

When asked to photograph apartments in Beijing I had delusions it would be fairly easy. "Hey, I'm taking pictures for this magazine *Apartamento* of people's apartments, would you be into that?" Fairly straightforward, but like many things in China, actually not. Besides living with their parents or saying they were "too busy" (a very popular response in China), I didn't have a copy of *Apartamento* to show anyone. As far as I knew there wasn't a single copy the magazine in the country. When I'd say, "It's about apartments," I got skeptical looks, as if it was a porn mag or a filled with sensitive political content. Which brings up another problem, and that's the endlessly fascinating, incredibly aggravating and

# China apartments

truly baffling great Chinese firewall, or Golden Shield, as it is known. These photographs were taken around the time of the 2008 Olympics and as the games approached more and more websites got blocked, dropping like flies every day with that insidious "Safari can't locate server" message. Up until then the *Apartamento* website was seeable, then one day poof, it was gone. That made the whole endeavor more difficult and appear even more suspicious because along with my request to take pictures of their apartments I would include a link to a website they couldn't access because of it's supposed subversive nature. So there were obstacles, but these six people were plucky enough to let pictures of their abodes appear in this counter-revolutionary (反革命), capitalist roader (走资派) publication.



Byron Hawes



Elaine wing-ah Ho



Elaine wing-ah Ho



Elaine wing-ah Ho





Byron Hawes



Rutherford Chang



Liu Fei



Rutherford Chang

**ELEONORA STRÖMBERG**

Eleonora Strömberg's apartment is in the diplomatic compound across from the French embassy right around the corner from the nastiness of Sanlitun bar street, the heavily trafficked expatriate center of Beijing. But when one turns the corner onto Eleonora's street and goes past the guards there are parked bikes and the kids of African diplomats playing soccer and a peaceful atmosphere quite at odds with the usual Beijing hubbub.

The compound consists of four white five-story apartment blocks built when East German and Chinese cooperation was its highest, hence the vaguely Bauhaus aspect and an atypical level of quality construction. Once inside in the clean and wide stairwell I always got the feeling I was in Berlin, and there even seemed to be a scrubbed, Germanic very-not-Chinese smell in there. The day I took pictures Eleonora was working so I had the place to myself and though I'd been there a few times before this was an odd new sensation, like I was an intruder privy to intimate secrets. The wood floors and minimal décor gave it a clean, uncluttered feel that was an antidote

to the either very raw and basic non-design or alternately insanely over-designed hodgepodge that characterizes Beijing. A Scandinavian aura of good, simple yet elegant living prevailed, in keeping with Eleonora's Gothenburg roots. There wasn't anything "extra," although there were some interesting and personal touches, like the Egyptian cat statuette by the window and two small deer figurines, much-more-interesting-than-usual fashion photographs, some showing Swedes bathing in frigid northern waters, and a choice assortment of Artus de Lavilléon paintings and drawings, including a great one of Eleonora with her hand to her head in a phone gesture and the caption "Your phone is calling you" next to the door phone.

An EKG print out was on the wall, somewhat mysteriously, and two touches of pure Eleonora: a little black dress hanging on a door, and a pair of black shoes with five inch high heels she often wore next to four orange skateboard

wheels. The whole time I was there taking my clandestine pictures two cats lounged across the way on the roof of another building, basking in the sun without a care in the world.

**RUTHERFORD CHANG**

A fifteen-minute walk from the Zhichun Lu 13 line subway station in western Beijing's Haidian district you go past a big office building called Jinqiu Quoji with a huge sign reading "Horizon" in a perfect simulation of Verizon's font onto a side street of restaurants and convenience stores into the Jinqiu Jiayuan complex, consisting of about fifteen buildings. It's roughly six or seven years old and has a bustling atmosphere with street food vendors and trash pickers mingling with middle class young people and professionals, a vibrant mix that is very much modern urban China. Above

the desk in the lobby is a big impressionist-style painting, artist unknown, and then you go up to the 13<sup>th</sup> Floor to Rutherford Chang's apartment – buildings in China don't have 14<sup>th</sup> floors (or 4<sup>th</sup>) but they do have the 13<sup>th</sup>. It always instantly made me think of the great 60s psychedelic ga-



Elaine wing-ah Ho

rage band the 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Elevators, which was a funny image to have in your head riding up an elevator in Haidian.

