



25 Years of Fashion Design

## ALUMNI AROUND THE WORLD



Elizabeth Gordon in Beijing

# Life Beyond the Fifth Ring



Brian Wallace of Red Gate Gallery met me at the Beijing airport. "What a great day to arrive!" he exclaimed. The sun had warmed a cold December day. As our taxi sped down the highway, my first impression was of rows and rows of bare trees painted white at the bottom that sunk to the brown of the barren ground beneath them.

Beijing is cold. The double red doors of my studio entrance had no clasps or locks, so I used an exacto blade container to close them. The wind blew through the opening. My studio boasted the ubiquitous cinder block walls found everywhere in China, a stove, phone, and washing machine. I hung my rice paper drawings from the upstairs balcony to dry, showered early (before the hot water cut out) and wore multiple layers until a weak, yellow sun heated my bedroom to 40 degrees.

The Red Gate studios in Feijia Cun are in a gated enclosure off a long, narrow street that leads to Tong Da's, a restaurant built around ancient trees. Its massive interior resembles a jungle with large, round tables under hanging lamps on which bean, eggplant, tofu dishes, and pots of tea are served on lazy Susans. On the other side, the street becomes a dirt path that passes oil rigs and rice fields en route to vendors selling persimmons, baby carriages, anything in their open air stalls. "Tai guai la!" (too expensive!) opens all negotiations, which are conducted with mandatory impassiveness. I found this challenging after meeting Yan, the calligrapher and framer, who works, eats, and sleeps in a single room without heat.

Beijing as a city is broad and expansive, like L.A. It takes time to get anywhere. The city has five ring roads and high-

ways; loads of cars often sit, clogged in traffic. You know you are in China when a Ming Dynasty fortress suddenly looms from a cavalcade of office buildings. I usually traveled by taxi into the city or rode my \$24 bicycle alongside a mélange of buses, taxis, cars, bikes, and horses (with carts).

Before departing, it became essential to experience the Great Wall. With a driver in a decrepit Volkswagen, nestled with friends beneath a workman's coat (drab green, gold buttons, faux fur lining), I breakfasted on dried grapefruit during the two-and-a-half hour drive north. Our van ascended a mountain, and we eventually disembarked, crossed a moat, and paid a small fee for admittance to the wall. The temperature plummeted below zero; we were alone. The wall rose 12 feet from the ground, accommodating two visitors across at most. Its grade was so steep in spots that climbing with both hands and feet was necessary. We climbed for several hours. The mountains rose around us while the sun moved over Beijing far below. In the silence, rocks slipped beneath my feet and the shadows lengthened. I suddenly realized that Chinese painting traditions were based on this experience. On the descent, I saw how spatial intervals and compositional devices in scrolls echo a day in the mountains. Returning to the cold of my studio, I began composing "Life Beyond the Fifth Ring" from ink paintings, words, and postcard images cut out and presented on a wall to tell the story of my passage through Beijing.

### NOTE:

Elizabeth Gordon (Fine Arts, '80) spent December, 2005, in Beijing at the Red Gate International Artist Residency Program. *Life Beyond the Fifth Ring* (11 x 21 in.) composed of postcards and painting on rice paper, represents a contemporary version of Chinese painting.



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## Excellence and Diversity

In recent alumni gatherings, I have heard, both here and elsewhere, I am not the greatest but I do have great stories. It was gratifying to hear that sentiment that the majority of the graduates have had by the time of the gathering. The only other comment that I have heard since the last time I have been here is that the graduates are still doing things in the college. It is not that they are not doing things in the college, it is that they are doing things in the college.

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Elizabeth Gordon

