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CULTURE | ART AND DESIGN

The House Collective's debut art programme with Swiss artist Katja Loher concludes at The Temple House in Chengdu, China

Living the dream

Text: *Aravin Sandran*

Image: *The House Collective*

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The amalgamation of an art gallery and hotel isn't exactly ground-breaking. These days, it's commonplace for high-end hotels to install temporary art installations by big-name artists in an effort to entice the seasonal hip-and-happening art circuit crowd. However, in China, The House Collective's group of refined properties is taking the concept of the hotel as a patron of the arts to the next level with its debut year-long art programme.

The House Collective's vision for the arts began almost 10 years ago at the height of the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Propelled by its passion for high art, design, and sustainability, the collective opened its very first property The Opposite House in the then-newly developed Sanlitun Taikoo Li shopping district. Balenciaga, Valentino, and Dover Street Market Beijing — the 98-room hotel matches up with its stylish neighbours with a bewitching interior designed by renowned Japanese architect Kengo Kuma.

When I visited in November, I spotted Valentino's creative director Pier Paolo Piccioli in the foyer. He was in town for the label's extravagant haute couture show and boutique opening. While the crowd gathered outside, The Opposite House conveyed a sense of serenity within. A large bamboo installation by Anti-Aesthetics Design Studio complemented a new reception wall by Kuma that looked deceptively like stone or marble from afar, but was in fact, treated paper.

In light of its 10th anniversary, the hotel was busy prepping for its new F&B openings in December. In place of Mesh (which was famous for its epic gay nights) and Village Cafe, the hotel will be welcoming Sizhuan-inspired contemporary restaurant Superfly as well as Italian restaurant Frasca.

Besides adding colour and refurbishing the natural woods of the rooms, the hotel will also be transforming its sunken garden into a dedicated arts and events space, which will host exhibitions by Beijing's intrepid network of artists and collectives.



Japanese architect Kengo Kuma's visionary hand is reflected in the discreet nature of the facade and interior, but it reaches its pinnacle in the basement: a stainless-steel pool that captures the golden vagaries of the sun.

The House Collective furthered its commitment to the arts with its debut art programme, which was led by Swiss artist Katja Loher. 🎨 Entitled Encounters Across Cultures: Seeds of Life, Loher referenced the five traditional Chinese elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water for her three-city journey.

The video artist worked with local creatives to create unique installations that conveyed each city's distinct cultural heritage. For The Upper House in Hong Kong, she joined forces with Feng Shui designer Thierry Chow to explore the idea of *qi* while at The Middle House in Shanghai, she produced a limited edition apparel collection with cool design collective Dirty Pineapple.



Swiss artist Katja Loher stands within The Temple House's inner courtyard.

For the programme's grand finale within the atmospheric sites of The Temple House in Chengdu, Loher produced a multidisciplinary showcase that brought together film, dance, music, video, and sculpture as well as traditional calligraphy and tea ceremony culture thanks to local artists Hao Wu and Yong Ma. The result: the past, present, and future came together in Loher's kaleidoscopic video 'globes' in an almost cinematic counterpoint to The Temple House's beautifully conserved heritage buildings, open courtyards as well as its elegant bar JING and Italian restaurant Tivano.



Loher's video sculpture is cleverly juxtaposed with Tivano's outdoor water feature.

I sat down with Loher, Wu, and Ma after a sumptuous vegetarian hotpot at the adjacent 🍵 Mi Xun Teahouse to reflect on the nature of collaboration , the open-mindedness of Chengdu, and the comforting stillness of The Temple House.

Alot of the works feature multiple disciplines such as dance and film. Why was it important to tell the story of the five elements through these different kinds of disciplines?

Katja: I would say the messenger of the impulse of the video is dance. In this case, there were people who were dressed according to the different elements and the choreography also reacts to the characteristics of the element. In every step of the journey, I had a different collaboration. In Beijing, it was with dancers and choreographers. In Hong Kong, it was with a Feng Shui master. In Shanghai, it was with fashion designers. In Chengdu, we have ink painter and artist Wu and Ma.

It's quite rare to see three artists collaborating on a single project. What was the process of collaboration like?

Katja: We first met during a tea ceremony and all these ideas and inspiration popped up naturally. Pretty much by the time that we finished drinking the tea, it was completed.

Another thing that I've noticed is that the installations have created an almost like cinematic feel around the property. It's really beautiful. How was it like for you to exhibit in a place like this where you can create different moods and environments?

Katja: I like to take art out of the traditional gallery space and make it liveable and alive so that it becomes part of the environment. It allows people to experience art not just at a museum or gallery. It also gives them a moment to reflect, meditate, or enjoy when they are spending time at the hotel's bar or restaurant.

Do you have a favourite installation?

Wu: It's very hard to favour one spot, because they all come together and complement each other through a sense of harmony.

Ma: The five elements relate to the concerns of today too. The earth is so beautifully and perfectly built when the elements fit with each other. When humans start messing around with them, there's chaos.

Wu: This collaboration pretty much transcends culture. It's beyond East and West.

As a creative person, is there a particular spot at The Temple House that's inspiring or comforting?

Katja: I remember the first time I set foot at The Temple House a few years ago. I had tears in my eyes, because it was so pretty. I remember it was August, the sun was shining through the leaves, and it was so quiet. The hustle and bustle melted away the moment I entered. It was like a little bubble or time capsule.

Wu: When I walk around the property, it's like a time machine because I can almost travel through time. There's plenty of history here.

What are your memories growing up in this area and witnessing the urban development over the years? How important is the heritage and conservation of these properties?

Wu: Time flies by. Many locals are thankful for this property, because it has revitalised the businesses here. Nobody came to this area before.

What are your key takeaways from this experience?

Katja: If you haven't been in Chengdu before, you might not think much of it. Yet, the people in Chengdu are some of the most open-minded people in the country. They welcome anyone. These 10 days in Chengdu felt like a creative retreat. It was a very focused and safe environment to create and realise this dream of mine.

The Opposite House

Taikoo Li Sanlitun North, No. 11 Sanlitun Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing, China

100027

+86 10 6417 6688

The Temple House

No. 81 Bitieshi Street, Jinjiang District, Chengdu, China 610021

+86 28 6636 9999

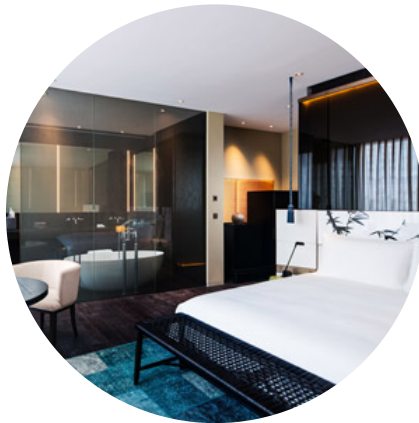
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