International opening
The Feuerle Collection, Berlin

A new gallery showcases this collection of international contemporary art and imperial Chinese design, but does Berlin need another art space? Oliver Krugg talks to its director, Désiré Feuerle, about how this one is different.

The Feuerle Collection is housed in a second world war era telecommunications bunker in Berlin, which is appropriate given the gallery’s aim: to provoke dialogue between art and design from different cultures and periods. As a collector, Désiré Feuerle, the director of the gallery, has championed cross-cultural, multi-era comparisons between contemporary western and ancient Asian art.

Feuerle’s collection juxtaposes 7th- to 13th-century Cambodian Khmer sculpture, imperial Chinese furniture spanning the Han and Qing dynasties (200 BC-18th century) with contemporary work by the likes of Cristina Iglesias, Anish Kapoor and Zeng Fanzhi.

The building has been redeveloped by architect John Pawson and offers an unusually sensual experience: there’s a meditative interior lake, a room for traditional Chinese incense ceremonies and one of the world’s most advanced lighting systems.

What made you take the step from collecting to creating a museum?

I was always collecting works of art and never knew what to do with them. In the end, it was the collection that forced me to think bigger. Friends of mine kept asking to see works and I had to say they were in storage. I also wanted to give each work the physical space it deserved.

How did you decide on a place to show the collection?

We started looking nine years ago. It was not easy to find something suitable, but the minute I saw this bunker I knew that it was special. I wondered if I needed such a big space, but then realised it would be able to install things the way they ought to be, with air between them.

Why Berlin?

It’s a rough city, it’s a young city. At first glance, the museum doesn’t seem to fit in, but in the end that is precisely why it does. Everything in Berlin is slightly unexpected and so is my collection. This town makes you look at art differently.

What will visitors see?

Everything in the collection is unique. But there are certain pieces I am particularly happy to be able to show. There is a sitting platform from the Han dynasty that is one of the earliest pieces of Chinese furniture. Underneath the platform the four seas are carved in stone, alongside astrological cross lines, symbolising that the person sitting on it controls the world, the sky and the universe.

Then there is the tiny Khmer head that visitors encounter first as they enter. This little piece has such presence; it can carry the whole room because it is of such extraordinary quality.

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The museum opens with this tiny head.

Why did you decide to pair ancient works with contemporary ones?

I became interested in this juxtaposition around 30 years ago. It is fascinating to see how works can be thousands of years apart and still evoke the same profound feelings and thoughts in the viewer.

What will artists create site-specific works?

Yes, Cristina Iglesias has already made a piece. We spoke about the eroticism of Chinese furniture and she said she would create a work in response to that.

Why do you have an incense ceremony in the gallery?

Being invited to an incense ceremony in China is an honour, and the event is a wonderful sensory experience. You enter a world of incredibly refined smells. We thought it wasn’t possible to bring this to the museum because it’s such a complicated process - you don’t burn incense, you have to heat up wood to bring the oil out. So I brought in the producer of an electronic tasting device and the architect thought we could make it work. It took us a year to find the the finest African black wood; it’s made in a minimalist Chinese manner. Visitors can book an incense ceremony as part of their visit.

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