berlin. An east-western curiosity in itself, the Feuerle Collection is the culmination of a lifelong passion for uniting and confronting works of western contemporary art with sublime pieces from ancient China and south-east Asia.

Feuerle is a man who understands that simplicity and a refined sense of ceremony needn’t exclude each other, that opulence and scarcity have been beauty’s most loyal advisors through the ages, and that nothing quite sets the scene for the lavish and divine artistic encounter that he has prepared the stage for, like the intricate interplay between light and darkness. And so the works themselves have determined the guiding principles in the meticulous construction and arrangement that has led to what must now count as one of the world’s finest and most unusual museums. Nothing comes here to stand between the eternal beauty of what has taken a lifetime to unite, and the undivided attention and admiration of the viewer, not walls, not noise, nor labels and other pretentious museal misconceptions.

Few hints on the compound’s outside prepare the visitor for the all-encompassing sensual experience that awaits behind the sturdy three-metre deep walls, which give the former telecommunications bunker from the second world war its distinct Berlin feel. A short walk down from the sad cultural no-man’s land that is Potsdamer Platz, to the canal and then along the water, a front door resembling a department store’s goods entrance blends in with faded

*Bronze sculpture by Zeng Fanzhi at the Feuerle Collection.  
Untitled, 2009.  
Photo: def image ©The Feuerle Collection*







## “ The works asked for space ”

concrete and the shady fences that this patchwork city specialises in. The attentive eye might notice the surfaces not derelict but carefully washed, the humble yet stylish red writing on the wall, well placed to greet those who know, with an overall air of graceful understatement lingering at every corner. As such, the building has taken very much after the owner's embrace and joyful humbleness.

When Désiré Feuerle started out in Cologne, artists Rosemarie Trockel, James Lee Byars, Per Kirkeby and Sigmar Polke were quickly added to his circle. Running his own gallery or operating as an art consultant later on, conventionality has never found a place in the intriguing collector's life. Whether he was pairing the works of Richard Deacon with silver tea and coffee pots from the 17th to the 20th century, those of Eduardo Chillida with Chinese neck rests, or opposing Anish Kapoor's with thousands of years old Ban Chiang terracottas, his inquisitive and playful mind promptly earned him the reputation of a maverick in his field. Anish Kapoor he had the good fortune to discover on the verge of global art stardom, as he puts it, and a keen eye for talent on the brink of fame, probably for business too, has been a constant in the years to come, during which he made himself at home across Europe, North American and Asia.

In hindsight, and against the backdrop of the Feuerle Collection throwing open its doors to the wider public in such splendour, the early and varying forays into ambitious and out of the ordinary curation have been an indispensable precursor to the now overarching concept of meticulous presentation the place adopted. Yet as much scholarly rigour as there can be found in, or ascribed to, his signature style juxtapositions of ancient east and contemporary west, in conversation two much more basic underlying concepts surface as defining his model of action: "Intuition has to take the lead whenever I make a decision, with precision taking over straight after for the execution," he explains. In the same vein it took about five minutes of an encounter with famed minimal architect John Pawson to establish a partnership rooted in mutual understanding for the transformation of the newly acquired concrete behemoth, leaky and derelict, but full of fascination to both men at first sight. For Pawson a first in the eternal building site that is the German capital, for Feuerle an unexpected return to his home country, following years of scouting around the world for a place to finally unveil his treasure chest.

"The works asked for space", is the laconic response when asked what might have triggered the major decision to house his collection in a public place in the end. He had lived with the pieces, had found them, chased them, and in some cases, as with Cristina Iglesias, commissioned them from the artists, and nobody knows better how to show them in their best light. Light turns out to be an explosive concept, something of which the sheer mention makes Feuerle jump in his seat. To bring out the very essence of every work on display, to define its role in relation to its neighbour, to open up ways of interpretation, to suspend reality and to draw the spectator into the game, bringing to life what has been motionless for a thousand years, all that lies in the hand of this master of illumination.

To do so, the building boasts one of the world's most advanced light systems, the demonstration of which takes on characteristics of a classical Bond villain who can't resist showing his cards. A finger stroking the screen of a tablet and the wavelength of the colour spectrum on a pristine Khmer sculpture varies ever so slightly, creating a shadow here, taking away a reflection there, the possibilities are impressive, and Feuerle leaves no doubt, he has taken no chances. John Pawson, the architect, and his team, are witness to a most unusual process of



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creation that the former bunker has undergone. Turning the poet's famous last words on their head, Feuerle demanded right out "More darkness!" and categorically refused to accept the presence of any window across the 7,600 square metre building, so to leave the world outside precisely there.

However, in the end, even complete darkness alone was not enough and further measures had to be taken to eliminate whatever sensual contamination visitors would unavoidably arrive with at the front door. Thus the journey into the belly of the bunker commences with an obligatory visit to the audio-visual detox chamber. Minutes of meditative silence in utter darkness are followed by a rendition of a short piece by John Cage. Another short silence and the pathway on the other side becomes, if not visually discernible, then at least fuzzily present.

Turning around the corner into the main hall is the breath-taking beginning of an utterly incomparable exploration. The gaze wanders from a minute Khmer head, the first visible piece of the collection, seemingly suspended in mid-air, along thick concrete columns reaching out like stalagmites from floor to ceiling, over to ancient furniture in front of contemporary photography,



surrounded by works of wood and stone caressed by equally smooth and precise rays of light seemingly coming from nowhere.

No prescribed route leads through the Feuerle Collection so that the journey that starts out as one of a great collector will inevitably end for each wanderer in the dark as their very personal encounter. Yet there are moments of revelation that will be shared and be common to all visitors, such as the first glimpse of eerie reflections and subtle movements over the mysteriously dark surface that borders off the ground floor to the left. What may seem a nervous trick of the mind at first, results from an indoor lake of 2,000 square metres, inviting calm contemplation and time spent lost in thought. Leaving the lake aside, the museum's incense room promises an equally rich sensual experience.

Sourced from the finest woods across Asia and presented on a contemporary counterpart to the traditional ancient furniture, designed by Pawson, a ceremony master guides you through an entire olfactory session, which can be booked individually or in small groups. When Désiré Feuerle, guardian of the world's most sophisticated museum, is asked where an unexpected spare amount of time would take him, to the lake, or to the chamber of scents, he responds: "To neither of them. I would want to be close to nature. To experience it in its wild beauty." True refinement seeks simplicity, indeed.

By Oliver Krug

[www.thefeuerlecollection.org](http://www.thefeuerlecollection.org)