

**HUW DAVIES GALLERY** 12 June–4 July 2008

## Constructing Beijing

Richard Fairbrother

It doesn't take long for the momentous events of the day to be forgotten as time diverts us to new headline events, new concerns, new idols. Although people were filled with wonder when photographers first captured history's big moments in the mid nineteenth century, today we take it for granted anything important will be served up to us in the still images of newspapers, or in the moving images of television—real life sound and expert commentary intensifying the drama.

Events on Bougainville in the 1990s were big news, and Australia had a role with other Pacific nations in brokering and monitoring the peace process. Richard Fairbrother spent some time on Bougainville as an observer in the early years of the decade.

Richard is now living and working in Beijing. Of course, China has been news for a long time, but with this year's Beijing Olympics and unprecedented media focus, including the harrowing scenes following the earthquakes in Sichuan Province, we are seeing vast numbers of still and moving images documenting the political and personal fortunes of the Chinese people every day.

While world events are recorded for mass consumption, many photographers concern themselves with smaller stories in a tradition that goes back to photography's early days. Their candid images are often fortuitous but seldom objective, catching a moment in time that fits their aesthetic or story telling aims. In many cases everyday people and events are juxtaposed with landmarks or other icons as political or social commentary. This is the broad landscape for Richard Fairbrother's work.

Richard is making photographs in Beijing, as he did on Bougainville, producing the strong and beautiful images that made up *Memories of a Future Peace*, his first solo exhibition shown in the HUW DAVIES GALLERY in 2004. But, as he says in his Artist statement, he has a ghost like presence in the city, there but not there, '...every day making me feel closer to finally 'getting it', yet every day reminding me that I never quite will.' About this work Richard says:

I have a restrained photographic style. Hours spent mere inches from the faces of my fellow Beijing subway commuters, pressed against a million strangers, have reinforced the value of holding back, offering respect for someone's personal space even while sharing it at close quarters. I have sought that in these prints—to observe closely, but with humility and an honest distance, reflecting my ghostlike existence in this city.

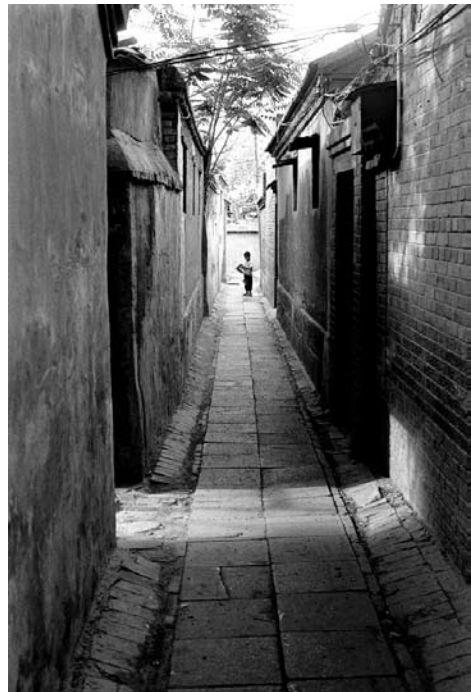
This exhibition is Richard Fairbrother's very personal response to a big world story. Characteristic of his approach to photography, the images are thought provoking, sometimes amusing, always insightful.

PhotoAccess is very pleased to welcome Richard back to Canberra for *Constructing Beijing*, his second solo exhibition in the HUW DAVIES GALLERY at the Manuka Arts Centre.

David Chalker



*The Birds Nest*



*City of 13 million*

## Artist statement

China and Beijing are changing every day, yet it is very difficult to say anything new about them. But we can say something personal. Even if I will never fully understand the city or its people, I can express my strange sense of detached connection to this place. Aloof and incomprehensible at first, and covered with dust, Beijing's seduction of the outsider starts slowly and works mysteriously. Without me knowing quite why, it grew on me and in me, every day making me feel closer to finally 'getting it', yet every day reminding me that I never quite will.

Life in Beijing in 2006 and 2007 was consumed by construction. Development pervaded everything. Every street corner was a chaotic pile of rubble and cranes jostled for room in the dusty sky. Every second person wore a hard hat and came from the provinces. From the old *hutongs* to the new Olympics precinct, from the downtown subway to the furthest suburb, few corners of the city were untouched. It impacted everyone's daily life. It worried those who lost their homes or businesses and excited those who saw opportunity. It suffused the contemporary art enjoyed by the fashionable middle class and gave planning experts endless material for debate.

