

New York

MoMA buys Chinese contemporary art

Twenty-eight photographs have been purchased from collector Larry Warsh

NEW YORK. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has acquired 28 photographs by 11 contemporary Chinese artists, including Ai Weiwei, Rong Rong, Huang Yan and Sheng Qi. The works were purchased from New York collector and former publisher of *Museums* magazine Larry Warsh, who bought most of the pieces directly from the artists' studios.

Valued at over \$400,000 by Mr Warsh, the collection was reportedly acquired by MoMA at a 30% to 40% discount. The museum's chief curator of photography, Peter Galassi, declined to discuss the acquisition.

Mr Warsh says he has been talking to MoMA about the acquisition for more than a year. He says he invited curators from the photography department to view his 500-piece collection.

"They were very careful to review various works and select the strongest examples of Chinese contemporary photography," Mr Warsh said.

Many of the photographs chosen by MoMA are from well-known series or editions that have been shown in international and touring exhibitions such as "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China" which was seen at the

Victoria and Albert Museum in London and New York's International Center of Photography and Asia Society, among other venues. Works acquired include Sheng Qi's *My Left Hand: Me* (2000), which shows the artist holding a childhood photo of himself in a hand missing the pinky finger. (Sheng Qi severed the finger himself following the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and then left China for a decade.)

While exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art continue to proliferate and pieces are eagerly snapped up by collectors, few US institutions have acquired work for their collections. Last year the Guggenheim purchased Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* (1994), and the Metropolitan Museum acquired Hai Bo's *The North: Bicycle Riders* (2005) while the Los Angeles County Museum of Art bought Xiang Liqing's *Rock Never 6* (2002) in

2003. Few other museums have followed, and none on the scale of MoMA.

"MoMA is the first major institution to understand that it is necessary to extend their collection to include these artists," says Mr Warsh. The work MoMA has bought is by artists who Mr Warsh describes as having started the Chinese contemporary movement in the 1990s, such as Ai Weiwei and Rong Rong. Their direct criticism of the Chinese Communist government and often ironic appropriation of traditional Chinese art influenced the generation of artists that followed.

As we went to press, MoMA had no plans to put the works on public view, though Mr Warsh says he believes the collection will be posted on the museum's website soon. A few of the works are already listed under the photography department's recent acquisitions. **Helen Stoilas**

Ai Weiwei's Tiananmen Square and White House, 1997-2000, have been acquired by MoMA

