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An Insider's Tipp: DAFEN ART VILLAGE

Looking for a Mona Lisa or for a deceptively realistic painting by Gerhard Richter ? The artist village of Dafen (Shenzhen, China) offers affordable masterpieces for everyone.

Lisa von Ortenberg (text) and photographer Markus Steffen strolled the lanes of the biggest artist colony of the world.

Arriving in a taxi (from Lowu, train station), the massive bronze statue at the entrance of the village tells us immediately that we have finally reached our destination: It represents a giant hand holding a paint brush. Behind the barrier lies the artist village, a poorer version of Paris's Montmartre in Southern China, where 60 percent of the world's oil paintings are mass produced. The village seems literally brimming over with bestsellers of the international art world: there is da Vinci's Mona Lisa, the Sunflowers by van Gogh, Warhols' Marilyn. Furthermore there are countless views of Venice, belling stags in front of a lake in the mountains, pretty realistic cats, or portraits of Putin, Chinese stars and kids. And every day brings several hundred of new additions.

In front of the low rise buildings stand or sit young painters in action, treating their easels with fast movements. Toddlers accompanied by grannies are running around. The walls of the houses are piled high with ready canvas while other corners sport drying canvas boards. One gallery owner grants us a peek into his workshop – after we promised that we won't write his name. We ring a bell on a small house, walk up to the second floor – and find seven tired-looking youngsters working on different views of the Alpes. A picture postcard in the left hand, a brush in the right. They barely notice us. One guy is even producing two identical paintings at the same time. First he paints the Matterhorn's sunny peak to his left, then he finishes Switzerland's most famous mountain on the right easel. He is clearly busy as art from Dafen ist still in demand.

The village sells 5 million oil paintings every year (a total turnover of 400 million RMB) – and almost 80 percent of the paintings are „replicas“. This was the idea of tricky businessman Huang Jiang, originally an errand-boy from Guandong, who escaped the communist country in the 1970s to Hong Kong from where he went back in the late eighties to open an art-factory – drawn by cheap rents, low salaries and the closeness to the international port at Hong Kong. He arrived with 26 artists to complete orders from the US – and his success was huge. Soon he would be shipping large numbers of oil paintings every week. „More, more“ demanded supermarkets such as Walmart or big hotel chains. By 1993, Huang had 1300 gifted ex-farmers working for him. Meanwhile China didn't have an art market yet, much less an internationally operating one.

The rise of the internet brought new opportunities – Western, Arab, as well as Chinese people commissioned naturalistic portraits based on photos. In 2004, the government named Dafen a ‚model village of the cultural industry‘ – given its extraordinary success. The word spread and the model village became a magnet for aspiring artists and amateurs across the country: That's why all men we've spoken this afternoon – Tony Lee, Zhi Qiang-Wang and Haifan aka „Sam“ – arrived in the year 2005. Only Huang Jiang can't be found anymore – and hasn't been seen for ages. „I think his problem was that his own people copied his workshops and he couldn't cope with that,“ assumes Tony Lee, one of Huang's epigones.

Lee looks like a dynamic tennis instructor on a good day. The name of his gallery reads poetically „Grandbeauty“ – and that's exactly his concept. He doesn't sell the usual suspects but colourful, abstract or happy „sofa art“ as he likes to put it. Seven graduates of art academies produce for him – preferably without too much meaning. Well, there is a bright yellow canvas that talks to his future owner in English: „Relax“. The original reads „Calm down!“ grins Tony. Four times a year he has official visitors who check the copyrights of living artists. But he knows how to disguise fake art. And even in a hot month like August he sells up to 300 paintings. In the cooler months starting from September the business is even better because the Chinese customers start coming back. That's the big change since Tony Lee came to Dafen after his highschool to work as a copy painter himself. In the beginning everybody was working for the US. Since the last recession in 2008 more and more sales go to private homes in China. Chinese people like colours without spending too much money on their decoration. Tony knows his clients well and meets their expectations. A large abstract Grandbeauty painting of 2 sqm size seldom costs more than 100 US Dollar. Frame included!