Yet the construction of Beijing was deeper than simple building sites. A city grew in every person's mind. What was this city becoming? How did people build their own understanding of it when it changed at such breakneck speed? What did they anchor their lives to? Or was an anchor just a hindrance to letting the future wash over them, come what may?

I had no anchor, no foundation for my own mental construction of Beijing. Being functionally illiterate, I was largely immune to the propaganda that imposed itself in many public spaces, hoping to shape minds and fuel pride in advance of the Olympics. In fact, I had enough difficulty feeling physically part of that world, despite the warm welcome of Beijingers. My overwhelming sense in those years was of roaming the streets as a ghost: visible to the locals, able to see them myself, and yet always half communicating, half understanding. I wanted to make images reflecting this sense of detached connection; the feeling that you can reach out and touch something, and just as your hand reaches it, everything dissolves and disassembles. Pull away, and focus sharpens.

Photographically, I hope these are not typical images of Beijing. There are no pictures of old men in Mao suits using mobile phones, or of Wal Mart looming over a *hutong*. Such sights are easy to see in Beijing and the contrast between old and new is obvious. But the contradictions run deeper, and they are fluid.

An example is the image of Tiananmen Square: hands hold up digicams to film the soldiers lowering the national flag. The famous red building with its portrait of Mao, seen so often in western media, appears only as a soft-focus background. The point of the image is not to say 'Wow, Chinese people have digital cameras now too'. Instead, for me, it reflects the new politics in China. The nightly crowds with raised arms recall the masses at Tiananmen Square in the 1960s, but not those of 1989. Newly wealthy and increasingly proud, their own photographs construct a new capital and a new identity for its residents and the soldiers who guard it.

I have a restrained photographic style. Hours spent mere inches from the faces of my fellow Beijing subway commuters, pressed against a million strangers, have reinforced the value of holding back, offering respect for someone's personal space even while sharing it at close quarters. I have sought that in these prints—to observe closely, but with humility and an honest distance, reflecting my ghostlike existence in this city.

Richard Fairbrother  
June 2008

## Artist CV

Richard Fairbrother is based in Beijing. His first exhibition, *Memories of a Future Peace*, was shown in the HUW DAVIES GALLERY in July 2004. Images from that show, a documentary exhibition about the Bougainville peace process, were purchased for the Australian War Memorial collection and private collections in Australia, the United States and China. Some of the images appeared in a photo essay in the AusAID magazine *Focus*, and on the cover of Fred Smith's album *Independence Park*.

