

DÉSIRÉ FEUERLE



Portrait of Désiré Feuerle.
Photo by Def Image. Courtesy The Feuerle Collection, Berlin.

Installation view of The Feuerle Collection, Berlin, 2017.
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Unparalleled Visions

BY NED CARTER MILES

At Désiré Feuerle's private museum in Berlin's Kreuzberg quarter, guests must leave their cell phones at the door. They then enter the museum's downstairs room through a dark antechamber, during which a short piece by minimalist composer John Cage is played to "cleanse the palate."

At this point, the eyes acclimate to the low light of the main collection spaces, in which Feuerle has spent long days and nights personally adjusting the many lamps so as to do justice to each carefully placed object. Exquisite stone and lacquer furniture from various periods of Chinese history sit among contemporary acquisitions such as Anish Kapoor's stainless steel sculpture, *Torus* (2002), or the collection's sole commissioned piece, a topographic sculpture crafted from bronze and incorporating water by Cristina Iglesias. They are not, however, to be seen as works in themselves, but a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork, manifesting Feuerle's vision at the expense of all other concerns.

While Feuerle himself enjoys understanding the individual history of these objects—taking vicarious pleasure, for instance, in owning something that might have been a prized possession of a Chinese emperor—visitors to The Feuerle Collection are encouraged to absorb the works collectively and through a purely aesthetic lens. The two main *béton brut* rooms within the converted Second World War communications bunker are subtly illuminated, but no light is shone on the histories belonging to the eclectic and unlabeled pieces on display. The reason for this, as far as Feuerle is concerned, is to indulge a sense of unadulterated aestheticism and unabashed decadence, mirroring his own philosophies and a refined sense of taste developed since childhood. Although the seasoned German collector speaks with the cheerful enthusiasm of a man dedicated entirely to his aesthetic and experiential passions—sprinkling his sentences with words such as "amazing" and "beautiful"—the tenebrous ambience of his private museum reflects a somewhat mysterious character.

Given that Feuerle prefers to think of his collection according to its aesthetic value—what he calls "quality"—and not any one object's individual identity, significant acquisitions are difficult to pinpoint. However, his life as a collector began at a young age. As the ten-year-old son of a doctor and avid collector from Stuttgart, he began to take an interest in keys, then

antique tea and coffeepots, eventually branching out into a myriad of objects. "The earliest [pieces in my collection] were Roman," he told me, "and from there to Tiffany and Bauhaus—from London to Denmark to Russia to Shanghai, everything! I loved it."

Feuerle's specific interest in Asian art—which makes up the vast majority of the work on display in the museum—arose when he was 16 years old, on a family trip to Hong Kong, where a Ming-dynasty toy horse caught his eye. "It was a very quick decision," he said of the purchase. "I thought it was beautiful, and then after that I wanted to know more about China and this period." Artifacts such as antique tableware and toy horses may seem like random acquisitions, but Feuerle has his own metric of importance. "I have lots of things that are completely anonymous and I love them as much as work by very famous artists . . . it's the quality that counts." Indeed, his museum includes many unorthodox pairings of unattributed 7th-century Khmer sculpture and work by well-known contemporary artists. The collection created some controversy during its opening in 2016, in fact, for displaying religious statuary alongside erotic photography by Japanese artist and pink film producer Nobuyoshi Araki. Although such displays are considered *faux pas* in other art institutions, Feuerle himself seems genuinely unable to grasp where the problem might lie, and suggested to me that his intent was not to shock. "Maybe it's my fantasy," he said, "and it's nice to transport my fantasy into reality."

The abundance of Khmer sculpture in the collection is due to Feuerle's pursuit of the experiential, aesthetic essence, rather than the religious significance, of such treasures. He cultivated this interest, along with the idea of pairing incongruous objects of different periods, when he was a student in New York in his twenties. Every weekend, he would visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and choose one piece—often Khmer—in front of which he would sit for hours. Then, after a walk through Central Park digesting what he had seen, he would visit the Museum of Modern Art and absorb an artwork there. Often, he returned home from these trips with a few postcards that would find their way to his wall. "They could be of works by Joseph Beuys or Jackson Pollock. I looked over them all together and suddenly thought 'This is amazing!'" What struck Feuerle was that the sensation evoked from looking at an image of, say, a cathedral in Italy or an ancient Cambodian statue,

was the same as what he experienced from a modernist painting, or an erotic black-and-white photograph.

"This was part of my self-education," said Feuerle, "training my eye, my insight, my feelings." It was Feuerle's extremely refined sense for objects that ostensibly transcend space and time that helped make his name as a gallerist in Cologne, from 1990 to 1998. In a breakthrough 1992 show at Galerie Feuerle, simply titled "Richard Deacon and European Silver Tea and Coffeepots," the dealer flexed his curatorial muscles by convincing the British Turner Prize-winning sculptor to display his work alongside antique tableware from his early forays into collecting. "When I proposed it to him, he looked at me and said 'Tea and coffeepots, me?'" Feuerle recalled. However, upon seeing how the pieces would fit together, the artist was quickly charmed. The exhibition was a hit, and the collector followed it with others that placed works by Anish Kapoor among Ban Chiang terracotta vessels (3600–1500 BCE), and Eduardo Chillida's creations alongside Chinese Ming- and Song-dynasties neck rests.

Feuerle's curatorial practice is regarded as one of juxtaposition. However, while wandering alone through the rooms of his private museum, and later speaking to him in his tastefully minimal office, I started to consider the aptness of the description. To juxtapose two objects would be to draw out their differences to create an overall effect. Here, however, the individuality of each object is subsumed within Feuerle's personal vision. It is not their differences at play, but the similarities in how they make him feel. The space might be described as a rarity in the art world, a personal playground that is a totally uncompromising manifestation of his personal aesthetic desires.

For example, in a recent addition to the museum, the collector commissioned a mirrored-glass incense room, the first of its kind in any museum. He equipped it with a specially commissioned heating table and extraordinarily elegant gold utensils, and invited Wang Jun-Chin—a Taiwan-based master in the art of incense ceremonies—to preside over its installation and use. When I noted that the museum now had sound, sight and smell covered, and asked whether taste might be next, the collector was gleeful at the idea but, mysterious as ever, reluctant to discuss his plans. If you really want to look inside Désiré Feuerle's head—discerning, encyclopedic and unashamedly *sybaritic*—the best way is to step into his collection.