

WHEN THE HEAVENS

MEET THE EARTH

Selected Works from Robert Devereux's Sina Jina Collection

**THE HEONG GALLERY
AT DOWNING COLLEGE**

My engagement with the arts began as a fourteen-year-old. My mother, an English teacher, passionate and persuasive about literature, thrust D. H. Lawrence into my hands. I read *Sons and Lovers* and *Women in Love* in quick succession and almost without pause, and have not stopped reading since. My love of the visual arts began at much the same time.

As a family, we spent most of our summers camping in Tuscany, visiting the great museums and galleries of Renaissance Italy, particularly those of Florence. Our regime was: mornings in the galleries, family lunch and then freedom. I exercised my freedom by returning to the museums. That they were reliable places in which to meet other young people may have been an attraction, but it was Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca that really did it for me.

At school, I studied History of Art under an inspiring teacher, Doc Carter, spent more time at University in the History of Art Department than my own, and married an art dealer with a wonderful eye. By my early 20s, I could afford the odd purchase, mostly in support of my wife's gallery, and my life as a 'collector' had begun.

I am uncomfortable with the notion of being a collector, although that is probably what I am (I buy books like a collector, creating libraries as I go). It brings with it unattractive connotations of ownership, hoarding and possession. I like to think that my principal reason for buying has always been to support artists and, in some cases, gallerists.

For me, owning is not the most important aspect of collecting, though it is the most complex. I have a perceptive friend who likens collecting to hunting, a metaphor that I find intriguing. The recce, the stalk, the knowledge of terrain and the love of the quarry all find an echo in the activities of collecting (and, by the way, I am anti blood sports!)

One the ironies of being a collector is often one's separation from the work. Like many, I have far too much in storage and no interest in running a private gallery. I try to alleviate this by lending as much as I can, for example, to a school with which I have long been involved and, although the work may be at some risk from exuberant children, it's more important

to me that it is being engaged with and by an audience which would not normally have access to such artefacts.

What I collect seems to be the conjunction between the random and the purposeful. What resolves the tension between these impulses is a receptive open mind, constantly looking and listening. While I frequently seek advice and spend time discussing work, I have never wanted an intermediary to guide me. For me, collecting is a very personal affair. Nor do I have a programme or a plan. I am not trying to be comprehensive or coherent.

I have, however, often focused on a particular field – albeit broad. I like to know something about the context in which work is made and how it relates to its environment. The process of learning is one of the joys of collecting, but there is a limit to how much one can pursue at any given time. At different times I have collected only portraits, only abstract work from a particular decade, and only from particular geographies. I have always collected the work of young and emerging artists.

This echoes my view that interesting art is rooted in the particular, the specific, the local. While it must reach out to wider constituencies and be inclusive, it flourishes when it is connected to place and time.

The *Sina Jina Collection* is connected to place. A place that I came to love in the 1990s. I had been to South Africa and Kenya a number of times, but my real love of East Africa began on a backpacking trip in 1996. I decided to see if, as a middle-aged company director, I could still travel as I had done as a student. So, off I went to Heathrow with a backpack, a budget of US\$20 per day and no ticket. My plan was to take the first flight to an African destination. It could have been Mogadishu, but by a few minutes it was Durban.

Durban was not where I wanted to be, so I left the next morning for Maputo, Mozambique, a city that meant nothing to me at all. I stayed for five days down by the docks, sleeping in a dormitory and eating in the local bars. I was the only 'muzunga' in sight and loved it. Only on the last day, when I had to change some money, did I find the white enclave up on the bluff above the ocean. Two worlds.

Over the next six weeks I worked my way up the western seaboard of the Indian ocean. By the time I reached Mombasa, having survived a cholera epidemic, a reef full of sea urchins, broken-down buses and more goodwill than I had ever experienced before, I was hooked. The legacy of that trip has been an exhilarating twenty years of which the *Sina Jina Collection*,¹ The African Arts Trust,² The New Forests Company,³ the Rift Valley Walk⁴ and our house in Lamu have been the most-tangible results. The intangible has been constantly re-assessing how I see the world.

