



## THE HEONG GALLERY AT FIVE

I was an undergraduate at Downing College between 1960 and 1963. After two years of immersion in “The Great Tradition” under F. R. Leavis, I decided it was time for a major change and entered the recently established Department of Art History. When Michael Jaffé thrust a Renaissance bronze into my hands in his grand rooms at King’s, I knew I was about to enter a different world.

Although Raphael and his School took over from Henry James and T. S. Eliot as the focus of my attention, an entirely different sensibility was revealed at Kettle’s Yard, Jim Ede’s house at the other end of town. I was one of many undergraduates welcomed for tea and insights into the understated display of twentieth-century masterpieces, diminutive as some of them were. The loan of an Alfred Wallis or two did not transform my rather gloomy rooms at Downing on “M” staircase into the environment to which I aspired, but it helped to sow the seeds for my life-long involvement in different aspects of the art world.

Fast forward 50 years to 2013, when Dr. Susan Lintott and Gabrielle Bennett visited me in my office at Chambers Fine Art, a gallery specializing in contemporary Chinese art on 19<sup>th</sup> Street in the Chelsea district of New York. This was when I first heard about plans for a new art gallery in the former stables just behind the Porters’ Lodge. Although small in scale, it would be strategically placed, only a short walk from the Fitzwilliam Museum and at the opposite end of town from Kettle’s Yard. Dr. Lintott’s enthusiasm for the project was contagious and led, on my part, to an association with the gallery that has been enormously fulfilling, as it has enabled me to re-establish connections with the College, and more generally with Cambridge, that over 50 years of living in the United States and elsewhere had not given me much time to cultivate.

Discussions of the future program of the embryonic gallery led to what were to become frequent and most enjoyable visits to Cambridge. On one of them I decided to focus on twentieth-century art on public display in the city and realized that apart from one room at the Fitzwilliam Museum, an enterprising programme at Jesus College, a scattering of Henry Moores, and a work by Barbara Hepworth on loan to Clare College (*Two Forms (Divided Circle)*, 1969), Kettle’s Yard was still the only permanent display of modern art in Cambridge. How could this be and how could the new gallery at Downing contribute to the cultural life of Cambridge?

At this first meeting, Dr. Lintott told me that Sir Alan Bowness, former Director of the Tate Gallery between 1980 and 1988, was also an alumnus of Downing, a fact I had not known when I was his student at the Courtauld Institute from 1963 to 1967. Always very

supportive, he opened many doors for me and indirectly set me on the path that led to my acceptance of an offer from the Philadelphia Museum to catalogue the collection of the Rodin Museum of Art in 1967. For the first exhibition at the Heong Gallery, it seemed obvious that a selection of works by modern British artists from Sir Alan's private collection would be a perfect choice. Indeed it was, and the previously mentioned sculpture by Barbara Hepworth, to whom he is related by marriage, is now on loan to Downing and can be seen in First Court.

I was directly involved with the second exhibition at the Heong Gallery, *Ai Weiwei: Cubes and Trees*, as I had been acquainted with the artist since at least 2007 when he designed a building on my property in upstate New York that is known as ArtFarm. I was spending a lot of time in Beijing between 2014 and 2016, working on a book about Ai Weiwei's photography (*Ai Weiwei: Beijing Photographs 1993-2003*). The photograph of a cat climbing over a model of Caruso St John's renovation of the Edwardian stables close to the entrance of the College was taken while I was sitting with Ai Weiwei in the garden outside his studio in the Caochangdi district, discussing which one of several proposals would be most appropriate for the space. We settled on four cubes executed in different materials as they harmonized perfectly with the elegant austerity of the interior of the gallery. However, by themselves the cubes would have represented only one aspect of Ai Weiwei's multi-faceted art so, in complete contrast, eight of his tree sculptures, reassembled from trees that had long since been living, were arranged in a circle in front of the Chapel.

As a member of the advisory board and in frequent touch with Dr. Susan Lintott and Dr. Prerona Prasad, I realize that not every exhibition can be of the scale, and as expensive to install, as the Ai Weiwei exhibition. Furthermore, the exhibition schedule does not represent the taste of a single dictatorial director or curator who has carte blanche to impose a particular vision on the visiting public. That would not work. Rather, it reflects an inclusive approach that has encompassed not only monographic exhibitions such as those devoted to Dame Elizabeth Frink (*Dame Elizabeth Frink: Larger than Life*), Yoko Ono (*Yoko Ono Sky Pieces*) and Stephen Chambers (*Stephen Chambers: Court of Redonda*), but a timely survey of contemporary African art from the collection of Downing alumnus Robert Devereux (*When the Heavens Meet the Earth*) and, forty years after Downing admitted its first female undergraduates, *We are Here: Women in Art at Cambridge Colleges*, curated by Dr Prasad.

As a bookish student who used to spend afternoons in the Fitz and the Botanical Gardens or, when weather permitted, having tea at Grantchester, I never imagined that, one day, Downing would have not only its own theatre but also an art gallery!

John Tancock (English/ History of Art, 1960)