

CAO FEI

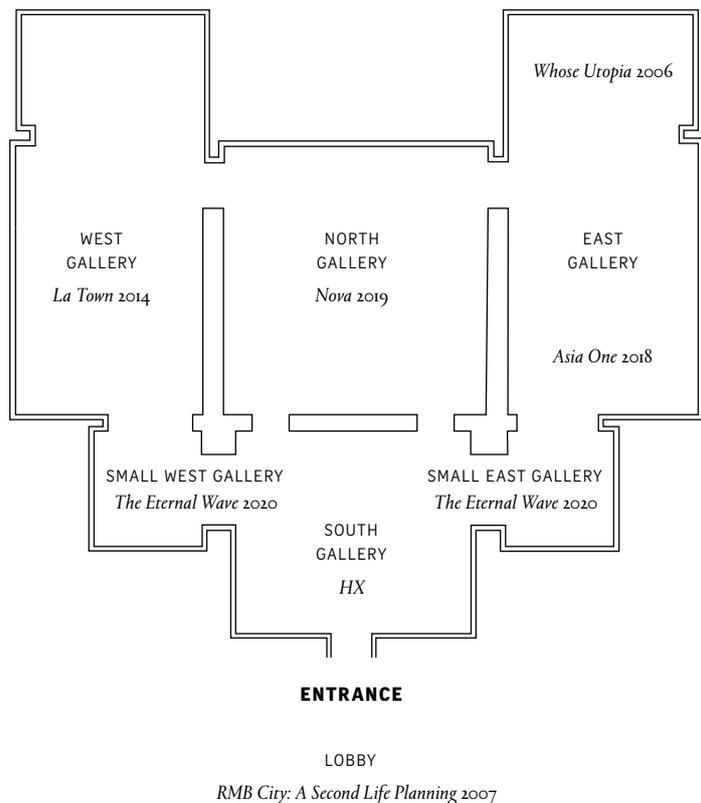
BLUEPRINTS

4 March _____ 17 May 2020

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CAO FEI

BLUEPRINTS



Cao Fei’s practice bridges film, digital media, photography, sculpture, installation and performance, all of which capture her fascination with human responses to the rapid technological developments of the last two decades. Born in 1978, the same year that saw the start of China’s policies of reform and opening up to the international community, Cao Fei takes as her starting point her home country and the accelerated changes that have shaped her generation. From this context, she explores a set of broader ideas that resonate with our contemporary experience of the world, such as the omnipresence of the virtual, its potential to alter our perception of self and the ways in which we understand reality; systems of production and the automated factory infrastructure that facilitates our desire to consume; our relationship to architecture and built environments that are constantly changing, and the significance of memory and the ways in which the past can come to haunt the present.

Underpinning these different subjects is a continuous movement between the physical and virtual, the real and the imagined, within each of Cao Fei’s works. Through this process, she collapses together multiple time frames in order to produce new and fantastical realities for the characters that exist within each of her compelling narratives, told with a subtle, at times surreal, sense of play.

For her first major institutional solo exhibition in the UK, Cao Fei brings together new and existing works in a site-specific installation throughout the Serpentine Gallery.

At its centre is a new virtual reality artwork, *The Eternal Wave*, produced in collaboration with Acute Art, and the artist's feature-length film, *Nova*. Both of these works mark the culmination of her extensive research in Beijing over the last five years, examining the social history and urban transformation of the city's Jiuxianqiao ('Hong Xia') district, where she lives and works. Transformed into a stage set, the first gallery is modelled on the entrance of the artist's studio, which is housed within a former cinema and community space called the Hongxia Theatre. From this starting point, visitors are invited to enter a cinema where Cao Fei's 'retro-Sci-Fi' movie, *Nova*, is playing, and to access an immersive and multi-sensory VR experience through the time-travelling narrative of *The Eternal Wave*.

The second part of the exhibition comprises a selection of works made between 2006 and 2018. The earliest in the exhibition, *Whose Utopia*, is paired with Cao Fei's recent film, *Asia One*, in an installation that considers the significance of automation on the human body and its labouring self, while her 2014 work, *La Town*, presents a post-apocalyptic cityscape pictured through a cinematic stop-motion animation. Connecting back to the Serpentine's 2008 project with Cao Fei, her work *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* is re-presented in the Serpentine Gallery lobby. These works further the layering of virtual, physical and cinematic spaces that are encountered in the first part of the exhibition.

At the centre of Cao Fei's practice is an impulse for world-building, to imagine and construct new universes for her characters that traverse past, present and future time frames. This mode of magical thinking leads to the creation of spaces that are both real and fictional, physical and virtual, a series of blueprints that take us beyond a singular, everyday reality.