The first time I had went there Rutherford and I immediately bonded over the deplorable state of Chinese contemporary art and how the "art of the street" was, to oversimplify a bit, basically vastly superior. The brooms, the mops, the flyswatters and all other colorful cheap household goods arranged in front of every little store, the pool tables with bricks on them in the villages, the stuff of life. Then I looked around and it was like Rutherford had read my mind, because arrayed around the apartment were collections of brooms, flyswatters, and megaphones, exactly what we'd been talking about. There were also the stockpiles of tape and corks, and a drawing on cheap Chinese homework paper of my favorite symbol, the ubiquitous dollar sign-like Chuarn signs you see everywhere. A meeting of the minds. These photos were taken six months



later, when Rutherford made miniature hot dogs that he, Emily and I ate before going to see the Poland vs. Germany men's volleyball match at the Olympics.

#### BYRON HAWES

Getting to Byron Hawes' place involved getting off at the Beigao exit on the way to the airport and calling, since even the most intrepid taxi driver needed help out there in the vast exurban tract that encompasses the new upper middle class developments of the Shunyi district, villages, farms, and a bunch of artist's studios and art "complexes." I dialed the number and gave the phone to the driver when we got off at the exit so Byron could tell him directions but when I got to Suojiaocun (translated into "The Beijing International Art Camp" in English) he didn't seem to be around. By the gate a couple of guys were lounging in the shade, across the street was a field full of truly horrible "modern" Chinese sculpture, and up the road was a really gritty hamlet where I bought a ice cream bar. Back at the gate Byron walked up with a bag full of groceries, which mostly seemed to be beer, and then we went to his place that was by far the biggest living space I'd seen in Beijing. A huge cement floored studio with 8-meter ceilings and a stairway up to a second floor mezzanine where Byron's bed and clothes were, and except for the bathroom there were no separate rooms to speak of, just open space.

One of the first things Byron told me in his Canadian by way of Switzerland accent with a heavy dose of universal American slang was what a massive amount of coal he used in the winter for heating. The most au courant sounds played, and there was a copy of *Tokion* and the newest William Gibson book on the table, as well as two iMacs – not your usual coffee table assemblage in Beijing. The huge DVD collection under the stairs was more appropriate in the capital of unrestrained bootlegging. There was a Karim Rashid designed Q Chaise Lounge, an Alessi Walter Wayle II clock by Phillip Starck on the wall, and a Pink Mao sculpture by Zheng Lu, as well as Gucci bags and an impressive collection of expensive Cartier, St. Dupont and Dunhill lighters. Along with the more expected spray paint cans and Krink brand markers was Byron's hoard of shoes – there had to be fifty pairs – and considering that Byron lives alone the best part was that at least 10 pairs were women's. There were also quite a few women's

handbags. Overall Byron got the prize for most impressive and bizarre mix of "name" cultural signifiers/products in the most unlikely place ever. Upstairs there were collaborative pieces Byron was working on with Alfredo Martinez, and a highly practical cardboard "wall" by the window in lieu of curtains for those late nights that can turn into painful sun-flooded mornings.

Other highlights included a graffiti-covered cardboard barrier at the bottom of the stairs so Robo the Cinnamon Chow Chow couldn't go up the steps, and a purple splotch on the floor. That was left over from when Byron was knocked off his Vespa at 60 kmph by a bread truck running a red light and instead of going to the hospital used a super cheap and effective disinfectant literally called "Purple Medicine Water" (Zisi Yao Shui), getting it all over the place and staining his body for a week.

#### Liu Fei

Somewhere south of Chaoyang Park Lie Fei's apartment is high up in a fairly recently constructed compound comprising at least twenty buildings. It's the kind of place that appeals to China's new upper middleclass, and though it seems faceless and dehumanized on some level it's also understandable that people would want something standardized and "nice" compared to the rawness of the hutongs or the old communist style apartment blocks. In contrast to Rutherford Chang's complex, it's newer, brighter, cleaner, more controlled and it must be said less "Chinese," whatever that means. You can feel it, but it's hard to define.

