

# Setting the right scene

**CLARISSA TAN** visits the Russian, Eastern & Oriental art show in London's Mayfair and finds that, under the Art Deco chandeliers, one can be stirred by the desire to buy

**W**HEN art dealers or exhibitors talk about "staging" an art fair, they're probably using the verb in its most concrete sense. For one thing that art has in common with theatre is this – the setting, the *mise en scène*, is paramount. Where you hold an art fair is almost as important as what's in it.

Take the Russian, Eastern & Oriental Fine Art Fair, which concluded last weekend in London. The event, which featured paintings, sculpture, antiques, ceramics, textiles and carpets from Asia and ex-Soviet bloc countries, was held at the Park Lane Hotel in Mayfair. This is the hotel, built in the 1920s in Grand Art Deco style, that featured in the films *The End of the Affair*, *The Winds of War* and, more recently, *The Golden Compass*. (And yes, Mayfair is that area that's the most expensive when you're playing *British Monopoly*.)

The venue, either consciously or sub-consciously, can be an important factor for art buyers, noted Peter London, the fair's director.

"If you're in an environment where you're surrounded by what you perceive to be glitz and glamour, it's more conducive to you wanting to buy a painting. There's a bit of psychology here, and all London galleries use it. If you walk into a swanky gallery in the middle of Bond Street, you're far more likely to pay a certain figure for a piece, than if you saw that piece in a cheap shop in Portobello Road.

"For many people, the buying experience is as much a pleasure as having the work of art. It's where you buy it, who you buy it from."

It's not clear how brisk total sales were for the 43 art galleries and dealers who participated in the fair – the Western art market is also still recovering from the economic recession – but Park Lane Hotel's 1,000 sqm ballroom complex did create a mood. The fair was opened by Andrew Graham-Dixon, one of the world's leading art critics, in the presence of Prince Michael of Kent (that's Princess Margaret's hubby).

The purplish decor and gilded trimmings would not have been to everyone's tastes. But walking under the Art Deco chandeliers with champagne flute in hand and rubbing shoulders with Russian oligarchs and willowy East European models, you suddenly felt that you, too, could buy a 16th century double-sided icon of Christ's resurrection, or a Japanese wooden sculpture of Bishamon from



**Gloss and grandeur:** (Clockwise from above left) 'Guns N' Lilies', one of the paintings from the Russian, Eastern & Oriental Fine Art Fair, by Chinese artist Ling Jian; 'Taj Mahal', by Kazakhstan's Anya Sand; the Park Lane Hotel ballroom on the opening night of the fair



PHOTOS: RUSSIAN, EASTERN & ORIENTAL FINE ART FAIR



the Edo Period.

By the end of the opening night, the Tanya Baxter/Kings Road Gallery had sold two key works by Indian artist M F Husain. Other galleries reported "strong interest", with Albemarle expecting to sell all its paintings by the Russian duo Elena and Michel Gran. (The fair was cannily timed right after a sale of Russian works at Sotheby's, so many visitors were trooping in fresh from that auction, already in a shopping frame of mind.)

As one would expect given its Old World setting – and even its name – the Russian, Eastern & Oriental Fair showcased artworks that veered toward the figurative rather than the conceptual.

Even the contemporary art on display was in more tra-

ditional mediums such as oils or watercolours.

The quality of most of the works was extremely high, and some notable pieces included the striking, stylised portraits of China's Ling Jian; a watercolour tableau by Natalia Goncharova, the most expensive female artist in the world; abstract paintings by Kazakhstan's contemporary painter Anya Sand, whose works are being collected by politicians and celebrities the world over; soft-focus works on silk by Vietnamese Kim Bach; and a rare work from the Soviet Realist period by Y S Komendant, depicting Nikita Krushchev visiting miners.

The gloss and grandeur notwithstanding, these are still perilous times for the art market. Mr London, who also runs a gallery in Notting Hill and is the editor of *Art in Lon-*

don magazine, said Russian art prices have taken a beating in the past two years.

"The Russian paintings market was vastly overinflated. It's been going up since the year 2000, accelerating about 200 per cent a year. So we are talking a 2,000 per cent increase in 10 years. Even in a buoyant economy, that would be hard to sustain. When you add in the fact that so much has been wiped off the Moscow stock exchange, well, Russians started thinking twice before paying millions of pounds for a work of art."

Still, the Asian market, especially pertaining to China and India, is resilient.

"Chinese art is still on the rise. Five or six years ago, Chinese art was almost unheard of, really, among Western collectors. You look at the art price index now, and for the top 100 artists in the world, there are about 33 Chinese artists."

Mr London was also keen to add that, posh backdrop or not, much of the art at the fair was quite affordable. "This isn't just for the super-rich. A lot of the paintings that were sold last year were in the £1,000 (\$2,063) to £1,500 price bracket. We are trying to have a broad range of exhibitors. We are not an exclusive fair, we cover all walks of life."