SOUTH GALLERY

Visitors to the exhibition enter into a transformed stage-set-like space, modelled on the entrance of Cao Fei's Beijing studio. This studio is housed within a former cinema and community space called the Hongxia Theatre, located within the north-eastern district of Jiuxianqiao, colloquially known as 'Hong Xia' or 'Red Dawn'. The theatre was built during a period of intense industrial development throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s, fuelled by the assistance of communist allies in the USSR and DDR, in which Jiuxianqiao changed from a rural area into a conglomerate of factory infrastructures. Three factories in particular, numbers 718, 774 and 738, became key components in China's socialist industrialisation and the development of advanced electronics – it was here that the first Chinese computer was invented. At the time, many people were eager to contribute to the burgeoning electronics industry and moved to Jiuxianqiao. In response to this influx, and the consequential housing shortages in the area, the factories started to build residential quarters based on the Soviet 'Khrushchev' model of low-cost, simple dwellings, while a public welfare scheme and entertainment and community venues were also established.

The Hongxia Theatre was located at the heart of this activity, functioning as a cinema, canteen, disco and meeting and education space until its permanent closure in 2008 in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics.

In 2015, following the demolition of her previous studio, Cao Fei came across the theatre and moved in, establishing a site of working and production, but also initiating what would become a five-year research project mining the social and economic histories of this charged space and its surrounding neighbourhood. The first part of Cao Fei's exhibition is therefore dedicated to the 'Hongxia' or 'HX' project, encompassing a site-specific installation of cinema curtains, a floor and wall design based on that of the theatre, a series of archival objects and documents, photographs, and *Hongxia* (2019), a documentary video by the artist that weaves together interviews with retired staff from factories 738 and 774, the former manager of the Hongxia Theatre, urban historians, architects and photographers. Set within an old ATM machine, the documentary constructs an oral history of a disappearing community. Nearby, visitors are invited to pass through the cinema curtains where Cao Fei's film *Nova* (2019) is playing, and enter into an immersive virtual reality experience, *The Eternal Wave* (2020), which journeys from the kitchen of the Hongxia Theatre to the different spaces and times of its multi-layered history.

SMALL EAST AND WEST GALLERIES

The Eternal Wave 2020

Virtual reality

Produced in collaboration with Acute Art

The Eternal Wave is Cao Fei's first virtual reality work and uses the spaces of the Hongxia Theatre's kitchen as its backdrop. The experience begins in a physical rendition of a stage set that the artist designed for her film, *Nova*, which was based on the theatre's original kitchen. From this starting point, the visitor embarks on a multi-sensory journey through various portals, traversing the boundaries between time and space to explore the computers of the early electronics industry in China and the areas in and around the Hongxia Theatre. The title of the work is taken from the 1958 film directed by Wang Ping, which focuses on the story of an underground CPC telegrapher, and is a key reference within the plotline of *Nova*.

For further information on *The Eternal Wave*, please speak to a member of staff.

NORTH GALLERY

Nova 2019

HD video, 109 min 53 sec, colour, 5.1 sound

Screenings of *Nova* start at the following times:

10:10 / 12:05 / 14:00 / 15:55

Nova is a 'retro-Sci-Fi' feature film by Cao Fei, produced as part of the 'HX' research project. The film tells the story of a computer scientist working on a secret international project that attempts to turn humans into digital mediums. A failed attempt to use his son as a test case results in the young man becoming lost in cyberspace, a spectre haunting the past, present and future worlds that continuously interact and overlap throughout the film. By mining the history of her immediate context, Cao Fei takes us on a 'retro-futurist' journey that goes beyond chronological time and hovers between reality and fantasy.



Nova 2019



The Eternal Wave 2020



RMB City: A Second Life City Planning 2007



La Town 2014





Whose Utopia 2006

EAST GALLERY

Whose Utopia 2006

Video, 20 min 20 sec, colour, sound

In *Whose Utopia*, factory workers roleplay their fantasy lives within the confines of an industrial environment. During a six-month residency with the Siemens corporation, Cao Fei filmed everyday life at the company's Osram lighting factory in China's industrial Pearl River Delta region. The mechanisation of the worker's daily duties is juxtaposed with personal interviews that reveal their private aspirations and motivations for working in the factory. This slippage between dreams and reality is enacted in the film's second half, where the artist developed a series of performances through which the workers staged their dreams in full costume: practising tai chi, ballet, and playing rock music within the aisles of the factory. Through the film's mode of magical thinking, there emerges a poetic dramatisation of the idiosyncratic imaginations that lie within the contexts of mechanised labour.