So from one perspective soulless, from another a comfortable, efficient, convenient modern way of living. From the window you see multitudes of apartment buildings stretching away into the distance, the railroad tracks to the east, and to the north the expanse of Chaoyang Park, supposedly the biggest park in Asia. A black furry lamp hangs from the ceiling in the bedroom, and the pillows are pink and leopard print. Back in the living room Liu Fei smoked and talked on the phone arranging the fabrication of her fake fossil sculptures for an upcoming exhibition, including Hello Kitty ("Schizolepis Jeholseries") and Astroboy ("Lycoptera"), detailed skeletal remains of well-known human-animal hybrid cartoon characters supposedly dating from the Jurassic age. Then she'd switch to evoking Zhuangzi with elusive and occasionally mystifying epigrams



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Wu Deshun



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like, "You know, in Taoism time and space are insignificant, the past is the future and here is there." A hot August day in Beijing, luxuriating in the air conditioning high above the city, and then we ate a whole bag of Lay's potato chips. "I can't stop eating these, they're my favorite," she said, and I had to agree.

#### WU DESHUN

Wu's place used to be in a simply constructed decayed cinder block one-story building that looks like it's slated for demolition. That will be its ultimate fate, but for now it houses Wu's three compatriots from Shandong Province who he'd come up to Beijing with to find work. Just east of the not-yet-completed CCTV headquarters on Guanghua Lu, the structure is at the back of a huge parking lot that's impressive for being such a large undeveloped plot of land right in the middle of Beijing's Central Business District.

Hidden from the street behind a high wall next to a three-walled shed where Wu & Co. sort trash after picking it up from a big office building nearby, it's where Wu lived before moving around the corner. The new place is a short walk past assorted piles of trash and wood and through a hole in the wall, then across a gutted empty space into an outdoor corridor between two abandoned worker's dormitories. That's where Wu is in the photograph, standing by his door. Inside are his few possessions, and though it isn't a "real" apartment and lacks heat and running water, it does have a homey, neat and fairly clean appearance in contrast to the surrounding squalor. The assortment of weird non-working wires hanging from the ceiling combined with the mosquito netting make for a kind of kinetic mobile, and along with the old newspapers taped to the wall give the room the feel of an inadvertent installation. It's much more compelling and "real" than any contemporary art installation that tries to recreate so-called abject environments. It is spare, to be sure, but it's most definitely a home, at least a temporary one before Wu goes back down to Shandong for the winter.

The many plants add a bit of natural interior decoration, and the globe, pens, scissors, nail clippers and English language learning book *ABCs of English* on the desk are affecting evidence of both practical and personal concerns. Even more personal, which I didn't discover until I looked at the pictures later, is that in one

of them a DVD with the title *Young Tight Latinas #12* is shown lying on the bed. You really can get a bootleg copy of every DVD ever made in the history of the world in China. Seeing that caused me see Wu in a new light, not to mention curious about *Young Tight Latinas #1-11*.

#### ELAINE WING-AH HO

With a "Jia" sign over the entrance HomeShop is Elaine wing-ah Ho's home but also so much more, a place for living seamlessly melded with a daily ongoing life-as-art, art-as-life project delving into the relationship between public and private space.

On this narrow hutong street such distinctions are constantly blurred, and to add to the indeterminateness Elaine actively and warmly interacts with her neighbors, who it must be said, were initially skeptical. Their trepidation has faded, in part thanks to Elaine hosting events like an open-air screening of the Olympic opening ceremonies, reading groups, and clothes drives, as well as engaging in general day-to-day conversations with the denizens of her street and whoever else might just drop by. Located on narrow Xiaojingchang Hutong near Gulou, HomeShop occupies one of the remnants of the old authentic one story maze-like Beijing that is either being mercilessly demolished or mercilessly gentrified.

Luckily for the residents of Xiaojingchang Hutong neither one of those outcomes has come to pass, and what flourishes there is an example of easy-going and friendly but intense civic and societal research that is by turns fascinating, collegial and occasionally surprising. All that said it's an extremely comfortable, relaxing and mellow place to hang out. When you arrive you will probably see Elaine typing on her computer in the fishbowl, and then you can eat some watermelon, drink some beers, and smoke on the step with the glass doors open as one microcosmic microcosm of Beijing rolls by and unfolds in real time.