*Sunset at Tiananmen Square*



*The Bird's Egg*



*Diptych: Construction Workers*

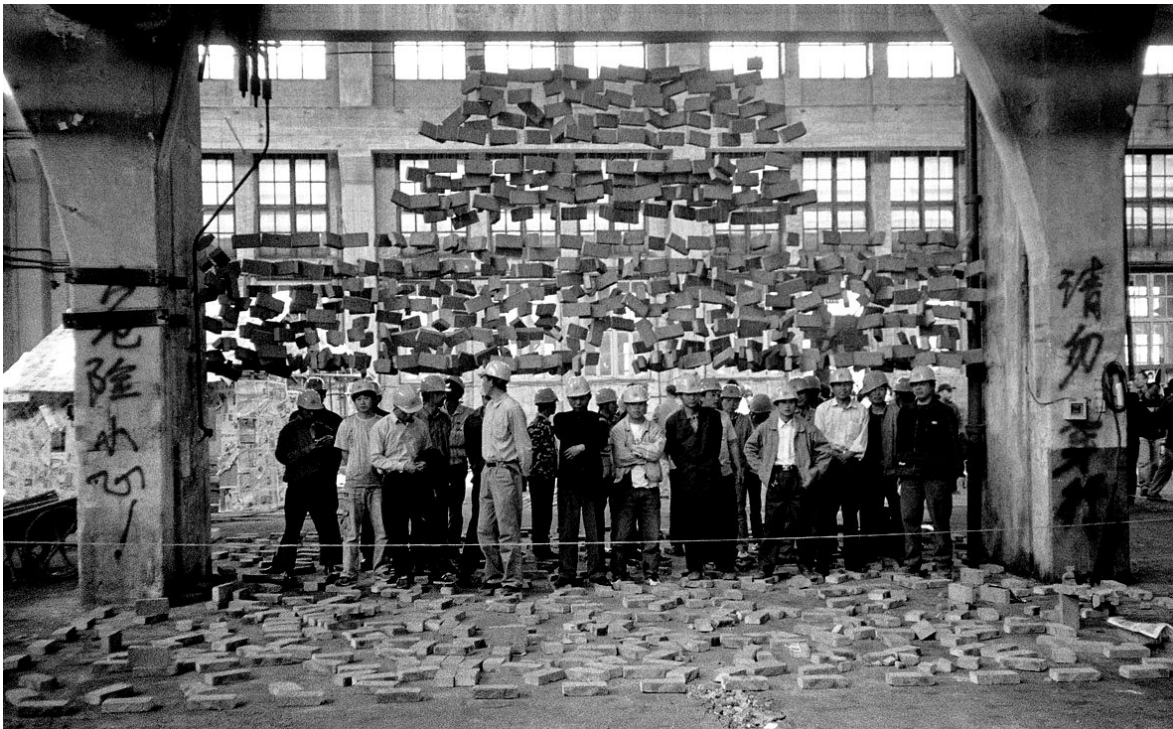




*Boy with Cat*



*Conversations with Songbirds*



*Diptych: Constructed Workers*

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**HUW DAVIES GALLERY @ PhotoAccess**

Corner Manuka Circle and NSW Crescent, Griffith ACT tel. 02 6295 7810

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# Constructing Beijing

## Annotated list of works

Artists proofs from an edition of 10; archival inkjet prints on Sterling Rag Smooth Art paper; \$320 each (unframed); 23 and 24 set \$540; 25, 26 and 27 set \$680

**15 per cent of the proceeds from print sales will be donated to the Red Cross Sichuan Earthquake Appeal**

		Size mm
1	<b><i>Migrant Workers, Central Beijing</i></b> Beijing is built on the backs of workers from the far-flung provinces. (Winter 2006–07)	300 x 400
2	<b><i>Heart of a Hi-Tech Future</i></b> Haidian District is the 'Silicon Valley' of Beijing—home to Google and Microsoft among others. The most prestigious universities in China are here too and competition is intense to secure a place. Success can mean a lucrative career and a future shaping modern China. (North West Beijing, Winter 2005–06)	340 x 510
3	<b><i>North Gallery, Guo Mao</i></b> Middle class Beijing lifestyles resemble those in the west—aspirational consumers enjoying life in restaurants, cafes and galleries. At North Gallery in Guo Mao, security is just a teenager in an ill-fitting uniform. Stray too far from middle-class economic aspiration, though, and more serious surveillance awaits. (South East Beijing, Winter 2006–07)	340 x 510
4	<b><i>The Bird's Egg</i></b> Landmark of new Beijing and a stone's throw from the Forbidden City, the National Centre for the Performing Arts was initially controversial for its non-Chinese architectural style. Now complete, it is known by down-to-earth Beijingers as 'The Bird's Egg'. (Central Beijing, Spring 2007)	340 x 500
5	<b><i>City of 13 million</i></b> Silence reigns in a hutong less than 200 metres from the 2nd Ring Road at Andingmen. Birds sing, trees shade and solitude exists for those who seek it. (North East Beijing, Spring 2006)	510 x 350
6	<b><i>Conversations with Songbirds</i></b> This man explained he could understand conversations with his songbird, a skill passed down from father to son for several generations. (Central Beijing, Spring 2006)	340 x 510
7	<b><i>Midday, Dongzhimen</i></b> A young professional smokes a cigarette while watching passengers lug their cargo to and from the Long Distance Bus Station under the cranes of a major construction site. (North East Beijing, Spring 2007)	340 x 510
8	<b><i>Kite over Rubble</i></b> Once housing a community, this area was flattened for future development. (North West Beijing, Autumn 2006)	500 x 320
9	<b><i>Sunset at Tiananmen Square</i></b> The square once saw hordes waving the Little Red Book. Today Mao's portrait looks down on busloads of Chinese tourists. Every day at dawn and dusk, they reach high in their hundreds to capture the People's Liberation Army as they raise and lower the national flag. (Central Beijing, Spring 2007)	330 x 500
10	<b><i>'Me and My Dream'</i></b> Beijing has several officially mandated dreams, and countless individual ones. (North East Beijing, Spring 2007)	490 x 340
11	<b><i>Sunday Hike</i></b> Halfway through a ten kilometre walk from Jinshanling to Simatai, a hiker unveils his Chinese flag. Patriotism ebbs and flows but is never far from fever pitch. (North-east from Beijing, Summer 2006)	340 x 510
12	<b><i>Mother and Child</i></b> Traditionally, this haircut shows respect for one's elders, which is auspicious for one's own old age. Now most often seen in villages, this boy wears it in a small community in the far reaches of the city. (North West Beijing, Spring 2006)	350 x 510

