

## HONG KONG

Tai Kwun Contemporary

# CAO FEI

## A HOLLOW IN A WORLD TOO FULL

### Opposite page

#### SHOJI UEDA

*Papa, Mama and Children*  
1949  
Gelatin silver print, 20 x 28 cm.  
Courtesy Shoji Ueda Office and Three  
Shadows Photography Art Centre, Beijing.

### This page

#### CAO FEI

*Rumba*  
2015–18  
Wooden stage and cleaning  
robots, dimensions variable.  
Installation view of “A Hollow in a World Too Full”  
at Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong, 2018–19.  
Courtesy Tai Kwun.

In a dank, moss-covered concrete room, a *Guan Yu* statue sat in webs of dust in a shrine. Moody twangs of 1980s Cantopop played; mangoes spilled out of a basket on the floor; and a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II hung crookedly over a desk littered with papers detailing the case of an imprisoned poet. This scene, like many others in the works Cao Fei has produced since the mid-1990s, was wholly constructed: the mold was artificial, the mangoes a hard plastic and the prisoner a fictional character in a new film, *Prison Architect* (2018), commissioned for “A Hollow in a World Too Full,” the artist’s first solo institutional exhibition in Asia, housed at Tai Kwun Contemporary.

Shown on the exhibition’s top floor, the new film is an hour-long, magical-realist tale that follows two characters: a modern-day architect, played by actress Valerie Chow, of *Chungking Express* (1994) fame—tasked with converting an art center into a correctional facility—and an incarcerated poet in the 1960s, sensitively brought to life on screen by the Hong Kong artist Kwan Sheung Chi. The two characters converse across time and eventually meet after Chow, tortured by conflicting thoughts on the criminal-justice system, releases Kwan and fellow inmates from confinement. Although the premise of the film—ultimately an inverse of Tai Kwun’s own history—is intriguing, its plot is mostly powered by saccharine, pseudo-philosophical ruminating (“So what kind of prison do you want to live in?” “How [*sic*] does your ideal prison look like?”) with inclusions of quotes by Albert Camus, clips of past riots in Hong Kong and even sly in-jokes about contemporary art. (In one scene, Kwan-as-poet visits “Dismantling the Scaffold,” a group show mounted at Tai Kwun earlier in the year,

and weeps while watching Kwan-the-artist’s own video piece.) Another reading of the film, with its profuse footage of Tai Kwun’s grounds, is as an advertisement, thinly veiled as a documentary, on the complex’s history as a colonial police station, court and jail.

Curated by Ullens Center for Contemporary Art director Philip Tinari in association with Tai Kwun’s Xue Tan, the three-floor exhibition framed older installations and videos that demonstrated Cao Fei’s practice of orchestrating mini universes, with film stills and installations of props related to *Prison Architect* (2018), as a way to investigate themes of captivity and freedom. On the first floor was the installation *Rumba* (2015–18), comprising several robotic, autonomous cleaning devices that circulate endlessly on several platform “islands,” evoking the conditions of a city such as Hong Kong, or a jail. This obvious metaphor was further pronounced through a large color photograph pinned up nearby showing an actual prison cell from Tai Kwun. Similarly, *La Town* (2014), a tale of ex-lovers fixating on their domestic trials in a now-decimated country (portrayed with miniature figurines), investigates elements of liberation in the purging of memory and the past. The second floor featured installations of Cao Fei’s lauded machinima works, *i.Mirror* and *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* (both 2007), representing her interests in entrapment or radical escapism via virtual, digital worlds.

Despite this considered curation, the exhibition didn’t offer visitors any orientation or guiding information, or the important disclaimer that it was vital to view *Prison Architect* first, before attempting to understand the new installations and photographs. For example, the plastic green mangoes hanging in the building’s circular staircase remained abstract unless one sat through the entire film, which revealed that, for the artist, the fruit symbolizes freedom.

Ultimately, the film and exhibition did little to reveal a progression in Cao Fei’s practice. If the themes of captivity and freedom were already prevalent in older works such as *i.Mirror* and *La Town*, what purpose was there to produce this film, except to make rampant use of, and to promote, Tai Kwun’s newly restored grounds? The show’s final work, *Coming Soon: Hong Kong* (2018), featured two swinging performers attempting to beat their feet against vertically installed drum sets, signaling, perhaps, the artist’s struggle, and that there is something more substantial still to come.

YSABELLE CHEUNG



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