Inevitably, this has meant acquiring work from these countries as I travel back and forth. When I first visit a place, I always make for the artists' quarter. It is a fascinating perspective from which to engage in a new place. I do, however, prefer to meet the work before its maker, simply because I am easily seduced by personality and want my initial response to be a direct connection with the work. The impact of the artist can come later.

I would like to think that I am agnostic when it comes to medium and means. The preponderance of figurative work in this show and, indeed, in the *Sina Jina Collection* is a reflection not of preference, but of what I have seen and responded to.

I have always felt that my eye for photography is not my strong suit and yet there are many works of photography, a tribute to the power of the artist's image making. I have, in the past, been somewhat dismissive of fine-art film making, perhaps reflecting over a decade spent in the film business. My view has changed in the last decade, as fine artists have mastered this medium, yet there are fewer films than I would like. I just haven't seen enough.

There is plenty of painting, a medium that despite the boring recitation of the 'death of painting' will always be with us. It is a vital and legitimate form of artistic expression. Likewise with sculpture, sadly under-represented here – the result of happenstance, cost of production and practicalities of display.

I have rarely bought editioned work, even in the early days when it would have made most sense. I think this is because I am fascinated by the making of work and the hand of the artist has always been critical. So I have never been biased against what would sometimes be called 'craft', a distinction that I don't find useful.

And, while on the subject of overprescriptive labels, let me address the notion of 'conceptual' art as a category. In my view, all 'art' is conceptual. It must have a conceptual underpinning, an animating idea. Normal categorisation would probably label most of the works in this exhibition 'non-conceptual'. That would be wrong. They all start with the agency of an idea and then find many different means to articulate and communicate that idea.

The *Sina Jina Collection* is a work in progress – a project that will find its own direction and its own end point. This show has been a fascinating way-station, compelling me to think more closely about what I am doing and why. Those thoughts are also works in progress and I look forward to seeing where they go.

I hope you enjoy it and that in some way you find it illuminating.

1. Sina Jina means 'the place with no name', and is a house in Lamu, Kenya that I now use for a number of projects. It was falling down, became a restoration project and is one of the oldest merchant houses in the town. Lamu, a magical place, was a major trading entrepôt on the route from the gulf to the west coast of India; the traditional Swahili homes, with their intricate and delicate plasterwork, are vital parts of its history.
2. The African Arts Trust (TAAT, www.theafricanartstrust.org) is a grant-making foundation that supports grass roots organisations in Africa, mostly in the East and South where my African roots are. They, in turn, support artists trying to make a career out of their practice.
3. The New Forests Company (www.newforestscompany.com) is a sustainable forestry company operating in Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa. It has planted 40 million trees in the last decade and created employment for thousands of rural people. I chaired the company from 2007 until 2015, when I stood down in order to be able to go on a walk.
4. The walk was something that I had been dreaming of since the beginning of the decade. I had long been fascinated by the Rift Valley – the cradle of mankind and much else besides. So walking it seemed an inevitable thing to do. I left Beira, Mozambique in September 2015 and arrived in Djibouti, the Horn of Africa – nearly 6,000 km up the road – in April 2016. I look back on it now with a sense of wonder – what was I doing? Many things, one of which turns out to be gathering the material for a book that I am trying, unsuccessfully, to write.

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Sina Jina Collection

The Heong Gallery at Downing College
in the University of Cambridge, UK
25 February–21 May 2017

Curatorial Advisor and Editor:

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Copy Editor: Claire Varley

Artist Biographies: Prerona Prasad

Design: John Morgan studio

Print: Unicum, Tilburg

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Published by Downing College,
Cambridge, CB2 1DQ

ISBN 978-1-911247-03-6

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www.heonggallery.com

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