

ART

OCTOBER 3RD, 2014

INCONVERSATION

## CAO FEI with Charles Schultz

**Cao Fei** is a Chinese artist from Guangzhou currently residing in Beijing. She is a multimedia artist whose work has been critically acclaimed and globally showcased since her nascent efforts as an art student in the late '90s. Described by many as a leading figure of the “new generation” of Chinese artists, Cao Fei has endeavored to create work that addresses the contemporary quandaries of her peers. Her most recent work, “La Town,” is a 45-minute video about a mythical post-apocalyptic metropolis. Associate Artseen editor Charles Schultz sat down with the artist at the Lombard Freid Gallery to talk about her new video work while the gallery’s art handling team put the final touches on her exhibition.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Inspired by a photo portrait by Zack Garlitos.

**Charles Schultz (Rail):** When the trailer for “La Town” starts the first thing we hear is a heartbeat. I’m curious, whose heart is beating?

**Cao Fei:** It is ambiguous. It could be life itself, or the heartbeat of the story, or the heartbeat of the town, or the artwork—it could be anything, really.

**Rail:** A universal heartbeat. Sure. The ambiguity of whose heart is beating and the way the trailer opens with a dark screen brought to mind Edgar Allen Poe’s famous short story, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” in which the sound of a heart beating ultimately comes to symbolize the narrator’s unhinged imagination, the boundary between his reality and fantasy becoming totally porous. You wrote a myth for “La Town”: Can you describe it for me?



Cao Fei, “13 White Street,” 2014. C-print, 35.5 × 51.75 inches. Courtesy of Cao Fei and Lombard Freid Gallery, NY.

**Fei:** Yeah, the myth is that there is this story of “La Town.” This is a work of total fiction. There is no “La Town” in the world, but according to the myth it is a town that has existed in many different parts of the world in many different time periods.

**Rail:** How do you create a universal town that is also outside of time?

**Fei:** In a literal way, I combined models from many different cultures and time periods. I mixed them all together. So there is a German supermarket that has a deal on bratwurst; there is a McDonald’s; there is the movie theater playing *Gone with the Wind*; there is the famous fountain from Nuremberg, “The Little Gooseman”; there is Santa Claus with his sleigh and a high-speed train.

**Rail:** Did you build all these models?

**Fei:** No. [Laughs.] I bought all the models from the Internet, then when they got to my studio I distressed each one by hand, which is why everything looks so broken, like after a disaster. The combination of all of these cultural signifiers makes it impossible to tell where or when “La Town” is occurring. And of course different audiences identify with different things. Americans notice *Gone with the Wind*; people from Denmark

notice the “Gooseman” statue. It is like a global town.

**Rail:** And the little wax figures in the film, they are from the Internet as well?

**Fei:** Yes. There is a famous German model company that makes these things for train sets. They sell all these figures to go with the train sets. They have thousands and thousands of characters.

**Rail:** It’s like a language in figurines and you’re writing a story with them.

**Fei:** Well, I didn’t have a script or anything when I started. I just selected characters I thought were interesting. Then I separated them into a lot of categories like men, policemen, businessman, sex worker, and I started to match them up to create little scenes. That’s how the story came together, very organic, one piece at a time.

**Rail:** In one scene the high-speed train has run over one of Santa’s reindeer. The train is off the tracks and the animal is covered with blood and Santa is just sitting there on his sleigh. Tell me about that scene.

**Fei:** The high-speed train is very well known in China now. At the time I was making this work, a high-speed train crashed and was all over the news. Having the crashed train related to the contemporary situation.

**Rail:** Tell me about how you distressed the models. I noticed that in the German supermarket there was a bloody mob at the door—

**Fei:** This was very interesting for me. I used a thin-leaf pen to paint their tiny faces. I would make them bloody, or dirty; sometimes I would cut their hand or attach something to it. This is the first time I’ve worked in this way with my hands. It’s going back to a very traditional way of working.

**Rail:** How did that process feel to you?

**Fei:** Interesting. I’ve directed a lot of videos, but that’s so different. This was a return to painting in some way. I spent a few months distressing the models and figurines and building the sets. I needed to download a lot of information because I don’t have this kind of special knowledge. I’m watching videos on how to make water. I mean, I want to make a river. So they say, buy this liquid and buy that liquid and put them together and wait 24 hours. It’s very funny to me because I studied art, but I never tried anything like this before.

