

ART

For Expatriates in China, Creative Lives of Plenty

By DAN LEVIN

BEIJING
THERE was a chill in the morning air in 2005 when dozens of artists from China, Europe and North America emerged from their red-brick studios here to find the police blocking the gates to Suojiacun, their compound on the city's outskirts. They were told that the village of about 100 illegally built structures was to be demolished, and were given two hours to pack.

By noon bulldozers were smashing the walls of several studios, revealing ripped-apart canvases and half-glazed clay vases lying in the rubble. But then the machines ceased their pulverizing, and the police dispersed, leaving most of the buildings unscathed. It was not the first time the authorities had threatened to evict these artists, nor would it be the last. But it was still frightening.

"I had invested everything in my studio," said Alessandro Rolandi, a sculptor and performance artist originally from Italy who had removed his belongings before the destruction commenced. "I was really worried about my work being destroyed."

He eventually left Suojiacun, but he has remained in China. Like the artists' colony, the country offers chal-

lenges, but expatriates here say that the rewards outweigh the hardships. Mr. Rolandi is one of many artists (five are profiled here) who have left the United States and Europe for China, seeking respite from tiny apartments, an insular art world and nagging doubts about whether it's best to forgo art for a reliable office job. They have discovered a land of vast creative possibility, where scale is virtually limitless and costs are comically low. They can rent airy studios, hire assistants, experiment in costly mediums like bronze and fiberglass. (Below, Rania Ho's installation "HoFatsO.")

"Today China has become one of the most important places to create and invent," said Jérôme Sans, director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. "A lot of Western artists are coming here to live the dynamism and make especially crazy work they could never do anywhere else in the world."

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images of works by some of the artists mentioned in this article:

nytimes.com/design



WANG WEI

Rania Ho

A major challenge for foreigners, no matter how fluent or familiar with life here, is that even if they look like locals, it is virtually impossible to feel truly of this culture. For seven years Rania Ho, the daughter of Chinese immigrants born and raised in San Francisco, has lived in Beijing, where she runs a small gallery in a hutong, or alley, near one of the city's main temples. "Being Chinese-American makes it easier to be an observer of what's really happening because I'm camouflaged," she said. "But it doesn't mean I understand any more what people are thinking."

Still, Ms. Ho, 40, revels in her role as outsider in a society that she says is blindly enthusiastic about remaking itself. She creates and exhibits work by both foreign

and Chinese artists that often plays with China's fetishization of mechanized modernity.

Because she lives so close to military parades and futuristic architecture, she said that her own pieces — like a water fountain gushing on the roof of her gallery and a cardboard table that levitates a Ping-Pong ball — chuckle at the "hypnotic properties of unceasing labor." She said they are futile responses to the absurd experiences she shares with her neighbors, who are constantly seeing their world transform before their eyes. "Being in China forces one to reassess everything," she said, "which is at times difficult and exhausting, but for a majority of the time it's all very amusing and enlightening."



SHIHO FUKADA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alfredo Martinez

While some expat artists find fame in China, others seek anonymity. One afternoon in August 2007 the Beijing police burst into Alfredo Martinez's hotel room, which was filled with drawings of guns and bombs, and demanded to know if he was a terrorist. The maid had found the sketches, which looked very much like blueprints, and the hotel alerted the authorities.

Mr. Martinez, a 6-foot-2-inch, 300-pound Brooklyn native, stood his ground. "You idiots," he said. "I'm an artist. Either arrest me or get out." The men in uniform left, but Mr. Martinez, 43, did not. Today he remains in Beijing, spending much time at a 24-hour Internet cafe and squatting at a friend's countryside hut that he calls "my little Ted Kaczynski setup." There he assembles models of assault rifles and draws weapons on paper.

China may seem an unlikely destination for Mr. Martinez, who spent 21 months in a United States federal prison for forging drawings by Jean-Michel Basquiat. But survival is easier in Beijing than in gentrified SoHo, where he used to live, and while his stint behind bars made him notorious, his creativity was suffocating. "In New York I felt like I was making forgeries of my own work," he said.

Mr. Martinez often collaborates with By-



MIKA MATTILA

ron Hawes, 30, a Canadian who arrived in Beijing three years ago after a job with the United Nations. Together they have rejuvenated Mr. Martinez's style, transforming his renderings from the facsimiles of his early years into abstract graffiti collages, top. Even his guns approach fantasy — toys more G.I. Joe than Blackwater.

Mr. Martinez appears to have found his element. "In China there's a certain kind of lawlessness," he said, fingering the barrel of a mock assault rifle he built from parts bought at Beijing flea markets. "The whole country's on the hustle. It's like New York in the '70s. I fit in here."



