Buried Treasure

Private museum | In a bunker in Berlin, Rachel Spence meets Désiré Feuerle – a collector with a penchant for unusual juxtapositions

Désiré Feuerle in one of the spaces of the Feuerle Collection: below, an 11th-century Khmer temple sculpture of Vishnu – right: No. 3

Feuerle – a collector with a penchant for unusual juxtapositions, he is always on the move, most often to be found in Bangkok and Shanghai. His collection of Asian antiquities encompasses not only Khmer sculpture but Imperial Chinese and Chinese Scholar furniture from 200BC to the 18th century. Most of the Chinese pieces, exquisitely carved and lacquered, are installed in the upper floor of the bunker with contemporary works by Cristina Iglesias, Adam Fuss, James Lee Byars, Zeng Fanzhi and more photographs by Araki. Here, too, the mood is serene, unshuttered Timelessness.

Mostly, Feuerle buys from private collectors. When I ask about the ethics of holding antiques far from their homelands, he replies: “I think it depends on how someone is treating the artwork.” He has been “astonished and shocked” at the storage conditions in major museums in Asia. “I understand there is no money but you can put an umbrella over a sculpture in the rainy season!”

Certainly, the works are safe in this bunker. And Feuerle could not have found a more suitable architect for the task of renovating it than the minimalist John Pawson. On the verge of unveiling London’s new Design Museum, Pawson looks back on our peregrinations. A jovial, self-deprecating character, the architect describes the job of restoring the bunker as one of “unbuilding.” Both he and Feuerle wished to do as little as possible in order to preserve the space mystery. The biggest challenges were technical, “it was like trying to put heating in the pyramids!” Pawson chuckles. They have resulted in a space whose space mystery triggers the imagination far more effectively than blanket displays, inviting visitors to experience fully the less-is-more power. Mobile phones must be left at the entrance and only 14 people will be admitted at once.

“I like it empty. It’s healthy. Also for my soul,” says Feuerle, when I say he is brave to embrace such austerity. Pawson, he continues, saw the place as a monastery.

What of the tension between those Araki photographs and this celibate dream? “I see a space and I see the potential,” Feuerle replies. In the bunker, he continues, he is not content for doing something special. Undoubtedly, he has succeeded.

desirefeuerlecollection.org