# The light from within

By **WOON TAI HO**

IN the showroom of Filipino art specialist Utterly Art, every single work by Randy Solon has a small red dot on it, indicating that his show – although still on until June 20 – is sold out.

That the works sold out two days before the show's opening is testament to just

how hot the Filipino artist is. While his name is being bandied about as the one to put your money on – priced at under \$5,000, his works are good value – hanging his monochromatic paintings in your living room is another story.

The paintings are of men in various states of undress. *Head to Head* shows

a naked man in calm contemplation, his hands literally holding a head. Another, *Seize the Day* shows a man, only in shorts, body tense, hands tied from behind, his head covered in a hood. If one didn't know better, they could easily be mistaken for paintings depicting S&M sex.

But that couldn't be further from the truth. Rather, they are a form of therapy and a no-holds barred look into the world of Randy "Andoi" Solon. His journey into depression and back from the backbone of this series – "the process of creation is meditative and therapeutic for me," Solon whispers, almost to himself. "This show took a lot out of me – it took a long time. It shows my pain as well as my liberation. I think when I am old and someone asks which exhibition is my most significant, I will say this one. It is my turning point."

It's hard to believe that Solon, 39, is the deeply religious father of six children – three his own and three adopted. Or that his previous show at Utterly Art was also a sellout, but featured paintings of happy children.

With this being only his third solo exhibition, Solon is fair game for fellow artists envious of his success so early in his career. Some say he played it too safe with children and monochromes. But then galleries wanted more of the same, and so did collectors.

It hasn't been an easy ride for him, what with dealing with a close friend's death, galleries' demands and the stress of preparing for an exhibition.

"I got to a point when I came very close to giving up painting, the one thing I love doing most," he says in the same whisper tone. "Now I look back and realise that we should all feel extreme feelings, the make or break kind. And I believe we all have it within us to make, not break."

And such is the premise of *Shifting Lights*, his cur-



**Disturbing images:** Solon's paintings, like 'Head to Head' (above) and 'Seize the Day' (below), are of men in various states of undress



Where white represents light, blue – which is used in the background along with grey – represents sadness. "I am an easy target for sadness. But remember, there is the intense white. I think you need to understand and experience sadness to know real happiness and joy."

Each painting is a variation of Solon's personal struggles – the dismay and uncertainty rendered in blue and grey, neutralised by blinding whites.

"My works have always been Biblical," he says. "I am deeply inspired by my faith in God. It's what keeps me going. It's what keeps the inner light that neutralises all the anxieties and suffering that I have been going through."

And so, despite the disturbing images, Solon's art is all about being human, all about the walk-way of light and darkness, and the inevitable truth that light shines stronger in the presence of darkness itself.

'Shifting Lights' is on at at Utterly Art till June 20



**Happy faces:** Ba Hai's photos depict elderly people with smiles of contentment

# Genuine humanity in bold strokes

By **NATALIE KOH**

IT is often said that wisdom comes with age, and it's a truism that Shanghai artist and photographer Ba Hai took to heart in his latest exhibition titled *Faces of Wisdom*.

Inspired by the elderly people he meets in teahouses in the villages in Zhejiang Province where he grew up, *Faces of Wisdom* is simply that – captivating images of faces in every mood and expression.

The artist, whose real name is Yang Hui, was born in Shanghai, studied in Beijing and has since lived and worked in France and Taiwan. The maturity of his works holds testament to his experiences in both urban and rural areas, but despite having had such experiences, this student of the prestigious Academy of Arts, Beijing, still holds on tight to his rural roots.

"I think of my grandfather who raised me in the countryside until I was six – he would take me to the teahouse every morning before dawn," he reminisces. "I am at ease with the people whom I meet and photograph."

The 48-year-old artist observes that people wear "masks" to hide their true colours but these are cast aside as they age. He says: "For the elderly, there is



**Forceful:** Ba Hai's paintings show images of faces in every mood and expression

nothing left to hide because the good and bad in life have already happened and they find that there was never a reason to wear masks in the first place ... People pressure each other to put on socially acceptable faces. But for me, I reject the very idea of a mask."

Such honesty in the faces of the elderly and the firmness of his belief in it are clearly portrayed in the bold strokes of his paintings.

just strokes, they are my vocabulary stripped down to the bare strokes I use to translate the richness of the subject's inner self ... I use strokes to represent a trace of genuine humanity."

As opposed to the forceful, almost angry nature of his paintings, his photos depict elderly people with smiles of contentment. He explains: "A photo is genuine. A painting or a drawing comes from my own hands. I do not see any anger in my drawings but more a representation of the pride of an ageing man accepting his destiny and his differences."

While Ba Hai's paintings hold a slight resemblance to that of Rembrandt's, he feels that his paintings resemble none but his own.

He says: "Everything in my life influences my work, but gradually I forget the influences. What matters for me is the observation of genuine faces; I'm interested in real faces, in real life."

'Faces of Wisdom' is on at John Erdos Art from June 18 to July 15 at 7A and 7B Dempsey Road

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