SHIHO FUKADA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Helen Couchman

China popped onto Helen Couchman's radar around 2000, when, she said, she "first saw gorgeous little tidbits of something far away": glossy photos in British magazines of ice palaces in the northern city of Harbin and sweeping tales of the country's frenetic experiment with modernization. In 2006 she stepped off the Trans-Siberian Railway and into the chaos of Beijing's main train station, and after three days of wandering around she knew she wanted to live here.

As a photographer she found the manic pace of Olympic construction irresistible, along with the cost of living as compared with London, her home for 15 years. "A £4 tube ticket would buy my dinner here," she said. Ms. Couchman, 36, who is British, moved to Beijing a year later, and though she sells most of her work in Europe, she said, the "shapes and designs here have

completely saturated my work."

In her most recent work, at right, she poses naked behind a large fan, a traditional Chinese accessory that serves as an emblem of the camera, behind which she is frequently shielded.

She is more than a documentarian. Her book "Workers" illustrates her personal engagement with China. In December 2007 she slipped behind the screens surrounding the construction of the Olympic park and shot portraits of 146 migrant laborers. She returned the next day with two sets of prints, giving each subject a copy to keep and having workers write their name and hometown on the other, which she compiled for the book. "Their families couldn't afford to come to Beijing and see their role in history," she said. "Now they have this document, like I would have a graduation or wedding photo."



SHIHO FUKADA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



JOSEPH ELLIS

Joseph Ellis



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When Joseph Ellis, 25, arrived from New York in 2005 to begin his studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, there was no car to meet him, nor a place to stay. He spoke no Chinese. For months his teachers ignored him. But last spring Mr. Ellis became the only Westerner to graduate from the prestigious school's sculpture program, winning the award for best thesis. "Chinese university is full of politics and lots of teachers are Communist Party members," so his triumph irked them, he said, standing in his 10,760-square-foot studio, for which he pays \$245 a month.

To succeed, Mr. Ellis "became totally Chinese," becoming fluent in Mandarin and dutifully mastering guanxi, or connections. He poured tea for his professors, carried their luggage and gave the right gifts. "In exchange they gave me work and respect," he said. In 2008 he earned \$70,000, making sculptures for Chinese collectors

and corporations like Bank of America and Chevron. Greenpeace commissioned him to make 100 life-size ice sculptures of children, which were left to melt in a Beijing park to raise awareness of global warming. (Above left, his 30-foot-tall tree for a Beijing hotel made of 2,000 ceramic teapots.)

Mr. Ellis works in a range of mediums, including large sculpture, ceramic ware and printmaking. He is obsessed with the tactile process of creating art, literally getting his hands dirty with materials that come from China's physical landscape.

"America taught me how to think, but China taught me how to make," Mr. Ellis said, adding that he had no immediate plans to return to the United States. He creates much of his sculpture and ceramics in Jingdezhen, a city in south China. Houses are made of clay, and shops sell a rainbow of glazes. "It's the land of Willy Wonka for clay artists," he said.



SHIHO FUKADA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alessandro Rolandi

The freshness of contemporary art and the ease with which it is manufactured here is a powerful draw for Western artists. "It's the closest thing to a Renaissance workshop, but sort of postmodern," Alessandro Rolandi yelled over the clangs of men hammering steel at a factory outside Beijing, where he now stores many of his pieces. A native of Milan who has lived in France and Spain, Mr. Rolandi, 38, arrived in China during the SARS epidemic of 2003 with only the phone number of a Chinese artist given to him by a friend. He soon built friendships with many Chinese artists, who helped him gain a foothold in the Chinese art world.

Since his arrival he has seen much of his adopted city razed and rebuilt. It is this ephemeral aspect of life in Beijing that emerges in his sculptures and performances, which he said give him "the opportunity to transform the energy of a place,

for a while, into something different."

Mr. Rolandi has performed poetry and experimental theater pieces at Chinese galleries and art fairs in order to reclaim creative expression from what he calls "the artist-market sphere" and has also made some socially conscious works, including a reverse question mark written in flour on a wall in his neighborhood, a symbol of doubt in society seduced by modernization.

China has given Mr. Rolandi the chance to hone a creative chutzpah unfettered by the distraction of aggressively marketing himself. "I'm humble, which is limiting in the West," he said. "I don't go to every opening and attack every curator." But to create art in Beijing "you need courage," he added. "If I go back to work in the West, it will be because of what I learned and dared to do in China."



HELEN COUCHMAN