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Photography: Chou Mo (Hao); Amanda Kio (Ng); Robert Nilsson (Tong)

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Love Me (2016) by Richard Hudson.
Opposite page: Donum Estate owner Allan Warburg, art advisor and wine collector William Zhao and writer Sarah Heller



A Museum-Worthy Vintage

Hong Kong art collectors Allan and Mei Warburg have transformed their Sonoma winery into a world-class sculpture park *By Sarah Heller, MW*

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Wine and art make for natural bedfellows. Think of the art labels pioneered by Château Mouton Rothschild at the end of the Second World War, when Baron Philippe began a tradition that has seen artists from Miró to Picasso to Jeff Koons paste images of their signature pieces to its bottles. Today there are countless vineyard sculpture parks and wineries that double as galleries around the world, while the top champagne houses have practically become curators in their lavish support of ostentatious exhibitions.

Perhaps it's idealistic to say that art and wine are both examples of human striving to connect on a deeper level with the world around us. But as someone who has devoted much time and love to both subjects (before becoming a master of wine, I was a paint-splattered art major at

Photography: Mike Pickles (portrait) Image: Gregory Gorman

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Yale), I believe the bond is genuine. However, the sheer proliferation of projects in this space—too many of them superficial and mercenary—makes me wary whenever I hear about another “art-wine” concept.

One that was recently brought to my attention is Donum, the Sonoma, California estate of Danish fashion entrepreneur Allan Warburg and his Beijing-born wife, Mei. The globetrotting pair are well known in Hong Kong, where they now reside, as prominent collectors of Chinese and international contemporary art, which they’ve been accumulating since their days foraging the fertile studio scene of early 2000s Beijing. Their foray into winery ownership is more recent, officially starting in 2011 when they purchased the decade-old pinot noir estate Donum. A few years in, they began to transform the property with a proliferation of important site-specific sculptures, now about 40 in number, including a Yayoi Kusama pumpkin and a sculpture by Anselm Kiefer, *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (*Poppy and Memory*), in the shape of an abandoned aircraft.

The idea that opening a vineyard-and-art destination was a savvy business decision draws a wry chuckle from Warburg, who says, “It makes no commercial sense to invest in all this art; then you add the wine...”

To be fair, the Warburgs’ initial decision to purchase Donum was rational enough. Warburg’s brother Carsten had been Donum’s Danish importer, so Allan liked and knew the wine very well. When they learnt it was for sale at a very reasonable price, the couple bought the troubled estate out of German receivership with some minority partners sight unseen. It seemed like a promising investment, expected to rise appreciably in value by the time they sold it in five to ten years’ time. The moment they visited the roughly 80 windswept, sun-burnished hectares of California dreaminess about a year later, Warburg notes, “It was not for sale any more.”

SITE SPECIFICITY

One of the pros of sculptures is that they can’t help but interact with their

environment. Paintings hang inertly on walls. But sculptures lustily take possession of the space around and within, letting themselves in turn be coloured, shadowed and resurfaced by the ambience. Reminiscing about his visit to the estate a few years ago, Hong Kong-based art advisor William Zhao—who collects both art and wine—says wistfully, “All of the sculptures, you need to walk around them. It’s not enough to look.”

Warburg himself chooses where each artwork fits into the vineyard. Occasionally, he notes, the artist has ideas about where the piece should sit, but generally this is his demesne. And some of the purchases have been site-specific commissions, affording the Warburgs the opportunity to collaborate with artists more closely.

“I try to just pick what I like and not be guided by what is the ‘right’ thing to do,” he says. “A curator has a responsibility to a lot of other people; in building a private collection we only have a responsibility to ourselves.”

Many of the sculptures feature a similar silvery, reflective surface that makes them virtually vanish into the environment, for instance *Love Me*, a metal heart by Richard Hudson or Zhan Wang’s *Artificial Rock*. To draw a parallel to wine, the pinot noir vine has a propensity to lap up and reflect back the particularities of its surroundings in the finished bottle.

Donum’s winemaker, Dan

Fishman, speaks of wine as capturing the land’s “energy”, something he sees in top-level art too. He remarks how the Zhan Wang piece—an imprint in stainless steel of a traditional Chinese scholar’s rock—makes him think of the stoniness that characterises the taste of the chardonnay they grow in Russian River.

EAST AND WEST

When I ask Zhao what he finds remarkable in the sculpture park at Donum, he quickly responds, “It’s something very unique to represent a collection of Chinese artists and Chinese culture in the US like this.”

