

Contemporary art chosen for new US embassy chosen “to connect” to China

The new embassy in Beijing, opening in August, will include art by Jeff Koons, Cai Guo-Qiang, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Rauschenberg, and others

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When the new American embassy opens in Beijing just before the start of the summer Olympics in August, it will display work by at least 18 American and Chinese contemporary artists, including Jeff Koons, Cai Guo-Qiang, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Rauschenberg, Betty Woodman, Martin Puryear, Maya Lin, Yun-Fei Ji, and Hai Bo. Many of the pieces are new commissions or site-specific works purchased by the State Department.

The collection has been overseen by Virginia Shore, chief curator of the Art in Embassies programme. The State Department calculates its art budgets based on a building's square footage, and the \$800,000 spent for art on the Beijing project is the largest sum ever for a US embassy.

Ms Shore says she strove to be “culturally sensitive and diplomatic” in selecting American and Chinese artists. She says that when she commissioned new work, she asked some artists “to connect” to China, “but without giving any specific parameters”. When she requested one of Cai Guo-Qiang's exploded gunpowder drawings he responded with *Eagle Landing on a Pine Branch*, 2007, which his spokeswoman describes as “an American symbol about to land on a Chinese archetype”. Very few works allude to contemporary events, and those that do are subject to alternative

interpretations. For example, a traditional Chinese-style landscape painting by Yun-Fei Ji, *Last Days Before the Flood*, 2006, portrays refugees from the Three Gorges dam project.

All of the works belong to the State Department with the exception of Jeff Koons's steel sculpture *Tulips*, a ten-year loan from the artist that will be installed outdoors. Sculptures by Ellsworth Kelly, Martin Puryear, Louise Bourgeois and Mark di Suvero have been donated by the Friends of Art and Preservation in Embassies, a non-profit organisation that helps acquire art for display in US diplomatic buildings.

The new \$550m complex, designed by the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, is one of the two largest construction projects ever undertaken by the State Department on foreign soil. (The embassy currently under construction in Baghdad will be larger.)

The works will be installed shortly before the building is unveiled on 8 August in a ceremony to be attended by President Bush and the First Lady, who will be in the Chinese capital to attend the opening of the Olympics.

Ms Shore declines to reveal how much the State Department paid for individual works, but says that artists and dealers agreed to prices within the constraints of her budget.

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