

China Institute Gallery Turns a Setback Into an ‘Urgent’ Contemporary Showcase

A last-minute cancellation led the nonprofit to pull together a timely new exhibition of contemporary Chinese works in just a few months.



“Metamorphosis: Chinese Imagination and Transformation,” an exhibition of contemporary Chinese works, is on view at the China Institute Gallery through Jan. 11. Daniel Terna for The New York Times

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This article is part of the [Fine Arts & Exhibits](#) special section on how creativity can inspire in challenging times.

Last October, the China Institute in Lower Manhattan found itself in an unexpected bind: the fall 2025 exhibition it had been planning for almost three years could no longer move forward because of a partner museum's change of plans, and it had a void to fill.

The organization's gallery committee decided to pivot to a show of contemporary works and asked the veteran independent Asian art curator Susan L. Beningson, a committee member for more than a decade to step in.

"We want to bring in a younger audience," the China Institute's chief executive George Geh said.



The independent Asian art curator Susan L. Beningson selected works that she felt would challenge visitors to rethink their preconceptions of Chinese art.

Daniel Terna for The New York Times

The resulting show, "Metamorphosis: Chinese Imagination and Transformation," came together in just over six months, he added — a time frame that amounts to light speed in the art world, especially for a show of this scope, which is typically conceived two to three years in advance.

Beningson received her doctorate in Chinese art and archaeology from Columbia University and has a long track record of organizing exhibitions on China at venues such as the Brooklyn Museum, the Asia Society and the Princeton University Art Museum. She said she was able to get many artists to participate on short notice because of her longstanding relationships with them.

With her selections, she “wanted to encourage visitors to think more broadly and challenge any notions they may have about what art by Chinese artists is,” she said.

With works by 28 artists, “Metamorphosis” is on view through Jan. 11. at the China Institute Gallery, founded by the nearly 100-year-old nonprofit in 1966. It is organized around four themes: the body and self, the environment and natural world, the historical and cultural, and the spiritual.

Beningson, who lives and works in New York City, said the framework of the show reflects her decades of watching Chinese artists — both in China and abroad — increasingly incorporate traditional techniques into their contemporary practice.

This tendency is evident in the two newly commissioned site-specific installations that form the heart of the exhibition.

“Dream Chamber,” is an installation by the artist Bingyi, who divides her time between Los Angeles and Beijing and whose works have been part of exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and other institutions. It comprises nine monumental panels, hanging from the ceiling to the floor, on four walls in the gallery. They transport visitors to an otherworldly setting featuring monks and animals like a hummingbird, monkey and snow leopard, hidden in mist.



“Dream Chamber,” a site-specific installation created for the gallery, features large-scale ink works on rice paper that defy the traditional format of smaller, more intimate ink paintings, Beningson said. Daniel Terna for The New York Times

“I rarely paint figures, but for this installation, I changed my way of expression,” she said in a phone interview.

She said that she had conceived of the project — inked on rice paper, a material Chinese artists have used for centuries — while on a retreat earlier this year to Mount Longhu, a Daoist site in the southeastern Chinese province of Jiangxi.

Her large-scale works “are the opposite of the traditional Chinese format, which is intimate with smaller paintings,” Beningson said.

The other site-specific commission, which also bears the title “Metamorphosis: Chinese Imagination and Transformation,” is a series of wall paintings by the artist Sun Xun. They too have spiritual references and immerse visitors in a sea of shimmering gold-leaf murals, where crabs, lobsters and Buddhist figures float in dreamlike scenes on the walls of the gallery’s foyer and adjacent stairwell.

To create the piece, Beningson said, Sun paired Chinese ink and pigments made from natural materials, such as crushed rose petals and walnut shells, with more contemporary Western materials like acrylic and gold leaf.

The multimedia artist, who was born in Fuxin, a former coal-mining hub in the northeastern province of Liaoning but now lives in Beijing, has had several solo exhibitions, recently at the Guangdong Times Museum in Guangzhou.

Despite China's strict government censorship, Alexandra Munroe, a senior curator of Asian art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and a founder of the Guggenheim's Asian Art Initiative, described the country as "one of the greatest centers of contemporary art expression anywhere in the world across all mediums."

Yet as Beijing increasingly turns inward, opportunities to see new Chinese works in the United States are becoming fewer and farther between, Owen Duffy, the Nancy C. Allen curator and director of exhibitions for Asia Society Texas in Houston, said, making the China Institute's show "urgent, because the channels of dialogue between the U.S. and China are contracting."

To underscore the importance of continued dialogue, Beningson decided to include works by Chinese artists worldwide, including nine Chinese American artists alongside those from mainland China. "They have their own unique and compelling stories to share and different ways to share them," she said.

One of them — Kelly Wang, a lifelong New Yorker — is presenting "Twelve Traces of Huangshan," a set of 12 mixed-media works on kaolin clay panels portraying the Huangshan mountains of Anhui Province, a popular subject of ancient Chinese paintings.

