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The art works (and wines) of the Donum Estate

Allan Warburg bought the California estate on the strength of its wines. Now he's showing his art collection there



Yue Minjun's 'Contemporary Terracotta Warriors' (2005) © Robert Berg

Caroline Roux AUGUST 31, 2018

The Donum winery seemed like a good deal to Allan Warburg when it came up for sale in 2010. "I thought, in five or six years some rich guy from Silicon Valley will come along and say, 'I want my own Pinot Noir', and we'll sell it on," says the Danish businessman, who made his fortune selling fashion in Beijing. But that was before he'd seen the beauty of the place, the rolling hills of its 170 acres ribbed by vines like heavy green corduroy. Eight years on, he has acquired a further 160 acres nearby, planted lavender and olive and plum trees — and introduced a lot of sculpture to the landscape.

There are now nearly 40 large-scale artworks, by artists including Ai Weiwei, Yayoi Kusama and Danh Vo, which visitors can encounter as they meander through this idyllic estate in the Sonoma Valley, under two hours' drive from San Francisco. Until recently, only those booked in for wine-tastings got to see the art, which Warburg began installing in 2014 — but from this autumn there will be pre-booked art-only tours too. "We don't want to turn this into Disneyland, but we do want people to come," says Warburg as he leads me past a market garden where lettuces, courgettes and heritage tomatoes burst forth with Californian zeal. "Donum will always be a winery first. A vineyard with sculpture, and not an art park."

This must come as a relief to Anne Moller-Racke, the winegrower who has tended this land since she arrived here in 1984. Back then it was still a dairy farm; now Moller-Racke makes the most of the breezes that flow inland from San Pablo Bay (the northernmost part of San Francisco Bay), the coolness of the eastern slopes and the warmth of the western ones to conjure up prize-winning Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Warburg owns 70 per cent of Donum, with two friends sharing the remainder. He visits up to five times a year, staying in local hotels. He has homes in Beijing, where his business is based; Copenhagen, his city of birth; and Hong Kong, in a Frank Gehry tower that nestles against the hills and looks down on the city.



Gao Weigang's Maze (2017)

He is, it seems, a man who takes his enthusiasms seriously. He first became beguiled by China's history and culture in his teens (a passion ignited, he says, by a dinner of Peking duck in Bangkok's Chinatown), studied Mandarin at night school and spent a year in Taiwan in 1988. By 1991, post-university and MBA in Copenhagen, he was one of only six foreigners registered at Yunnan University in Kunming, where he perfected his language skills. In 1996, after working in imports and distribution for the East Asiatic Company, selling Pedigree Chum and M&Ms to unwilling Chinese consumers ("some people had dogs, but no one ate chocolate"), he set up a business to produce fashion with his friend Dan Friis.

"We really were entrepreneurs, we wanted to create something," says Warburg, who is 51. "We'd never worked in fashion but we went in McKinsey-style, where Dan had been employed, to figure out what would work."

China's economy was growing fast, and its population boom was releasing huge numbers of young people into the cities. "When people start to earn money, first they buy food, then a fridge and a TV, then fashion," says Warburg. His and Friis's company, Bestseller, became profitable after 13 months.

By 2001, its clothing brands were turning remarkable profits. "Until five years ago, we could be seeing 50-100 per cent growth a year," says Warburg, though growth is now down to a steadier single-digit annual increase.



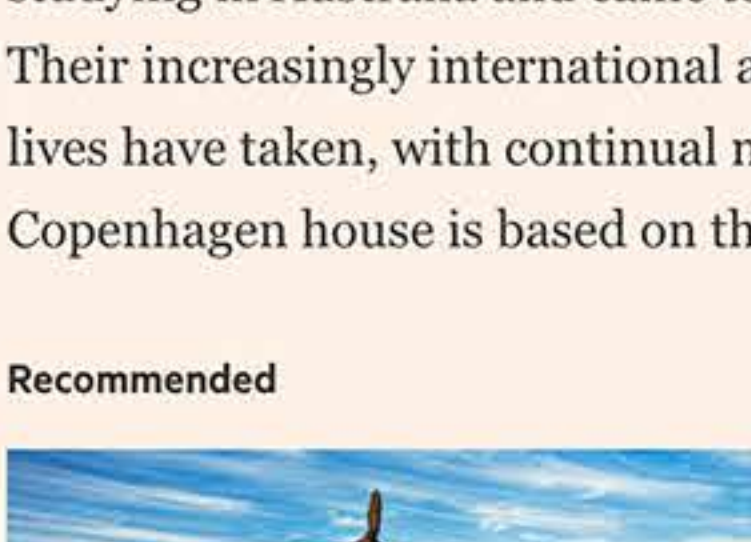
Anselm Kiefer's 'Poppy and Memory' (2017) © Greg Gorman

Warburg, meanwhile, had proved another theory of consumption: when people make their first million, they often begin collecting art, though his interest was piqued more by the mood of the times than by the need to adorn increasing wall space. "I started buying contemporary Chinese work in the late 1990s in Beijing," he says. "It was a moment of explosive creativity, like Berlin after the Wall came down, with the same sense of liberation and possibility."

He got to know local galleries such as Red Gate, the first commercial space in Beijing, and the artists, often visiting their studios. He now owns 11 works by the painter Zeng Fanzhi, a good friend, whose doleful portraits fetch some of the highest prices among Chinese artists. A glistening "Artificial Rock" sculpture by Zhan Wang was one of the first pieces to be installed at Donum.

In 2000, he married Zhu Meijun, who had returned to her native China after studying in Australia and came to Warburg's company for a job interview. Their increasingly international art collection is an expression of the path their lives have taken, with continual movement between east and west. (Their Copenhagen house is based on the traditional Chinese courtyard design.)

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At Donum, it becomes clear that the Warburgs like their art to come with a message. There's Anselm Kiefer's memorial to the horror of war, "Poppy and Memory" — a grounded fighter plane, made of dead, grey lead, sprouting poppies; and Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd's knotted gun, called "Non Violence", designed by the Swedish artist following the shooting of his friend John Lennon. An

outsized morning glory flower cast in bronze by the Cambodian artist Sopheap Pich trails on the earth, a reminder of what starving people ate to stay alive under the Khmer Rouge. An exquisite calligraphic ball by the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer is made up of Arabic words associated with love, while on the estate's highest point, British sculptor Richard Hudson's huge and highly polished stainless steel heart — a piece of dizzily kitsch Pop entitled "Love Me" — gleams and flashes in the sunlight.



One of Ai Weiwei's 'Zodiac Heads' (2011) © Greg Gorman

But Warburg is perhaps still finding his feet as a collector, and the business of installing art in nature is a finely balanced one. A huge rearing bronze horse by a contemporary Swedish sculptor has thankfully been situated around the back of a lake, but an overwhelming maze of shiny gold-coloured columns by Gao Weigang is rather less lovely than the field of waving golden grasses planted around it.

In 2013, Warburg acquired Ai Weiwei's "Zodiac Heads" sculpture. Here, the 12 animal heads of the Chinese zodiac, as recreated by Ai, are placed in a circle and ringed by 150-year-old olive trees brought in from Sacramento. Years are as important in wine as they are in the Chinese zodiac, and the olive trees have as much sculptural splendour as the animal heads on their poles.

Donum is at its best when art, nature and viticulture all align as they do here, where narratives and aesthetics become complementary. "One plus one is not always two," say Warburg. "The combination of the wine and the art in this setting is worth so much more."

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