

## China Dream 2014

### Residency rich in rewards

Article by Judith Ritchie, The Nelson Mail, New Zealand, 8 October 2014

Tasman artist, Lisa Chandler has just completed a two-month stint in Beijing as part of the Red Gate Residency programme. Chandler's temporary home was a live/work space in an old industrial building in the small village of Fei Jia Cun, about 30 minutes from central Beijing. Over the period, she spent time exploring the city and the art scene, collecting source material and developing her painting practice.

*"My main focus while I was there was to explore the contrasts between place and non-place in this fast-changing city,"* says Chandler. The residency culminated in one of her paintings being exhibited at Songzhuang township in Beijing for the opening of the 2014 China Art Expo. The theme this year, *Art Makes Life Better*, featured works from 80 countries at seven museums and art centres.

But first, Chandler had many adaptations and cultural challenges. *"Wandering around Fei Jia Cun village was an overwhelming sensory experience and one that was sometimes challenging,"* she says. *"The standard of living in the village is incredibly low."* Chandler describes streets littered with rubbish, buildings falling down and high pollution levels where visibility was poor, the weather changeable. *"It changes overnight to really dirty smoggy skies,"* says Chandler. *"You go out onto the street and feel like you could be in an end of the world movie."* *"However, my initial culture shock has turned into a sense of fascination,"* she adds. *"The village has its own unique sense of place, and is jammed pack full of character, of life lived on the street and of strong community."*

After travelling into the central city several times, Chandler experienced the new *"non-places of globalisation"*, the huge, characterless shopping malls, the oppressive subway system and towering glass-covered skyscrapers. *"The contrast between these two extremes, the village and the global city, the rich and the poor, presented a quandary for me,"* she adds. *"Life in the village can be uncomfortable, but it offers character-filled streets and a sense of the unknown. The people in the village were so friendly and helpful despite the language barrier. Whereas the shopping malls and western style cafes of the central business district offer known spaces of respite, but they are bland and anonymous."*

While Chandler hopes the standard of living for the inhabitants of Fei Jia Cun village will improve, she is left asking the question: Is there a way for China to achieve higher standards of living, but at the same time retain its own sense of character and community?

The Red Gate residency offered time for Chandler to explore collage, combining painting with "found" materials; photographs, ripped posters coming off walls, tattered and faded, as well as other detritus from the city and village. Instead of using cotton duck as her painting surface, Chandler found a local linen. *"The linen I brought has quite coarse weave and combined with the washy fluid acrylics, I have achieved quite a nice distressed look in places."*

*"In terms of the content, I am experimenting with juxtaposing place and non-place using minimal imagery,"* she adds. *"The sitting or squatting figure is old style Asian [place/pause] as compared to the marching business people and/or the cranes and new buildings [non-place/movement]"*.

Every month artists opened their doors during "Open Studios", sharing works in progress with other artists on residency and visitors. There were also artists' talks, where each resident got to talk about their work. In August there were nine artists from seven countries, including Australia, America,

and Germany. In September artists did a changeover, with new ones coming for a two-month period, including fellow Kiwi Jade Townsend, from Wellington.

Another event was the NZ Embassy hosting its monthly drinks for Kiwis in Beijing. Red Gate also puts on monthly art afternoons and a welcome dinner, plus visits to galleries such as the National Art Museum, where Chandler saw an exhibition of traditional ink paintings. She also attended a two-day conference on Australian and Chinese art at Renmin University about place, belonging and identity.

So what is next for Chandler? After a flying visit home to Nelson, and opening an exhibition at Icon Gallery and Sculpture Park, Chandler will head to Singapore early next month. She will take part in the great Collaborative Project, hosted by INSTINC Gallery. As part of their 10-year celebrations, gallery director Shih Yun Yeo has invited 10 artists from over the past 10 years to take part in the project, including Chandler, who had a residency there last year. Five international artists will collaborate with five local artists, painting two new Volvo cars. *“It will be my first collaboration project and also my first go at painting a car.”*