Asia One 2018

HD video, 63 min 20 sec, colour, sound

Asia One continues the factory setting that Cao Fei explored in *Whose Utopia*, but here considers the increasing significance of automation within the contexts of labour. The film's protagonists are a young female worker, a male worker and a cute artificially intelligent robot, working together in a large automated logistics centre called 'Asia One Unmanned Warehouse' in 2021. The film is centred upon the relationship between the two workers amidst the extended periods of loneliness and repetitive motion of the factory. Cao Fei introduces the surreal into the everyday, as the cold, mechanical environment is gradually unravelled via the imaginations of its inhabitants.

WEST GALLERY

La Town 2014

HD video, 42 min 13 sec, colour, sound

In the making of Cao Fei's cinematic, stop-motion animation *La Town* the artist configured a series of dioramas to create an abandoned metropolis, a mythical space that exists outside any fixed time, a post-apocalyptic city in moral and environmental disarray. Inspired by Alain Resnais' 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the static scenes of destruction are overlaid by two narrators in dialogue, who tell a story about the past, detachment and dystopia. The film is presented alongside the actual sets used for its production, magnifying and reducing the details between the real-life models and the large-scale projection.

Everyone has heard the myth of La Town. The story first appeared in Europe, but after travelling through a space-time wormhole, reappeared in Asia and Southeast Asia. It was last seen near the ocean bordering the Eurasian tectonic plate, vanishing in its midst like a mirage. La Town was struck by an unknown disaster – where without sunlight, time froze. Polar night was all-encompassing, so the few instances of white nights have been momentarily recorded in the town's history. Yet, through the drifting of time and space, various countries have rewritten La Town's history, and details have been neglected. Now, the story of the small town's past – love affairs, politics, life, demons and disasters – have all been sealed in the museum's vitrines, the historical 'specimens' becoming an authoritative but limited interpretation of this town's history.

– Cao Fei

SERPENTINE GALLERY LOBBY

RMB City: A Second Life City Planning, 2007
Video, 5 min 57 sec, colour, sound

Taking its name from the Chinese currency renminbi, the short film *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* reimagines the future of China's cities through the virtual platform, Second Life. From 2007–11, Cao Fei and her avatar China Tracy created RMB City, a fictional metropolis constructed in a virtual world, attracting users from the art world as well as a broader community within this online platform. Each user who accessed RMB City was able to choose an avatar, purchase and trade items, build urban structures, and interact with other characters in this artificial utopia. Originally displayed at the Serpentine Gallery in 2008, Cao Fei's project is re-presented on the occasion of her major exhibition over a decade later, posing new questions on the relationship between the real and the virtual.

LIVE PROGRAMMES

SERPENTINE CINEMA

In partnership with Everyman Cinemas

For tickets and further information please visit
serpentinegalleries.org

Nova

Wednesday 4 March

Everyman Screen on the Green

83 Upper Street, London, N1 0NP

11.11

Tuesday 24 March

Everyman Kings Cross

14-18 Handyside Street, London, N1C 4DN

Prison Architect

Tuesday 31 March

Everyman Kings Cross

14-18 Handyside Street, London, N1C 4DN

Haze and Fog

Monday 20 April

Everyman Kings Cross

14-18 Handyside Street, London, N1C 4DN

Nova

Wednesday 22 April

Everyman Mailbox Birmingham

116 Wharfside Street, The Mailbox, Birmingham, B1 1RF

Thursday 30 April

Everyman Manchester St. John's

ABC Building, 23 Quay Street, Manchester, M3 4AS

Thursday 7 May

Everyman Liverpool

Metquarter, 35 Victoria Street, Liverpool, L1 6DA

LIVE PROGRAMMES

SATURDAY TALKS

Saturday 25 April, 3pm

Dr Wenny Teo, Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary
Asian Art, Courtauld Institute of Art

Saturday 16 May, 3pm

Joseph Constable, Associate Curator



Get close to art by downloading our free app. Visit the App Store or Google Play and search for 'Bloomberg Connects' or scan the QR code. Look out for numbers next to selected artworks and use the digital guide to explore the exhibition further.



Cao Fei: *Blueprints* is curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director, and Joseph Constable, Associate Curator

With thanks to Rebecca Lewin, Curator, Exhibitions and Design; Mike Gaughan, Gallery Manager; Joel Bunn, Installation and Production Manager, and Caterina Avataneo, Curatorial Assistant.

Production team: ADi Audiovisual (Ant Marlow, Sara Smith, Josh Love) and Beyond Surface, Anthony Williams

Unless otherwise stated all works are Courtesy the artist, Vitamin Creative Space and Sprüth Magers

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With Koenig Books

Serpentine Sackler Gallery
West Carriage Drive
London W2 2AR

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