13	<b>Lone cyclist at underpass</b> Constructions dwarfs everything in Beijing. (North Beijing, Winter 2007–08)	340 x 510
14	<b>The Bird's Nest I</b> Beijingers took no time to bring Herzog de Meuron's cutting edge National Stadium back down to earth: 'The Bird's Nest' takes shape in early 2007. (North Beijing)	500 x 340
15	<b>Girl with Snack</b> Oblivious to the photographer and intent on her snack, a girl takes a shortcut across the main train line from Beijing North Station. Many children have a freedom in Beijing not experienced by kids in western cities.	340 x 500
16	<b>Boy with Cat</b> Yue Minjun's iconic portraits are probably unknown to this young lad, more intent on adventures with his kitten than commentary on the new China. (North East Beijing, Spring 2006)	500 x 340
17	<b>Dashanzi 798</b> Contemplating art at the trendy gallery district Dashanzi 798, once a state-owned factory. (North East Beijing, Autumn 2006)	345 x 495
18	<b>Rack-riding</b> Beijingers register a thousand new cars a week but there are still plenty of bikes on the city's congested roads. Cycling is not as prestigious but often a lot more convenient. (North West Beijing, Spring 2006)	345 x 500
19	<b>Inside Xizhimen</b> Gate towers at Xizhimen once stood watch over the North-west corner of the ancient capital's walls. Today three sleek buildings dwarf commuters transferring from Line 13 to Line 2. (North West Beijing, Winter 2007–08)	450 x 345
20	<b>Outside Xizhimen</b> The city walls are long gone, but even in 2006 the area immediately within sight of Xizhimen's towers was as poor as it was under the shadow of the old city gate. (North West Beijing, Autumn 2006)	340 x 500
21	<b>Young Man</b> For young men in Beijing, a Pink Panther umbrella on a sunny day is nothing to feel self-conscious about. (North West Beijing, Summer 2006)	410 x 480
22	<b>Beijing 1967?</b> On the surface little has changed for forty years in this street in Xuanwumen, South West of Tiananmen Square. A mother holds her child, a schoolgirl walks home, but the man in the mural would probably not recognise their lives today. (South West Beijing, Spring 2007)	340 x 500
23	<b>Diptych: Construction Workers</b> Real life, Dongzhimen (North East Beijing, Spring 2007)	400 x 480
24	<b>Diptych: Constructed Workers</b> Contemporary art installation, Dashanzi 798 (North East Beijing, Autumn 2006)	320 x 460
25– 27	<b>Triptych: Deconstruction I to III</b> The circled character 'chai' means 'condemned' or 'demolish'. It is omnipresent—buildings, shops, and T-shirts all instantly convey its meaning. (South Beijing, Winter 2006–07)	330 x 480 330 x 330 330 x 480
28	<b>New Year's Day 2007</b> Hutong, South Beijing	350 x 500
29	<b>Foundation for the Green Olympics</b> Concrete trucks line up at the Olympic construction site. (North Beijing, Winter 2007–08)	330 x 500
30	<b>The Bird's Nest II</b> Photo-call at the National Stadium. As the building took shape in 2006 and 2007, the trickle of interested locals grew so much that police needed to marshal traffic on the nearby 4th Ring Road to prevent accidents. (North Beijing, Spring 2007)	355 x 510

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