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# Cao Fei says good luck with a big suckling pig

The young Chinese artist on M+, Hong Kong's fledgling museum

By Robin Peckham. From Art Basel Hong Kong daily edition Published online: 22 May 2013



Cao Fei, *House of Treasures*, 2013, part of the "Inflation!" exhibition at Mobile M+. Photo courtesy of M+, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

The Beijing based artist Cao Fei first emerged on the stage of

Chinese contemporary art in around 2000 with a visual vocabulary based on international youth culture filtering into the rapidly growing cities of the Pearl River Delta. Her approach was shockingly novel for an art scene then still based around the three major art academies in Beijing, Hangzhou and Chongqing—the cities that experienced the same push towards global pop culture with a delay of several years. Since then she has consolidated her position by consistently taking on new territories with a characteristic approach that veers between the intentionally naive and the brashly sympathetic.

Over the past ten years her work has developed from having an initial regional focus to more universal concerns around urbanism, virtuality, spectacle and fiction in the Second Life project “RMB City” (2008-11) and, in the past two years, a series of videos exploring the mindset of a child through wonder, storytelling, sincerity and simplicity. All three of these strands of her work make her a natural candidate for the inflatable sculpture exhibition “Inflation!” presented under the banner of Mobile M+ on the site of the planned museum of visual culture in West Kowloon Cultural District. She is the only female artist participating in the exhibition, and by far the youngest.

**The Art Newspaper: In the exhibition “Inflation!” you’re presenting an inflatable roast suckling pig, which is around 15 metres long, called House of Treasures. How did you arrive at this idea?**

**Cao Fei:** I was invited to participate in the exhibition because of my inflatable structure *China Tracy* presented at the Venice Biennale in 2007. After receiving the invitation to participate with work on a similarly large scale, the suckling pig, which is one of two ideas representing the experience of the everyday in southern China, jumped out at me right away, the other being a cruller [fried pastry]. The imagery is related to personal experience and to memory. And of course, suckling pigs like this one are often involved in rituals that bring good luck to the launch of new magazines, or films, or stores, and because M+ has yet to open I thought this would be a way to bring such ritual wishes for good fortune to the museum. It’s a symbol that’s shared across Cantonese culture. I also like that it belongs to a set of imagery that could be misunderstood by northerners.

**How have you felt about the experience of working with the M+ curatorial team, and how do you think it’s developing as an institution?**

It has a young curatorial team, and they are all good

curators who did strong work in their former institutions before being brought together. Presented with this empty site before the museum is actually constructed, this type of exhibition is meant to occupy a large space and be easily deployed and taken down. Many of their projects are directed towards the public rather than professionals, due in part to their government support, so there is a lot of work around education and communication to be done.

**Last time you were in Hong Kong it was for a panel on the influence of Andy Warhol in China. Why are you so often asked to speak for a certain Chinese pop genre?**

In ["Inflation!"] my work is shown alongside artists like Paul McCarthy, whose work I read about as a student. I think his work is extremely strong in its naughty, childish sensibility—unlike Warhol, his work is a critique of reality. This direction makes sense for M+ at the moment, because they need to show work that can be understood relatively easily by their public. By referring to the exhibition as "inflatable sculpture" they have found a way to make the notion of sculpture more approachable.

**Having shown in Hong Kong a few times, what do you think of the audience here?**

Based on my experience exhibiting with Para Site and in "Louis Vuitton: a Passion for Creation" at the Hong Kong Museum of Art [in 2009], it seems that Hong Kong people often make the experience of visiting exhibition a family event, a leisure activity that is a part of their lives. In Beijing, exhibitions of this scale are still very much a professional activity. Hong Kong audiences can be convinced by the combination of commercial culture and government involvement, which can direct energy towards art and culture. But the understanding of contemporary art on a conceptual level is a problem—Hong Kong audiences prefer commercially successful artists.

**What else do you have on the horizon?**

*[House of Treasures]* was created specifically for the show in Hong Kong, so I don't believe I'll be continuing work with that material or in that direction. In some sense, though, I will be furthering some ideas around toys and children's stories that have appeared in my work over the past few years. At the moment I'm playing with the costumes of storybook characters and ways of telling stories through clothes.