

Press Release

Cao Fei

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Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles

Sprüth Magers

Cao Fei, based in Beijing and recognized for her groundbreaking work since the early 2000s, is one of today's foremost contemporary artists and filmmakers. Across her multimedia projects we witness individuals coming to terms with both the beauty and the perils of a global, industrialized and hyperconnected world. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to present a solo exhibition of recent films, photographs and sculptures by Cao Fei at the Los Angeles gallery, the artist's largest presentation to date on the West Coast.

Though raised in Guangzhou by two academically trained artists, Cao Fei came of age in the wake of the student-led revolution and rapid urbanization of China. She absorbed a vast range of sources, including avant-garde and French New Wave cinema, and developed an approach that centers everyday characters, usually from China's working class, living between fantasy and reality amid the backdrop of the country's expanding and changing megalopolises. How humans adapt to this change is the recurring theme of her wide-ranging work.

Cao Fei's two most recent feature-length films, *Nova* (2019) and *Asia One* (2018), are represented both on screen and through suites of photographs, and each explores this shifting era in different ways. *Nova* follows the story of a computer scientist engaged in a secretive international project; as part of his experiments he uses his son, who is accidentally turned into a digital version of himself and trapped in an eternal cyberspace. At once a period piece and a sci-fi film, *Nova's* narrative slowly devolves, and in the words of the artist, "The film has no sense of time, because the actors are always traveling between the past, present and future." In *Asia One*, however, we are rooted in a near-future (incidentally this very year, 2021) in which two workers and a robot are left alone in an enormous automated logistics center. Their labor is repetitive and lonely, but through playful fantasies and emotional connection, human and AI consciousness begin to merge.

Also on view are two earlier projects that exhibit this same sense of beauty and melancholy, always punctuated by moments of humor, which have come to characterize

Cao Fei's luminous films. *La Town* (2014), with its French-language voiceover and intensive pacing, recalls Alain Resnais' filmic masterpiece *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), albeit rendered through scene after scene of miniatures reeling after a massive, mysterious catastrophe – though many simply carry on with their daily lives. A sense of existential dread pervades the film, and one that could be found in any twenty-first century locale. *Haze and Fog* (2013) also plays with cinematic genres, this time the western zombie film with hints of Jean-Luc Godard's camerawork and vignettes depicting different scenes of work and family life in China. Cao Fei created this work in response to the economic crisis of 2008 in an effort to describe the feeling of entrapment, both internal and external, within a perpetual socioeconomic fog.

Finally, the exhibition includes sculptures from Cao Fei's *Rumba* series, which recast the popular Roomba robotic vacuum cleaners as actors moving across pedestals. Because of the machines' internal mechanisms, they stop short of the pedestal edges and continue their electronic dance as if performing on a stage. These works also relate to a film by Cao Fei in which the vacuums move absurdly through urban spaces. This element of repetitive performance, of choreographed movements, and of attempting to break the bounds of one's current reality, pervades all of Cao Fei's projects to form a body of work that mines the depths of twenty-first century global life.

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The exhibition is presented as an immersive installation, with the visual vocabulary and setting of Cao Fei's films extending into the exhibition space. On the ground floor, elements featured in *Asia One* create the backdrop for the screening, such as green plastic flooring, red beam chairs, a yellow grid fence and wallpaper from a film sequence. On the second floor, the viewer is transported into the scenery of *Nova* set in the disused Hongxia Theatre in Beijing – a mid-twentieth-century cinema decorated in the style of the Sino-Soviet alliance, as well as the artist's former studio space.

Cao Fei (*1978, Guangzhou) lives and works in Beijing. Selected solo shows include Serpentine Galleries, London (2020), Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019), the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative at Guggenheim Museum New York, Tai Kwun Contemporary in Hong Kong and K21 Düsseldorf, Dusseldorf (all 2018), MoMA PS1 (2016), Secession, Vienna and Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (both 2015) and Tate Modern, London (2013). Cao Fei is the recipient of the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2021.

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