

SHANGHAI SURPRISE

ARTIST TRACEY MOFFATT'S ADVENTURES IN CHINA

My clever art dealer Lothar Albrecht, of Frankfurt, Germany, has opened a chic gallery in Shanghai. He and his business partner, a Mr. Wei Wei of Beijing, are hoping to sell to the new Chinese wealthy, who are mad for everything. Lothar and Mr. Wei Wei decided that I would be the second artist to show in their gallery.

Shanghai is the new city of the world. It's booming economically, because there is so much industry in China. In Shanghai a new skyscraper appears every two months. The city hops, and people work hard—perhaps a little too hard. When I stepped out of the Shanghai International Airport, I witnessed a blazing row (New York City-style) between two taxi drivers.

Day One

I meet Mr. Wei Wei, who is part owner in the new gallery. He is young, cultured, and stylish and knows how to order a drink. At the gallery I do television press. They have me walk

Chairman Mao wrote about the sun rising on his hometown. We find a great new vegetarian restaurant. I want to eat there every day.

Everything is so new here, but the Shanghais still preserve the old buildings. You can look up at the skyline and, among the skyscrapers, catch sight of a lone kite. You know that there is a kid down below somewhere.

We cab it to the old antique market, where I buy Chairman Mao plates and a magnifying glass. I am great at beating down the prices. We find a foot-massage place, and after an hour of this bliss we can't even speak to each other and we have to part company.

Day Four

At my request the rich artist Mi Qui sends his handsome Chinese-army driver in the BMW jeep to take me for a Sunday drive. He takes me to Zhu Jia Jiao, an ancient stone village with water canals and such. The town is quite touristy, but who cares? On the way home I try to flirt with the good-looking



around an outdoor shopping mall. I show off and jump around and complain that the city looks so modern. "Where is old Shanghai?" I say to the camera. "Where are the opium dens?" More press in the afternoon. I lecture them about my artwork. Later, at M on the Bund (a cool new restaurant run by Michelle, a fellow Australian), the grooviest of the press gals gives me tips on places to go. I explain that I am writing a diary piece for *V Magazine* in New York and want to photograph street fashion. She directs me to a nightclub called The Face. After admiring the amazing view of the harbor from the terrace, we all get into cabs and go to a restaurant to have delicious local cuisine. I'm going to put on weight.

Day Two

At the wonderfully restored Jin Jiang art deco hotel I sleep in and then manage to stagger off to see the Shanghai Biennial. This international art show has an urban-planning architectural theme. Some of it is fascinating and some not so interesting, which is always the case with big shows. I get dressed for my exhibition opening, and because the night isn't that cold, I wear a bright silk top I have just bought in India. The opening is nice and friendly. About two hundred attended, mainly Chinese art-world types. My 2001 Olympic-photo series, featuring fourth-place athletes, is part of the show, and I tell them that *Rocky* (the original Sylvester Stallone film of 1976) is one of my favorite films. At the end, the boxer Rocky doesn't win his fight, but he goes the distance. The crowd grins and nods in agreement. I wonder if *Rocky* was ever screened in China back in 1976, when it was still very Communist.

Then it's dinner at the Australian Consulate, in a 1920s Spanish-style house in the French-concession area. The consulate general and his charming wife tell me that the Communists once used the house to perform brutal interrogations. The wife says that the house has bad vibes. They were nervous about telling their talented but uptight chef that we had brought an extra person for dinner. I photograph them in the kitchen as they break this news to him. The chef takes it well and splits one appetizer.

After dinner a famous Shanghai artist, Mi Qiu, who is rich and does conceptual and environmental work, drives me around the city. Mi's car is a fancy BMW jeep and his driver most handsome. I beg to be driven to the city jail, which houses ten thousand prisoners. It is 11:30 p.m., and I notice a lot of lights on. I wonder what the prisoners are doing there—reading?

Day Three

Sleep in again and attempt to use the hotel gym but fail. My two new friends pick me up, and we go on a walking tour of Shanghai. We visit the open-air markets, and I buy wonderful junk, including a Mao Zedong cigarette lighter that plays a tune when you click it. The tune is from a poem

driver, but it is like talking to a brick wall.

Then I have to get ready for the Chinese music awards. MTV Chinese-style. I have nothing to wear, but I enjoy watching the red-carpet parade. People here generally dress much trendier than anywhere, including New York and London. Some of the women are stunning.

The show is unbearable, not because I didn't know any of the cute stars but because the music is pure drivel. There. I've said it. Now accuse me of being ethnocentric! I skip out after forty minutes and give my tickets to some waiting kids who surround me. They get vicious with their grabbing. It's quite thrilling.

But heck—without being too mean—there is this one extraordinary chick with a big voice. She looks like a Chinese Roseanne Barr and belts out a number she wrote to simple guitar music. Han Hong is her name and she's hot. I'm her latest fan. My little friend Daniel whispers, "She no like men." I think, *I'm looking at talent, so of course she's a fabulous lesbian!*

Day Five

Walk around Shanghai by myself, mainly along the big shopping streets. I am overwhelmed by the crowds and stop at a giant department store. I try out the massage chairs for an hour; the sales assistant keeps hinting that I should get up.

In a playground I watch the cute children play. I notice a chubby baby boy in one of those puffy silk jumpsuits that you wish they made for adults. When he bends over, I am shocked to see his exposed bum! These jumpsuits are split open at the back, I suppose, so that it makes potty time easier. But wouldn't you think that in the dead of winter his little fat ass would freeze? In the evening Lothar and I join young Daniel and his friends in a private karaoke room for some drinking and singing. The kids insist that I perform Carpenters songs, which of course I do to perfection.

Day Six

Young Daniel comes to pick me up, and we walk around the Old City. At last something old. But then you wonder, *is it original old?* Go into the gallery to see my show for the last time. Lothar is in high spirits; he loves that he's in Shanghai and not boring Frankfurt in midwinter. We both agree that my show has so far done well, but, to our disappointment, the only people who want to buy my work are Germans and Americans living in Shanghai. This is great, but the whole idea of opening a gallery in Shanghai is to sell Western art to the Chinese. I suppose it will happen eventually. We are breaking new ground here, and someone has to be the first. We just have to give it time. Shanghai is massive in every way. I'll be back.

Photography Tracey Moffatt