The Warburgs are clearly cognisant that they, too, embody an East-meets-West paradigm that can be addressed in ways that are either meaningful or trite. Allan is Danish but has lived in Asia for close to three decades; Mei is Chinese but Australian-educated. Their children are growing up in Hong Kong, arguably the quintessential hub where the two cultures meet. The most straightforward expression of that hybridity at Donum is a sculpture from the Swedish artist Ernst Billgren, *The Gate Between East and West*, a title that I confess initially had my cynical hackles raised.

But surveying an image of the piece, an unexpectedly tender tableau of two kindred woodland creatures separated only by a frail geometrical



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fence, I'm softened. I'm reminded upon tasting the Donum pinots how similar American and Chinese wine preferences can often be: the American proclivity for pillowy textures, bold fruit and affable tannins is something I see mirrored almost exactly in mainland China. Donum's pinots, which Warburg says can easily sell out in US direct-to-consumer channels, aren't yet sold in China but I can readily envision them as the toast of Beijing.

Then there are the labels, specially commissioned from Ai Weiwei. Each vintage features the appropriate head from the artist's famous series of 12 bronzes—his interpretations of the zodiac sculptures that once decorated and were later stolen from the palace at Yuanmingyuan in Beijing.

Although at first I'm confused by the choice of such an overtly Chinese artist for wines targeting US consumers, I later reflect that perhaps Ai, who is virtually alone in western minds as the representative of Chinese contemporary art, is the perfect choice. The ceaseless layering of east and west at first makes the head spin but then gradually settles into a pleasant buzz, an apt metaphor for drinking pinot.

ART AND NATURE

The charm of wine, particularly since the emergence of the natural wine movement, is predicated in part on a fallacy of "naturalness". What after all is a vineyard but a garden trying to pose as nature?

"It's something I think about so much: changing the landscape, shaping it," says Warburg. "We don't want it to look too much like we've changed it, but in fact we've changed it a lot to accommodate the art."

Several pieces at the Donum Estate prod playfully at the fragile boundary between art and nature. The various interpretations of trees here reference humans' apparent need to pillage, control or domesticate nature, from Douglas White's politically freighted *Black Palm* rendered in burnt rubber tyres to Subodh Gupta's



luminous pot-and-pan Banyan tree. Marc Quinn's monumental bronze bonsai and Pascale Marthine Tayou's whimsical aluminium and concrete Mikado Tree likewise coexist with actual olive trees, more than 200 of them that the Warburgs brought from Sacramento and replanted on the estate. "It looks so natural, like they've always been there," Warburg says.

Quinn's *The Architecture of Life*, an oversized bronze seashell, is a paean to nature generating art and art melting back into nature. It leaves me puzzling over the widely held assumption that something must have intention to be art (meaning that no matter how beautiful, a real seashell couldn't be art), while in wine it is almost a lack of intention that is fetishised.

For Fishman, winemaking is

fundamentally about interpreting nature, something that demands considerable experience with a plot of land. Speaking about the West Slope Single Vineyard Pinot Noir, the gem of the estate, which is made from its oldest vines, he says, "That wine has been made since I was first at the estate in 2007; it has a clear voice I understand." A key prong of interpretation is tightly regulating quality, something the generosity of the Warburgs gives him scope to do. For instance in 2017, with the Warburgs' blessing, Fishman set aside seven barrels that might have been included in the West Slope, leaving the remaining seven-barrel blend truly exceptional, which to me sounds just like chiselling a David from the raw boulder of nature.

Images: Robert Berg (Kusama), Adrian Gault (Kiefer)

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Above: Anselm Kiefer's sculpture *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (Poppy and Memory) (2017) at Donum Estate. Below: *Pumpkin* (2014) by Yayoi Kusama



Vine Art

Sarah Heller's picks from Californian vineyard and sculpture park Donum Estate

Donum Russian River Valley Estate Chardonnay 2016

The nose is pungent with stony reduction, though the sensation is broad rather than sharp. The palate is oily and generous, addled with pure, golden fruit, but the acid, starting strong, never lets up from start to finish.

Russian River Pinot Noir 2016

Ripe damson, languid and sultry, but still at its core a bright, vibrant red. Mouth-filling cinnamon and darker brown spices start to build from the attack to the back of the palate. Texture is very rich, round and soft.

West Slope Single Vineyard Pinot Noir 2017

Very intense scarlet. Nose opens with a subtle earthy musk, hints of tiny-leaved, resinous herbs and delicate florals. Heady rose perfume released on the attack becomes denser and plumper on the palate with its Turkish delight texture. Tannins are whisper soft.



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