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# Fade to Black

How the absence of colour is just the start of the journey that Cao Fei is taking with the BMW Art Car #18

BY ANNELI BOTZ

When driving to the studio of artist Cao Fei in Beijing, the cab driver gets lost. This happens quite frequently in Beijing, a city ten times bigger than all of Greater London. Our communication is very limited, as neither one understands the other's language and the only way to tell him where to go is by pointing to some Chinese characters written on a piece of paper. Unfortunately, what the characters symbolise can often lead to more than one street of the same name. The quarter we finally arrive in is made up of small streets and low houses, people sit chatting on the sidewalk or go by on bikes. As opposed to what one might expect of the Chinese capital, for a large part of Beijing the pace is slow, and due to the enormous size, almost relaxed. We stop in front of a building with a rather unremarkable facade, walk up on a patio and enter the artist's studio.



Artist Cao Fei outside her studio, Beijing, 2017

Cao Fei, 39, is touted as one of China's most innovative artists today. Using fictional video art and multimedia installations, Fei explores the impact technology and urban expansion have had on China's infrastructure as well as on its people. In her artworks, she creates virtual and fictional utopias that shed a light on a feeling of life, often of an intrinsically melancholy and poetic character, immanent in the country's sub- and youth cultures. Born in Guangzhou, a city known for its industrial manufacturing and an early open door policy towards Western influences, the artist experienced China's economic boom first hand. In 2006, she moved to Beijing, where she now lives with her husband, Singaporean artist Lim Tzay Chuen, and their two children.



Cao Fei's studio, Beijing. Image: Yazmin Yazdani

Entering the artist's studio, we are greeted by a receptionist behind a wooden desk, an unusual feature for a humble artist's studio. With a small chandelier hanging from the ceiling and stucco applications adorning the pink walls, the entry hall is designed in an art nouveau kind of style. In combination with an ensemble of plastic chairs and an old carpet this whole arrangement seems carefully selected and somewhat deliberately ironic, already hinting towards the artist behind the space. Cao Fei is known for her precise understanding of cultural codes, for her distinct sense of humour and an attention to detail.



Cao Fei's studio, Beijing

The building itself used to be an old theatre, she explains (hence some of the features), but will soon be torn down as part of a development of this Beijing district: vanishing, like so many architectural and cultural relics throughout this still rapidly changing city.

Walking around, the two story studio offers a number of curiosities and details; a ceramic frog on the stairs, a number of typical Chinese posters, an ornamental hen, a little black house that used to be a miniature recording studio some time ago. In the downstairs studio area, one corner of is fully occupied with Fei's latest project: the BMW art car (#18).



Cao Fei's studio, Beijing. Image: Yazmin Yadzani

Following the footsteps of John Baldessari, Jenny Holzer and Jeff Koons, Cao Fei was chosen as the first artist from China to design a car for the German manufacturer. The unveiling took place in Beijing's Minsheng art museum in June this year. While most of the previous artists used the car as a canvas of their own work - applying colours, forms and figures - Fei opted to leave it entirely black, and pair it with a video and an app which, when pointed on the car, reveals an additional dimension. The video tells a story of a monk walking from a traditional temple through the Chinese landscape towards civilization, while the app introduces a level of augmented reality. This symbiotic relationship between tradition and cutting edge technology is a key aspect of what Fei's recent work addresses: the divergence between past, present and future as it occurs in the economy, culture and mindset of China's rapid development.



Cao Fei's studio, Beijing

Cao Fei is an artist held in high esteem by the international art world - just last year she was granted a major solo show at MoMA PS1 in New York. Yet in China her work has not been shown publicly in a major exhibition for far more than a decade. In fact, the BMW Art Car project has enabled the first public display of her current body of work. "I think it is quite characteristic, that it took an economically powerful corporation from Europe like BMW to bring my work back to Beijing," she says. "And I was really grateful to be finally able to show what I have been working on to the Chinese people, although I am not entirely sure, how much my work is being fully understood over here - yet."

*BMW is official Automotive Partner of Frieze London and Frieze Masters 2017. BMW M6 GT3 Art Car will race at the FIA GT World Cup in Macau in November 2017.*

All images courtesy: Anneli Botz, unless otherwise noted

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