Exactly the opposite is represented by the artist who is working in a quiet lane, Mister Zhi Qiang-Wang. He rents one big wall and doesn't have a studio, because his original art is only for a few. He is a lone fighter, specialising in calligraphies; fascinating, meandering lines that start to talk when you star at them longer. „It's an old tradition, but for most people this is too expensive,“ explains Zhi with a shrug. Why should they pay 1000 US\$ for larger than life-sized characters whose meaning they don't understand? Zhi doesn't feel bitter though. He came in 2005 from a northern province after he heard that artists in Dafen can make a decent living. „But my father is too gifted for this

community', says his son, who is just visiting. The whole little family – father, mother, son – are surrounding Zhi's latest addition, a massive rolling character that stands for never-ending hospitality. Zhi's wife gets two bottles of beer for her men, then they sit down. It's a pure idyll. While his economic success is little, the man with the sharp features and slightly greying hair is clearly at peace with himself. His grandfather was a grand scientist who lost all his wealth under Mao. The family barely survived. Little Zhi made the best of his poor roots and started to draw nonstop at the early age of six. First on the floor, then on paper. He learnt the traditions from old men in his home town – and didn't want to do anything else. „I need only my wife and my artistic freedom“, he jokes.

Sometimes he feels sorry for the young chaps around him who produce sunflowers and Mona Lisas nonstop. He is friends with none of them. „They are no artists. They are like ants, under constant pressure.“ That's the difference to him. The wall on which he presents his framed art works costs him only 100 US \$ per month. Ok, his working table stands in the open, and on a rainy day he can't work. But he likes this spot with the bamboo tree behind him. If he only meets people once in a while who can read his work, he is happy. Money is not everything, he says.

Sentences like the latter make the difference between a trained and a real artist. Haifan aka „Sam“ (40) is another real one. His habit – black T-Shirt, black trousers, black beard and lively, smiling eyes show immediatly that he is not the typical Dafen-guy. His beautiful, open showroom is filled with paintings and portraits of diverse periods and styles. He has a few Rembrandt-inspired, some Dali-esque works and one big nude on a sofa, a direct copy of Lucien Freud's famous masterpiece. „I learnt to copy when I was at art school,“ he says. But today i'm too old for it. The only master I like to copy is Lucien Freud, whose style I really admire.“ He has also done some Freud inspired self portraits, who didn't sell well. „And I'm glad that most of my guests usually find them too expensive.“ He was already an industrial designer when he enrolled himself on a post graduate art course. One day he heard of that famous village in the South of China where artists are paid relatively well and, together with his wife who is also a designer – he moved to Dafen. „Until today most artists in China can barely survive. This said, we have to be grateful for our adopted home that is internationally acclaimed –even if for the wrong virtues.“ He detests the assembly line workshops and the prestige that comes with them. 90 percent of his works are based on his own ideas. Some pieces take 10 days to produce, some require more attention. In a good month he is able to sell five pieces. How many friends he has? Less than 10. Out of all 5000 painters living in Dafen he respects only a few. „Unfortunately, this is not Shanghai or Beijing“, he says.

But there is another haven of taste in Dafen – the quiet museum-like, 3000 squarefoot „Sunrise oil painting“ warehouse, located in an ancient building with peeling walls and thick wooden beams. Husband and wife team Chen Qiuzhi and Zhu Hong exhibit Chinese artists from all over China here – and charge 10 times more than their most expensive colleagues outside. Haifan/Sam is not being represented so far, unfortunately. Even though he comes from the same home province, Anhui, as the two owners. Anyway, „this house is designed like an old Anhui-house,“ he explains. But that's not the only reason why he likes to drop by with guests. „This place is a good example that Dafen has not only cheap art to offer.“ On the upper floor he greets the lady of the house, Zhu Hong, who is sitting in a large wooden lounge, pouring kung fu tea from a little teapot in tiny cups. With her beautiful face and graceful movements, she is obviously a perfect ambassador of refined Chinese culture. „We love art,“ she admits, „but our main purpose here is to attract more prospective clients to this village.“ The large, surprisingly realistic picture of a red tomato costs 300.000 RMB. An astronomical sum – given the starting prices of 10 US Dollars outside. But it's hard to resist the tasteful interieur and architecture in this house. The mini-dress-uniforms of the shop girls look like Shanghai Tang. So pretty! Everything seems synchronized. It's perfect. „My husband found this place and had the idea to open it as an art gallery. He is a designer turned calligrapher himself.“ They came in 2005 to follow his dream to make a living as artists. She was a studio photographer before. But this house of art is her mission. They are going to open another branch in Beijing soon. „You have to come and see it“, she says, pouring some more tea in our cups. „Tea first, then I will show you around!“ That's her winning formula. Some in Dafen are actually really happy people.