**Rail:** The trailer of “La Town” reminded me of a detective story and in detective stories there is always someone searching for the truth, trying to piece together various bits of information to figure out some larger truth. At the beginning of the trailer there is a line that pops on the screen and says, “This film contains truth.” So I’m curious, what truth is at the heart of “La Town” that is contained in the film and is waiting to be uncovered?

**Fei:** Ah, what is the relation between truth and myth? Or reality and fantasy? If you go back to my old work, “RMB City,” it talked about reality and the virtual world. Here the virtual world is replaced by a mythical world. I created a myth of a town, like a story by the Italian writer Italo Calvino.

**Rail:** Calvino was an inspiration?

**Fei:** He wrote a book called Invisible Cities that has something to do with the truth people cannot see in the real world. One of the unanswered questions of “La Town” is why is it dark? What happened here? The town looks like it has suffered an attack; there is so much destruction. But in the story I don’t say anything about why it looks this way, or any clues as to what happened. I just focused on the conditions of the town, of the people who live in it, the human condition of the town.

**Rail:** It seems like the town itself could be a character. When you were formulating this myth, how did you think of the relationship between the town and the people who inhabit the town?



Cao Fei, “Airport,” 2014. C-print, 35.5 × 51.75 inches.  
Courtesy of Cao Fei and Lombard Freid Gallery, NY.



Cao Fei, "Center Plaza," 2014. C-print, 35.5 x 51.75 inches. Courtesy of Cao Fei and Lombard Freid Gallery, NY.

and because I am referencing the French film Hiroshima. The screenplay was written by the female writer, Marguerite Duras. It's a love story, sort of, between a French girl and a Japanese man. Their conversation is very poetic and mostly detached from the film; the people speaking do not appear in the film.

**Rail:** They are disembodied voices, in other words?

**Fei:** Yes, and the man spends most of the time contradicting the woman. For example, she'll say "I saw something in town today." And he'll say, "No you didn't. You imagined it. You made it up." So there is this continuing discrepancy between what is real and what is not.

**Rail:** That fine line between reality and fantasy is a thread you've traced for many years, as far back as *CosPlayers* (2004).

**Fei:** Yes, but in this film the people don't really have time for fantasy. Or maybe they use it just to survive. Their world is post-apocalyptic. Maybe their reality has outpaced their imagination, so they just try to survive.

**Rail:** It's an interesting notion of survival. I've read that in extreme conditions entertainment can function as a necessary tool to survive. It keeps the mind from unwinding and getting really depressed. Thinking about entertainment, I'm remembering your last exhibition here, *Playtime*, was partly inspired by the forms of entertainment you saw your children watching. Of course, the raw materials of "La Town" could be considered toys. Was children's entertainment a form of inspiration for this work?

**Fei:** No, I don't think so. But there are certain themes in every artist's work that recur, and what makes it interesting is how they evolve. You get more mature about life, you have kids, you have marriage; you start to think about life differently than you did before. I think in some ways "La Town" compressed many ideas I had in other works. But no, my son can't play with this artwork, even though I did steal his fire engine! [Laughter.]

**Rail:** Well in a sense would you say this work functions as a kind of self-portrait?

**Fei:** I think every work is a self-portrait. But for me, I guess this piece is most closely related to my 2007 work, "i.Mirror." You can find it on Youtube. It is about my character watching the world, asking why? Why is the world this way? It's the perspective of someone at the end of their 20s, the end of their youth. Now I have some answers to how I understand the world. If "i.Mirror" showed the perspective of the end of youth, I think this film comes out of the perspective of motherhood. New motherhood.

**Fei:** I think it's mostly about the human condition, the sense of feeling. Even though it's a theatrical work, it's quite real on an emotional level. The people, they just try to live. That's all. Even though their world is in disaster, they just try to keep living. What else can they do?

**Rail:** Tell me about the dialogue in the film.

**Fei:** For me this is another very interesting part. There is a female and a male and they have a discussion. The discussion is in French, with English subtitles.

**Rail:** French? [Laughter.] Why French?

**Fei:** [Laughter.] Two reasons. It adds another layer to the film,