

China's Roni Horn exhibition in Tadao Ando-designed museum draws Hong Kong art lovers to Midea's sprawling headquarters

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Featuring 50 of Horn's diverse and often monumental works, the exhibition is the largest retrospective that the artist has held in Asia

The Tadao Ando-designed He Art Museum, located within electrical appliance manufacturer Midea's headquarters, is almost a work of art itself



A selection from Roni Horn's "Water Double" series - monumental glass sculptures weighing 4,500kg each - and a series of works on paper titled "Yet", at the artist's retrospective at the Tadao Ando-designed He Art Museum in Shunde, China.

Photo: Enid Tsui

Most Hong Kong day trippers to Shunde district in southern China go for just one reason: its famous cuisine.

But a gaggle of Hong Kong art lovers made a special trip to the town near Guangzhou on June 6 because of the double appeal of a Roni Horn art retrospective and its venue, a two-year-old private museum designed by famed Japanese architect Tadao Ando.

The He Art Museum is located within electrical appliance manufacturer Midea's sprawling headquarters in Beijiao township, about three hours by road from Hong Kong.

He Jianfeng, the museum's founder, is the son of He Xiangjian, the billionaire who built Midea into the world's largest appliance maker (and sponsor of newly minted English FA Cup winner and Premier League champions Manchester City).



Exterior view of the He Art Museum. Photo: He Art Museum

The younger He, aged 55, keeps a low profile and runs his own financial investment empire. Press coverage is mostly limited to news about the museum launching in 2021 and an occasion when he swam across a river to fetch police after kidnappers broke into his father's mansion in 2020.

Once past the museum entrance, which features Ukrainian artist Stanislava Pinchuk's *The Wine Dark Sea* (2021), seen at this year's Art Basel Hong Kong fair, the imposing design of the glass and concrete building makes it clear why museum director Shao Shu has to consider whether the art on show can stand up to the architecture.

But the director has no doubts about the Horn show. "Roni's works do not get overwhelmed by the building," he says.

The most eye-catching part of the building – and where most of the exhibition space is housed – is a circular stack of discs with a magnificent double helix spiral staircase in the centre.

Apart from a minimal number of V-shaped concrete pillars, each vast gallery floor is completely bare of walls – there is 86,000 square feet (8,000 square metres) of exhibition space in total – and customised partitions are erected for every exhibition.



The He Art Museum's "double helix" staircase. Photo: Enid Tsui

With the tongue-in-cheek, faintly Taoist title "A dream dreamt in a dreaming world is not really a dream ... but a dream not dreamt is", Horn's show is full of ambiguity and surprises. Its scale gives a good representation of the artist's diverse practice, which includes sculpture, photography, drawing and books.

With 50 works sourced from international collections and the artist herself, it is the largest retrospective that 67-year-old Horn, born in New York in 1955, has had in Asia.

The load-bearing capacity of the building allows for the installation of her formidably heavy "Water Double" series. These round columns of solid glass weigh 4,500kg (8,800lb) each and stand 1.3 metres (four feet) high.



"Water Double" (2017-19), by Roni Horn, at the He Art Museum. Photo: He Art Museum

Made between 2013 and 2019, the columns resemble large, uncovered water butts with a top surface so smooth it is hard to believe they are not filled with water.

The water illusion itself is part of Horn's fascination with paradoxes and "inbetweenness".

"What you end up with is an object that is both liquid and solid visually. You have an identity that shares both worlds," she said during an opening talk she gave at the museum.



Horn (on stage, right) speaks during the opening talk for her exhibition at the He Art Museum, together with museum director Shao Shu (centre) and Christopher Ho (left), executive director of the Asia Art Archive.

Photo: He Art Museum

The range of the exhibition is vast: there are text bars covered in lines from Emily Dickinson's poems, photographic sequences that play with the idea of doubling, projects that conceptually challenge the distinction between landscapes and portraits, and of course, images of Horn's beloved second home, Iceland.

At the heart of many of the works is the Greek philosopher Heraclitus' idea that you can't step into the same river twice (because both the person and the river are always changing).



"Things That Happen Again" (1986/2010), by Roni Horn, one of an identical pair of solid copper cones weighing 900kg each.

Photo: Enid Tsui

Things That Happen Again (1986/2010) is a pair of identical copper cones shown resting on two pieces of wood and placed in separate sections of the circular museum. Visitors inevitably do a double take when they encounter the second one.

You Are the Weather, Part 2 (2010-11) is a sequence of 100 near-identical photographs of a former girlfriend called Margrit, who Horn photographed in exactly the same manner in 1994.

There is one work where Horn allows a fragile promise of eternity to seep through. *Gold Mats, Paired – for Ross and Felix* (1994/2021) is made of two extremely thin sheets of pure gold, one on top of the other, representing Horn's friend, the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and his lover Ross Laycock, who both died of Aids-related illnesses.

It is placed on its own, near a window so that it reflects the watery sun, unadorned by artificial lighting, and is profoundly moving.



"Gold Mats, Paired – for Ross and Felix (v.2)" (1994/2021), by Roni Horn. Photo: Enid Tsui



"Two Pink Tons" (2008), by Roni Horn. This pair of solid cast-glass pieces, weighing 900kg each, are made to look like they are filled with water. Photo: Enid Tsui

Shao, like many artists and curators in Guangdong province, says he goes to Hong Kong regularly to see exhibitions.

Now that the borders have reopened, Hongkongers can reciprocate. Apparently the Joseph Beuys exhibition at Shenzhen's Design Society, organised by How Art Museum, is worth a visit too.